

## **An Investigation into Belonging**

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A dissertation in praxis

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation in praxis examines the intersection of belongingness and antiblackness in PK-12 schooling. Centering the counterstories of five young Black men, this study explores their lived experiences within PK-12 educational spaces, their constructions of belonging, and their critical reflections on schooling practices. Guided by Critical Race Theory, the analysis includes the narratives of mothers of young Black men as sources of relational and contextual knowledge that shape and surround students' schooling experiences. Findings reveal that antiblackness manifests through exclusionary policies, racial microaggressions, and a lack of institutional support, limiting students' sense of belonging and exposing schooling as a site where Black exclusion is normalized. This study challenges the dominant narratives of schooling and calls for the re-envisioning of PK-12 educational spaces that disrupt antiblackness and affirm Black students' humanity.

*Keywords:* Critical race theory, belonging, PK-12 schooling, antiblackness

## Dedication

Juney was the first person to call me “doctor.” I was putting up posters I had painted with encouraging words and quotes as he watched from the hallway and said, “You are a healer, Ms.

Wilson. You love students here so well, and we feel it.”

He spoke something into existence within me, and his story became the catalyst for my desire to

learn, to grow, and to systematically outwit the schooling system that too often harms young

Black students.

Juney, you are more than a media headline. I am grateful for your wisdom, your trust, and your

kindness. I dedicate this work to you—your story and your struggle in a system that too often

lets students down.

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To the students who have been entrusted to my care, and the youth whose stories are shared here, thank you for your trust, wisdom, and grace. I hold your truths with care and share them with humility and respect. I hope I have honored them well.

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## **An Investigation into Belonging**

### **A Sense of Belonging**

As a researcher, I find myself drawn back to the sanctuary of my formative years- the public school system. Schools were my refuge, where I felt safer than in my home. They played a unique role in providing safety and belonging, a role that no other environment could match. While some teachers may have misunderstood or disliked me, I was never in immediate danger within the school walls. The care and safety I experienced in these spaces surpassed anything I had encountered up to that point. My school experience afforded me space to question, push back, and assert myself in ways I did not have at home.

I now recognize that these experiences offered me glimpses into a sense of belonging—spaces where I felt seen and welcomed as a student. According to Powell and Menéndez (2024), belonging comprises four interrelated elements: inclusion, connection, feeling seen, and agency. These components occur in an iterative cycle, each shaping and reinforcing the others. Human survival and well-being are deeply tied to the experience of belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Powell & Menéndez, 2024; Walton & Cohen, 2007). While the need for social connectedness persists across the lifespan, its significance during adolescence is especially pronounced, serving as a foundation for both well-being and personal development (Yeager, 2024). Within this context, schools hold a unique potential to cultivate environments where students not only feel included and connected but also experience autonomy and agency.

## **Belonging at the Margins**

Yet, the promise of belonging in schools is not experienced equally. For many students of color, systemic racism and exclusionary practices undermine these conditions, making the pursuit of belonging inseparable from questions of equity and justice- a concern at the heart of Critical Race Theory. For over a century, Black intellectuals have warned about the enduring color line in American institutions- schools, courts, churches, and prisons- as mechanisms of control (Du Bois, 1903) and emphasized the urgent need for Black students to confront the truth of the past to help them question their place in society (Baldwin, 1963/1985). Building on this legacy, Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education is an intellectual and social tool for dismantling oppressive structures and envisioning equitable and just schooling (Ladson-Billings, 1998). However, despite decades of activism, many Black students and youth of color continue to fall through the margins of schooling, experiencing disproportionate discipline, lowered expectations, and curricula that erase their histories (Ewing, 2025). This systemic neglect is not benign. Many students seek belonging outside of school- in peer networks or cultural spaces that offer the affirmation schooling denies. Some leave school altogether.

The urgency of cultivating a genuine sense of belonging for Black youth has never been greater, especially amid political rhetoric that seeks to dismantle federally funded inclusion efforts. In early 2025, the U.S. Department of Education cut over \$950 million in grant funding for programs labeled as advancing a “woke” agenda, including initiatives centered on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in teacher preparation programs and PK-12 schooling (U.S. Department of Education, 2025a; 2025b). These cuts extended to critical mental health supports across the nation, where funding had been earmarked to provide services for

marginalized youth, and to increase access to clinicians who reflect students' cultural and racial identities. The loss of these resources has had far reaching implications, as Black students often rely on culturally affirming spaces and support systems to feel seen, safe, and valued in educational environments (Hampton, Manuel, & Fadel, 2025). When DEI and mental health funding are stripped away or repurposed under hostile political framing, it sends a message that Black students' identities and lived experiences are expendable. The administration's weaponization of DEI and student support services not only undermines the original intent of these initiatives but also deepens the alienation of the very communities they uplift.

The goal of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) funding is to address systemic barriers by creating places and spaces that foster belonging for marginalized communities (Johnson & Harper, 2024), particularly for historically excluded Black students (Hampton, Manuel, & Fadel, 2025). Within schools- institutions largely shaped by racial oppression- this funding plays a critical role in challenging the legacy of inequality and the reproduction of racial hierarchies (Ewing, 2025; Love, 2019). Cuts to funding intentionally dismantle programs that provide cultural support for Black students' sense of identity and community (Hampton, Manuel, & Fadel, 2025). However, as Dyer (1997) cautions, when race is only applied to non-white people and whiteness remains unnamed, it continues to operate as the invisible norm. The recent federal funding cuts to educational programs designed to support bias training, inclusive curriculum development, and culturally responsive teaching (Riccard, 2025; Wise, 2022) embolden the conservative narrative that racism exists only in the past, solidifying whiteness as the dominant framework for belonging. DEI efforts help to make visible what is rendered invisible. This elimination of funding emboldens whiteness as the default cultural framework in

schools — a structure that defines belonging through white middle-class norms and behaviors (Dyer, 1997; Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Okun & Jones, n.d.). When whiteness is unchallenged, efforts to build inclusive communities risk centering white comfort over the cultural affirmation of students of color. In PK-12 education, disrupting whiteness as a normative behavior is crucial for cultivating authentic belonging among Black youth (Love, 2019; Love, 2023).

Systemic racism significantly shapes the educational experiences of Black students, often resulting in their suffering being disregarded or erased in PK-12 spaces (Dumas, 2018). Schools, as institutions, play a significant and frequently overlooked role in upholding and perpetuating whiteness in the U.S. (Zamudio et al., 2011). The structure of schooling is white-centric, and the concept of belonging is central to students' experiences. Forced assimilation to white-centric norms of belonging is deeply problematic for *all* students. Belonging as a feeling and an experience is complex and contextual. A student's sense of belonging is shaped not only by how they wish to belong, but also by the environments in which they seek that connection (Strayhorn, 2019).

My own sense of belonging in school, however partial or conditional—was shaped by moments of safety, visibility, and agency. However, I recognize that my experience is not universal. For many Black students, especially Black boys, schools are not sanctuaries but sites of surveillance and exclusion. I focus on the often-overlooked stories of Black students' resistance, resilience, and redefining their sense of belonging. This research thus examines the experiences of belongingness—defined through inclusion, a sense of connection, feeling seen, and agency—among five young Black men whose educational trajectories diverged from

success within traditional U.S. comprehensive schooling models. Using qualitative interviews, I illuminate the complex relationship between belongingness and their lived experiences as Black students navigating white-centric educational spaces.

### **Positionality**

As an educator, I often grapple with the tension between the transformative potential of schools to nurture a sense of belonging and the sobering reality that they frequently fail to do so. bell hooks (1994) writes about her own search for a place of belonging, a longing born from feeling disconnected from her family and estranged from any sense of home. Her reflections echo my own. In my formative years, spaces where I felt genuinely cared for were rare, yet those few moments of affirmation continue to shine as powerful reminders of what belonging can feel like. While some school communities strive to cultivate inclusive environments, these efforts often remain isolated: scattered across classrooms, programs, or individuals rather than embedded systemically. Looking back, I see that this fragmentation was not incidental—it was structural. The promise of belonging existed, but only in flickering pockets rather than as a steady light illuminating the whole.

I had two teachers in my PK-12 journey who sparked joy within me. These teachers spoke to what Muhammad (2020) refers to as my innate genius. I entered their classrooms as a combative, oppositional, defiant, and disruptive student, and they responded by creating leadership roles that complemented my strengths as an individual and a scholar. All these years later, I can still remember the smell of coffee on my fifth-grade teacher's breath each morning as he opened the door early to let me in. I recall the coffee stains on lesson plans and the

nudges that encouraged me to think beyond my circumstances. These morning chats taught me the value of perseverance, the importance of empathy, and the power of self-belief. The life lessons I learned from these morning chats have carried with me over half my lifetime.

Many students of color do not have the opportunity to learn from teachers who understand their lived experiences. It is not lost on me that the two teachers I felt seen by the most were the only two teachers of color I had in my PK-12 schooling experience. Nationally, there is a significant racial disparity between students' racial makeup and that of their teachers (Zamudio et al., 2011), with white women comprising 80% of the nation's teachers serving a student population that is 54% students of color (Ewing, 2025; Schaeffer, 2024). White students are far more likely to have teachers who share their racial background than students of any other race. I have never had a teacher who shared my racial identity, a personal reality that underscores the broader impact of this issue on students like me.

As a multiracial woman who has benefited from and experienced marginalization by the schooling system, I occupy an in-between space—neither fully inside nor outside the experiences of the research participants. This duality reflects what Du Bois (1903) termed double consciousness: the sense of two-ness that arises from navigating multiple, often conflicting identities within a dominant culture. My white-passing identity has afforded me privileges in educational spaces that would deny the research participants, even as I carry the weight of racialized and gendered experiences that shape my own schooling. As a woman researching the experiences of young Black men, I am mindful of the gendered dynamics that shape our interactions, such as the power differentials and societal expectations. I remain

critically aware of how this shapes my access, authority, and interpretation of participant stories.

I focus on Black youth because I care deeply about their collective experiences and the injustices they face. I am multiracial—Black, Indian, and white—I feel an ancestral connection that grounds my concern. During my formative years, I was raised in part in Black community, whose love and guidance helped shape who I am. To witness a community that nurtured me struggle against systemic barriers is a tension I carry daily. I do not claim to speak for Black youth, but I feel a responsibility to listen, learn, and amplify their voices—especially around questions of identity and belonging. My goal is to reflect what is shared and to create openings for deeper dialogue.

My own experiences of schooling have shaped my commitment to exploring how belonging is cultivated or denied in response to systemic inequities that I have both witnessed and experienced. I approach this work with humility and a deep sense of responsibility, recognizing that my positionality shapes how I interpret and present participants' narratives. In naming my own identities, I do not seek to center myself, but to clarify the multiple lenses through which I engage this research. I hold both the privilege of proximity to power and the insight of marginalization. As I listen to the stories of young Black men navigating white-centric educational spaces, I remain critically aware of the power I hold and the ethical responsibility I carry. This research is not only an academic endeavor but a personal commitment to honoring their counter-narratives.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a vital framework for understanding how structural racism in schools relies on power, under the guise of normalcy, to subjugate students of color (Hyland, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio et al., 2011). Schools reflect and reproduce the racial hierarchies and social norms that shape our collective consciousness (Baldwin, 1963/1985; Hyland, 2005) and are a result of a racialized society that silences marginalized voices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT asserts that pervasive racism does not exist in a silo; it is created and maintained by many individual acts (Bell, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio et al., 2011), undermining Black students' sense of belonging in schools. The counterstories of Black students are not just testimonies- they are individual acts of resistance (Love, 2019; Safir & Dugan, 2021), and collectively, become tools for revolutionizing schooling.

These stories are not isolated; within a Critical Race Theory framework, counter-storytelling includes the experiential knowledge of Black families, particularly mothers of Black children, whose advocacy and insight reveal how racial power operates across educational spaces (Sankofa Waters, 2020). CRT affirms that the narratives of marginalized communities are essential for understanding and challenging systemic racism, as they contest dominant and deficit-based constructions of schooling (Vaught, 2011; Zamudio et al., 2011). Black mothers, often the most consistent advocates for their children, create parallel counter-narratives that challenge school practices, exclusionary decision making and Black surveillance (hooks, 1990; hooks, 2001; Lorde, 1984). Despite their deep insight and advocacy,

mothers of Black youth are frequently excluded from formal conversations about schooling (Dillard, 2022; Howard & Howard, 2024). Through counterstorytelling, these narratives disrupt dominant ideologies, illuminate the lived realities of racial exclusion in PK-12 spaces, and reclaim the right to belong in educational environments that have historically and currently denied them visibility, voice, and value.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) not only exposes the structural nature of racism in schools, it also interrogates whiteness as a dominant cultural force. Whiteness is the cultural standard in educational institutions and encompasses a structural racial advantage that is both normalized and rarely named (Frankenberg, 1993; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2002). U.S. schools socially condition all children to assimilate to the presumed privilege of whiteness, reinforcing racial hierarchies through everyday practices and policies (Gillborn, 2005; Johnson & Harper, 2024; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Zamudio et al., 2011). This continual manifestation of whiteness demands conformity and assimilation, inflicting not only academic but deep psychological harm on Black students (Love, 2019). These harms are not isolated—they reverberate across generations, embedding trauma into the educational experience (Johnson & Harper, 2024; Perry & Winfrey, 2021). CRT confronts the preservation of whiteness in schools as a tool to uphold racism (Hyland, 2005).

In addition to confronting whiteness, Critical Race Theory emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, especially in understanding the lived experiences of Black boys and young men. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw (2020) describes, is a framework to examine how overlapping identities shape access to power and opportunity. Black students find themselves entangled within a web of interconnected racialized experiences (Dumas, 2018; Zamudio et al.,

2011). By design, this intricate web weaves throughout the fabric of American society, challenging Black students as they strive to thrive in American schools (Love, 2019). Intersecting systems of oppression operating within white supremacy compound the challenges Black students experience (Zamudio et al., 2011). Intersectionality refers to how overlapping identities- racial, gender, sexuality, and class- interact to produce unique forms of discrimination and marginalization (Crenshaw, 2020; Zamudio et al., 2011). While the notion of intersectionality is founded upon a Black Feminist lens, specifically centering Black women's lived experiences, I expand this lens to consider the experiences of young Black men. For young Black men, the intersection of race and gender often results in hyper-surveillance, criminalization, and exclusion (Dumas, 2018; Love, 2019). Young Black men are often perceived as violent and academically inferior as subjects in need of control (Ewing, 2025; Love, 2019).

Black students' lived experiences challenge the illusion of whiteness as a neutral or superior norm. When students share their stories, they challenge institutional silences and offer alternative perspectives that expose racial inequities (Ewing, 2018; Love, 2019; Love, 2023; Muhammad, 2020; Vaught, 2011). The more whiteness is interrogated through these narratives, the more it is revealed as a mirage, an unstable construct held up by exclusion and silence (Frankenberg, 1993). Counter storytelling is a foundational tenet of Critical Race Theory, which asserts that experiential knowledge is essential to understanding and dismantling systemic racism (Vaught, 2011; Zamudio et al., 2011). In exposing white fragility, counter stories reclaim space for authentic belonging rooted in truth, resistance, and cultural affirmation (DiAngelo, 2018). These narratives become more than acts of resistance; they offer tools for revolutionizing schooling spaces.

Schools wield considerable power to instill conformity, maintain oppressive practices, and limit knowledge. From curricula that ignore students' histories to disciplinary policies that disproportionately target them, students encounter strategic institutional practices that limit their success (Zamudio et al., 2011). Schools are not neutral entities (Gillborn, 2005). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens for understanding the void of belonging for Black students in American schools, as it centers on race, power, and systemic inequality—factors that profoundly shape how students experience inclusion, visibility, and agency in K-12 settings.

### **Review of Current Research**

This research will investigate how students' beliefs and experiences shape their understanding of school-based belonging. This literature review outlines three key themes as they relate to students' sense of belonging: (1) Context of Schools Black Students Attend, (2) Significance of Sense of Belongingness for Students, and (3) Curriculum and School-Based Instruction in PK-12 Schooling. The themes reveal that the complexity of the struggles of Black students in traditional schooling is not due to a lack of ability but to intentional systemic racism. The complexity lies in how schools simultaneously include and exclude, affirm and erase, embolden and oppress. Black students internalize these contradictions; they experience belonging and othering not just cognitively, but in their bodies. Grounded in Critical Race Theory, this research intends to confront these historical injustices. With these participants, I reimagine schools not as sites of control, but as spaces where Black students can thrive, belong, and reclaim their full humanity.

### ***Context of Schools Black Students Attend***

Black students often are excluded from PK-12 American schooling because of systemic racism. Audre Lorde’s work powerfully critiques the marginalization of outsider identities,<sup>1</sup> particularly those who self-identify as “outside the structures” (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). Her challenge to the conformity demanded by whiteness is not only a critique—it is a celebration of difference. Lorde calls on the collective to recognize the strength found in being alone, unpopular, and reviled, arguing that such resilience enriches communal flourishing. This marginalization is not abstract—it manifests daily in the lives of Black students, who are pressured to conform to whiteness in both overt and covert ways. Within school spaces, where whiteness is often normalized and rewarded, Black students who resist these racialized norms are frequently denied affirmation of their whole selves (Wise, 2022).

In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision legally integrated American schools, but despite the promise of integration, educational institutions continued to function as mechanisms of racialized control (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954; 1955).<sup>2</sup> The hope that integration would lead to educational equality was short-lived. Black teachers and administrators were fired en masse as Black-led and Black-enrolled schools were closed, forcing Black students into white-led and white-enrolled schools (Bell, 2002), and the sense of belonging that Black students experienced in Black schools was taken away (Love, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Outsider identities refer to individuals or groups positioned outside dominant cultural norms—those whose race, gender, sexuality, or other markers of difference challenge the structures of power that define belonging (Lorde, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> The first *Brown* decision overturned the long-held separate but equal doctrine, which deemed racially segregated facilities to be constitutional under the law. It is important to note that prior to this decision, while Black students did not have access to the same resources and facilities as white students, the quality of education in Black-created educational institutions was exceptional. Many Black educators often held advanced degrees and were highly qualified (Love, 2019).

Subsequent education policies and practices were designed to create a subservient labor force, thereby sustaining economic inequality (Bell, 2002; Ewing, 2025). Race and class worked together to funnel Black students into predetermined economic roles. Schooling in the United States has always actively erased students' cultural identities, stripping them of their languages and self-worth (Au et al., 2016). This cultural genocide penalized students of color rather than creating spaces and places of belongingness (Love, 2023). The normalization of whiteness within schools has historically reinforced the expectation that Black students conform to white cultural norms while simultaneously being prepared for subordinate roles in society.

The subjugation of marginalized communities through schooling is a significant deviation from the dominant narrative of schooling as a great equalizer. Civil Rights Activists and lawyers were optimistic that integration would provide better schooling for Black children; however, the assimilation into white schools caused alienation (Bell, 2002). In the aftermath of desegregation, as Black schools closed and Black educators were displaced, standardized test scores, designed for explicit racist purposes (Ewing, 2025; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Zamudio et al., 2011), became tools to reinforce the ideology that Black children are inherently less intellectual than their peers. Schools, organized around accountability and surveillance through disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect Black students, function as a pipeline to the criminal justice system (Laura, 2018).

In today's PK-12 public schools, whiteness remains performative and functions to exclude (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Black students are not only pressured to conform to whiteness but also subjected to the structural violence of exclusion—a dual burden that permeates their educational experience (Dumas, 2018). Schools and classrooms are arenas

where covert micro-level practices perpetuate social inequalities for Black students (Zamudio et al., 2011). Black students find themselves entangled in the complexities of racialized social relationships, structures, institutions, and beliefs (Zamudio et al., 2011). Critical Race Theory urges educators to unmask and challenge the oppression faced by Black communities that have been strategically underrepresented in PK-12 schooling (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

As school leaders, educators play a major role in perpetuating exclusionary practices rooted in ideas of whiteness. The lack of awareness among white educators is a pressing and urgent issue (Vaught & Castagno, 2008), as it leads to unchecked biases that perpetuate racist practices in the classroom that disproportionately impact Black students (Gillborn, 2005; Love, 2019). Critical Race theorists emphasize that systemic racism is upheld by countless individual racist practices and ideologies woven into the fabric of everyday schooling (Hyland, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, awareness of these acts rarely leads to empathy. Instead, white educators often respond with avoidance, distancing themselves from the discomfort of racial realities (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). These practices create academic environments in which Black students' social belonging is continually destabilized by racialized expectations. CRT suggests PK–12 institutions are not equipped to dismantle themselves. Until educators confront and dismantle these normalized structures of whiteness and racialized control, Black students will continue to be denied not only academic opportunity but the fundamental human right to dignity, belonging, and liberation.

These students' experiences of being othered are traumatic. The trauma of othering, which is experienced by students with marginalized identities, leaves lasting imprints on both the brain and the body (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). At its core, othering delivers a message of

inferiority (Wise, 2022), reinforcing systemic hierarchies that permeate educational spaces. Love (2019) describes this dynamic as the *Education Survival Complex*—a relentless cycle in which Black and Brown students are forced to navigate institutions that profit from their pain.

If students are to thrive, the trauma they experience due to racism needs to be taken seriously. Trauma research underscores the human need for belonging as essential to relational health and emotional well-being (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). When schools erase cultural identity, they do more than disrupt a student’s sense of self—they fracture community ties, perpetuate intergenerational trauma, and deepen internalized oppression (Johnson & Harper, 2024; Love, 2024). The psychological toll of exclusion becomes cumulative, embedding itself in the very architecture of students’ lives (Love, 2019). Love (2019) argues that American schooling not only deprives students of color of their true potential, which encompasses academic success, but also undermines their self-worth, their ability to navigate the world, and their emotional well-being.

### ***Sense of Belongingness***

Systemic othering dehumanizes students and reinforces a culture of exclusion within educational spaces (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). These patterns of exclusion shape how belonging is experienced—a concept that is emotionally charged, context-dependent, and often misunderstood (Strayhorn, 2019). As perspectives on what fosters belongingness vary widely, this becomes especially urgent in educational settings, where whiteness is often normalized and conformity rewarded (Wise, 2022). Systemic othering, in its various forms, dehumanizes students and contributes to uncertainty about belonging, which is negatively correlated with social and academic success (Perry & Winfrey, 2021; Walton & Cohen, 2007; Walton & Cohen,

2011). In short, students struggle to engage in school when they do not feel they belong at school.

Understanding belonging as a basic need provides a valuable framework for addressing these inequities. Maslow's *Theory of Human Motivation* (1943)<sup>3</sup> positions belonging as a basic human need, attainable only after foundational needs are satisfied. Maslow (1943) speaks of belongingness as a desire for connectedness and a need so powerful it can overshadow previous needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs applies universally to *all* students. Without a sense of belonging, students experience barriers to reaching higher levels of the hierarchy, such as esteem and self-actualization, which are crucial for academic success and personal growth.

While Maslow (1943) frames belonging as an individual need, scholars have offered nuanced perspectives that situate belongingness. Brown (2017) defines belonging as "the innate human desire to be a part of something larger than us" (p. 31). Brown separates a sense of belonging and *true* belonging, which she describes as the way we show up in the world- a reflection that can never exceed our own self-acceptance (2017). This definition is deeply inward-focused and mirrors the individualistic orientation associated with whiteness. In contrast, other scholars emphasize belonging as a relational and communal experience. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) describe it as emerging through appreciation, validation, and acceptance within equitable spaces. Wise (2022) similarly frames belonging as the feeling of being accepted and actively participating in a community with others. hooks (2009) expands

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<sup>3</sup> I initially hesitated to incorporate Maslow's *Theory of Motivation*, because critics argue his work emphasizes the individualistic emphasis on self-actualization as the ultimate goal. However, as I dug into Maslow's work, it revealed a more nuanced perspective. For example, Maslow studied the Blackfoot People- whose ancestral lands are the Siksika in Canada- while he was testing his theory (Raviolochan, 2021). While Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is widely regarded as the foundation for understanding motivation, Maslow (1943) acknowledged its limitations. Notably, the imagery of a pyramid of needs was not Maslow's creation, but a later interpretation.

this understanding by conceptualizing the architecture of belonging as a deliberate design—one that weaves people, place, historical memory, and the enduring legacy of racial segregation. Her framing speaks to the complexity and layers of belongingness. Strayhorn (2019) adds that even a few meaningful connections can stabilize a student’s sense of belonging, influencing their commitments and behaviors. Conversely, a single moment of isolation can fracture that sense, underscoring the fragility and significance of relational connections in educational spaces (Strayhorn, 2019). These perspectives collectively underscore that fostering a sense of belonging in schools is not incidental—belonging requires intentional, relational, and culturally responsive design.

Belonging, then, is not a linear process. It is multifaceted, evolving across personal, interpersonal, and systemic dimensions.<sup>4</sup> One's experience of belonging is profoundly shaped by individual and social identities, which influence how different environments are navigated and interpreted (Wise, 2022). In response to exclusionary structures, marginalized communities have long cultivated their own spaces of resistance and affirmation. For example, Black Literary Societies emerged in the 1830s as sanctuaries where literacy, identity, and intellectual freedom were honored among so-called free Black people in northern states (Jones, 2020; Muhammed, 2020). This tradition of building intentional spaces was carried forward by Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) created global networks that celebrated Black pride, economic independence, and cultural solidarity—offering a powerful counter-narrative to white supremacy (Garvey, 1923). hooks (1990) describes similar spaces in her own life as *homeplace*—sites of safety, resistance, and radical care. Across generations,

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<sup>4</sup> Later in his life, Maslow wrote that self-actualization cannot occur in isolation (Kaufman, 2020). An individual’s satisfaction with their needs depends on the community.

communities of color have continued to build these intentional spaces for belonging—places where cultural identity is not only preserved but celebrated. These efforts reflect a refusal to be erased and a commitment to nurturing connection, dignity, and collective healing.

### ***Curriculum and School-Based Instruction***

People of color in the United States often experience a heightened awareness of being othered in schools—institutions that, both implicitly and explicitly, communicate that their lives and identities do not matter (Anderson, 2020; Jones, 2020). Zamudio et al. (2011) argue “the entire schooling process, from the first day of kindergarten<sup>5</sup> to university graduation, serves to reproduce the existing historical racial inequalities” (p. 75). One way this reproduction occurs is through systemic erasure as schools privilege white normative behaviors while marginalizing others (Ewing, 2025; Love, 2019; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Within this context, students are forced to assimilate into the dominant American cultural norms, including, for example, ways of speaking, thinking, dressing, and being (Zamudio et al., 2011). Over time, students internalize these profound forms of epistemological and identity dissonance in their whole being (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Zamudio et al., 2011). For Black Americans, this often means navigating schooling through a form of double consciousness - simultaneously seeing themselves through their own experiences and, contradictory by how others see them through a lens of whiteness (DuBois, 1903).

hooks (1997) describes whiteness as a terror to Black life—a force that permeates educational spaces and suppresses marginalized voices. Frustrated by curricula that erased their

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<sup>5</sup> The word *kindergarten* means “children’s garden,” a place meant for growth and care. In practice, however, many schools function as spaces where racial inequalities are reinforced, requiring students of color to conform to dominant norms. This reveals the irony of the term—what is meant to nurture growth too often limits it.

histories and identities, young people resisted. In the late 1960s, student movements emerged demanding Ethnic Studies courses that would teach the histories, cultures, and struggles of their communities (Jones, 2020). While Ethnic Studies emerged from student resistance and centered around racial justice, Multicultural Education broadened the scope to include other marginalized identities. Culturally Responsive Teaching operationalizes these principles in classroom practice, focusing on pedagogy and teacher-student relationships (Gay, 2010).

Ethnic Studies examines the complexities of double-consciousness—how students of color navigate fragmented identities within educational settings. Its goal is to uncover the rich histories and lived experiences of racial and ethnic marginalized communities and the occupied land they inhabit (Jones, 2020; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Ethnic Studies boldly challenges the dominant narrative that whiteness is the norm, the measure against which all other cultures are judged (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). However, in addition to supporting healthier notions of self, Ethnic Studies is a call to dismantle the stereotypes imposed by the dominant society that impact students' sense of self (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). Ethnic Studies is a journey of resistance and liberation, cultivating the criticality needed to name, confront, and dismantle whiteness (Leonardo, 2002).

Building on the political foundation of Ethnic Studies, Multicultural Education expanded its scope to include other marginalized identities and broadened the conversation around notions of belonging. An intersectional lens reveals how race, gender, class, and other identities interact to shape students' experiences of belonging and exclusion in schools. Multicultural education then challenges the dominant Eurocentric curriculum by promoting the integration of diverse histories, struggles, and victories across the curriculum (Au et al., 2016). Multicultural

Education seeks to create inclusive, equitable, and affirming educational spaces for students of all cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1993). When students see their cultures, languages, and lived experiences reflected in the curriculum and practices, they are more likely to feel seen and experience a sense of belonging (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Au (2016) argues this is not a passive experience- but a political one. Belonging, in this context, is not only emotional inclusion but structural affirmation—where students are co-creators of knowledge and active participants in shaping their educational experience.

Culturally Responsive Teaching emphasizes instructional strategies that foster engagement and academic achievement, particularly for students of color (Gay, 2010). It applies principles from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to classroom practice by embedding students' funds of knowledge as valuable assets, thereby cultivating meaningful relationships and affirming students' identities as the foundation for learning (Gay, 2010). CRP provides a historical lens for understanding academic success and cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach challenges dominant narratives by validating students' lived experiences and funds of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally Responsive Teaching insists that educators move beyond surface-level inclusion to build meaningful relationships that affirm students' whole selves (Gay, 2010). In this way, Culturally Responsive Teaching becomes a vehicle for belonging, allowing students to feel seen, respected, and connected to their learning environment.

Together, Ethnic Studies, Multicultural Education, and Culturally Responsive Teaching form a powerful triad of curriculum-based approaches that challenge the dominance of whiteness in schools and affirm the identities of marginalized students. Each framework

confronts the historical and ongoing erasure of students' cultures, languages, and epistemologies, offering instead a vision of schooling rooted in justice, resistance, and liberation. Ethnic Studies centers racial justice and the lived experiences of communities of color; Multicultural Education broadens the lens to include intersecting identities and advocates for curricular inclusion; and Culturally Responsive Teaching brings these principles into daily classroom practice, fostering meaningful relationships and academic success. Across these approaches, belonging is not a passive feeling but an active, political process—one that emerges when students are seen, valued, and empowered as co-creators of knowledge. In reimagining what schools can be, these frameworks offer a path toward educational spaces where all students can thrive.

## Methodology

My research elevates the epistemic privilege of participants with outsider identities and their experiences of belonging. Centering Blackness, which has been largely devalued within American schooling, is an intentional act of affirming Black students' epistemic authority (Muhammed, 2020). The participants' stories emerge as a potent form of student feedback, illuminating the dissonance participants encounter as they navigate institutions that often devalue their ways of knowing and being (Zamudio et al., 2011). Critical Race Theory (CRT) amplifies this call by emphasizing storytelling as a vital tool for healing and self-preservation among marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (2021) notes, "The value of storytelling in qualitative research is that it can be used to demonstrate how the same phenomena can be told in different and multiple ways depending on the storytellers" (p. 42). These acts of storytelling are not only survival strategies but also assertions of epistemic agency.

### Phenomenological Framework

I used a phenomenological framework to examine the experience of belonging in PK-12 spaces. Phenomenology, as the study of lived experience and how people make sense of the world around them (Zahavi, 2025), provides a lens through which I unraveled this complex issue. Edmund Husserl, the pioneer of phenomenology, desired to deconstruct the conditions for the possibility of experience, including how someone perceives varying experiences: lived, memory, or thought (Husserl, 1931). His analysis of the structure of experience served as my compass, with a particular focus on bracketing, intentionality, and essence.

Husserl (1931) argues that there is a relationship between experience and intuition. I asked participants questions about their experiences of belonging and othering. My methodological approach involved conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews with five young Black men, ages 18–24, who had exited the PK–12 schooling system within the past five years to explore how schools fostered or failed to foster a sense of belonging. I intentionally focused on participants who did not experience success in traditional PK–12 settings, as their experiences reveal how white normative structures in schools fail to support diverse ways of knowing, being, and belonging.<sup>6</sup>

To address potential responses that may have evoked strong emotions during interviews, this study adopted a trauma-informed approach. Participants were reminded that they may skip any question, pause, or withdraw at any time. I was prepared, if distress arose, to offer breaks, discontinue the interview if requested, and provide a list of mental health resources and support services. Thankfully, these steps were not needed in the interview process.

During the recruitment phase of my study, I purposely sampled participants with varied experiences, including graduates from alternative programs and non-graduates<sup>7</sup> in the South Sound region of Washington state. I reached out to families and individuals I have previously worked with to identify participants. All identifying information, including pseudonyms used for names, places, and geographic locations, are confidential. In these conversations, I also asked if participants knew of other young men whose experiences offer valuable perspectives on

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<sup>6</sup> In this context, success is defined in the traditional academic sense as being on track to graduate and ultimately completing graduation through the completion of required academic coursework.

<sup>7</sup>Participants were between 18 and 24 years old and were no longer enrolled in PK–12 educational settings during their interviews.

belonging and schooling. Additionally, I collaborated with staff in alternative and comprehensive schools to identify participants whose perspectives illuminated experiences of belonging and identity.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, and I took real-time notes on responses that resonated with me. Following each interview, I engaged in reflexive journaling to document observations, reflections, and potential biases. To ensure comfort and accessibility, interviews lasted on average two hours and were conducted in person. In-person interviews took place in mutually agreed-upon community spaces, including coffee shops, a restaurant, and a community space—all spaces provided a flexible, comfortable setting. All research materials—including audio recordings, transcripts, notes, and reflexive journals—are stored in encrypted, password-protected files on a secure device accessible only to the researcher. Participants reserved the right to withdraw from the study at any point (until the completion of this dissertation).

### **Bracketing in Practice**

Bracketing was an ongoing process that enabled me to focus on how participants experienced and understood belonging. I maintained a reflective journal to process my assumptions regarding each participant's experiences in PK–12 schools and my expectations for each interview. This process involved documenting my beliefs about individual participants, as well as expectations, generalizations and stereotypes shaped by my years of working with Black male students. Throughout the study, I revisited this journal as a way to remain aware of how my positionality as an educator and research could shape the research process.

Husserl (1931) suggests that researchers can perceive phenomena differently by bracketing prior experience. Rather than claiming objectivity, I approached bracketing as an intentional effort to set aside my assumptions and remain open to how participants made meaning of their experiences. In practice, this meant pausing my impulse to explain or interpret participants' stories through my own professional lens and allowing their experiences to stand on their own terms.

Although I do not fully agree with Husserl's assertion that complete objectivity is attainable, I value his recognition that researchers must actively engage with their subjectivity. For me, bracketing served as a disciplined reflexive practice that required articulating my positionality, and remaining accountable to participants' meaning-making. This process supported my development as an educator committed to listening to participants' stories as they were shared.

### **Intentionality in Practice**

In the context of my research, intentionality refers to the conscious direction of our thoughts and actions towards the concept of belonging. Therefore, each type of intentional experience—a perception, a memory, or an image—is directed toward belonging differently. I analyzed how individual participants intend to belong. How did belonging become what it is, and how did it carry its meaning for the participant? Guided by this understanding of intentionality, my goal was to understand how a sense of belonging was cultivated and took on meaning for each individual. I examined which aspects of their environments became most meaningful and why certain experiences stood out over others.

## Essence of Belonging

This study was designed to understand how young Black men ages 18-24 interpreted their sense of belonging within PK-12 contexts structured by whiteness, particularly when their schooling experiences were marked by systemic barriers to their success. Counterstorytelling was the primary means through which participants engaged these questions, enabling them to articulate experiences of exclusion, resistance, and meaning-making while surfacing the deeper architecture of belonging and its entanglement with race, identity and power. This does not mean making broad generalizations, but rather focusing on specific things- such as key phrases, emotional reactions, common themes, and how participants saw themselves.

This study explored:

- How do young Black men critique schooling systems that shaped their educational experiences?
- How do young Black men ages 18-24, whose schooling experiences have been marked by systemic barriers to success, interpret their sense of belonging within PK-12 contexts structured by whiteness?

A phenomenological approach to qualitative methods involved open-ended, experience-based questions that guided participants into reflecting on various moments of belonging. To remain true to the phenomenological methodology, I conducted semi-structured interviews that focused on three key elements: concrete experiences, the structures of these experiences, and the meaning-making process. These questions helped surface the essence, the distinguishing features of belonging, as the participants lived it. I then categorized what belonging feels like, what shapes it, and what disrupts it.

## Interview Guide

### ***Educational Journey***

These questions acknowledged varied pathways and invited reflection on how education shaped belonging.

- What type of school programs have you attended (traditional, alternative, online, GED)?
- Will you describe your educational journey in your own words?
- How do you describe your racial or ethnic identity in your own words?
- Have aspects of your identity ever shaped how you were treated or perceived at school?
- Can you share a time in school when you felt proud of who you are or truly connected to others?

### ***Meaning Making and Interpretation***

These questions invited participants to reflect on their own definitions and insights.

- What does the word “belonging” mean to you? When you think about school, how does this definition of belonging change or stay the same?<sup>8</sup>
- How did your interactions with educators shape your sense of belonging—or lack of it?
- How did your relationships with peers influence how you felt about being part of the school community?
- How would you critique the schools and schooling systems that shaped your PK-12 experiences? What suggestions do you have for current educators?

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<sup>8</sup> If participants did not initially provide a working definition of belonging, I invited deeper reflection through follow-up questions such as, *What does belonging mean to you?* or *What does it feel like when you belong?* The purpose of these questions are to understand participants’ lived meanings of belonging and interpret how they describe this experience. If no definition emerges, this absence will be documented and analyzed as a significant aspect of the findings.

### *Experience of Belonging and Othering*

These questions invited participants to recount specific, embodied moments.

- Can you describe a time when you felt like you truly belonged at school? What was happening, who was involved, and how did it make you feel?
- Was there a moment when you felt excluded or like you did not belong? What stood out to you in that situation—interactions, environment, emotions?
- Did you ever feel unsafe or hesitant to express your identity (cultural background, interests, gender, beliefs) at school? What made you feel that way?
- Were there specific teachers, staff, or peers who made you feel included or excluded? What did they say or do?
- In what ways do you think school norms reflected or reinforced whiteness?<sup>9</sup> How did that affect your experience?

### ***Structures of Belonging***

These questions probed deeper into how belonging was shaped by context and embodiment.

- Thinking back to a moment when you felt a strong sense of belonging, what were the key elements that contributed to that feeling? (Consider: space, people, language, emotions.)
- What were your thoughts and feelings during that time? If you can recall, how did your body feel?

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<sup>9</sup> Participants were given this definition of whiteness: Whiteness means the everyday rules, behaviors and ways of thinking that come from white culture. These things feel “normal” and often go unnoticed, but they can shape how students are expected to think, act and be successful in schools.

### ***Reflexive Prompts for Self***

To support my reflexivity journey and to further inform my analysis, I asked and answered the following questions after each interview:

- What assumptions did I bring into this conversation?
- What surprised me or challenged my perspectives?
- How did my presence or reactions shape the interview space

## Interviews

### Participant and Interview Context

I am deeply grateful to the young men who trusted me with their stories. Finding time to meet and coordinating schedules took longer than I expected, which delayed my writing. I chose to accept this slower pace, realizing that my sense of urgency came from university timelines shaped by structures of whiteness. Taking time in a study about antiblackness felt important, since urgency is often forced on Black people while their humanity is overlooked. These pauses reminded me how much I was asking participants to share.

These stories reflect the real lives of young men whose families faced challenges like substance use, divorce, incarceration, and gang involvement. Some of their parents met in college, and many families chose to move to wealthy, mostly white communities, in hopes that their children would do well. No matter their background, all families worked hard to find educational opportunities they thought would bring safety and hope. Every participant also experienced deep personal loss from gun violence affecting people close to them.

Each participant wanted to share his story. As a mother, educator, and community member, I was moved by how openly these young men spoke about their pain, which spanned from early childhood through their school years. Participants' ease in speaking about harm reflects how anti-Black suffering has become normalized in schools, while their stories reveal how this harm accumulates over time, shaping students' sense of belonging and exclusion.

Every interview started and ended with a warm hug and appreciation. “Thank you for listening,” and “Thank you for being here,” participants told me. After each conversation, I sat in my car, holding the emotional weight of what had been shared. In my reflexive journal, I reflected on the responsibility of being entrusted with their stories and the gratitude for their willingness to share them. These stories were offered with trust and a shared recognition of our humanity.

## **Participant Profiles**

### ***Jay***

Jay and I met when he was a sophomore in high school. When I asked why he was willing to share his story, he told me he appreciated that I had connected with his mom, who I had called during the recruitment phase, and he had been excited I wanted to see him. Now 20, Jay walked into the coffee shop at 4 pm, smiling. The light hit the 14k gold grill he bought with money earned while in a juvenile facility. He saved every penny—proof of his resourcefulness and the tough realities of growing up in the system. He wore a gold chain with an image of a childhood friend who had been killed by gun violence. He ordered chamomile tea, joking that he’d already had enough coffee that morning. Too much caffeine fueled his extra energy for a second job interview earlier. As always, his humor eased us into our time together.

After his jokes and easy laughter, we hugged, and it felt like the three years apart had passed in an instant. Once we settled in, he updated me on all our mutual acquaintances, and we laughed over and over. We talked nonstop for thirty-five minutes before I started recording, and the interview began. Even then, it just felt like our conversation was continuing.

He reminded me of how I used to ask if I could walk him to class. He knew I wasn't watching over him, just wanting him to get there and feel supported in a place that didn't always treat him kindly. Sometimes he'd wave me off. Other times, he'd let me walk with him. Those short walks became small rituals, moments of connection and belonging in a school that often met boys like him with suspicion rather than understanding.

Our conversation shifted when he described his current life. He told his story simply, without exaggeration. Being 'on the street' wasn't planned; it just happened. For example, after some people came after him, he and his friends drove to Idaho to get guns for protection. "I'd rather have a gun to my head than be dead," he had said. Those pressured moments and quick decisions led to his time in detention and later in juvenile prison. When we connected, he was living in a group home and was serving a 'juvenile life sentence.' This sentence shows how harsh policies shape many young Black men's experiences with the state.

After the interview, as we got up to leave, he quietly asked, 'Was this helpful for you?' In that moment, I was reminded of who he is—someone who shows care as he shares the heavy parts of his story. His question wasn't about research, but our relationship. It confirmed my dissertation topic: belonging is built when we recognize each other and choose to show up for one another, even in places that rarely welcome us. Jay generously shared his story, reminding me that our connection never ended. It was just waiting for us to come back to it.

### ***Deuces***

Deuces has always carried loyalty as both weight and compass. He was a former student, and I suspect Deuces agreed to meet with me out of loyalty. He asked no clarifying questions,

and there was no back-and-forth about scheduling. Later, he admitted he felt anxious about what I might ask. Still, he showed up, honoring the rapport we built years earlier.

On the day we met, he approached the restaurant with the same quiet confidence I remembered from his adolescence. Inside, he initially resisted ordering food. He insisted he did not want to impose. Only when I told him I would order for him did he settle on matching my order—a burger and fries. His hesitation, politeness, and watchfulness reminded me of the survival strategies he learned to navigate life. He carefully read the expectations of adults, wanted to be respectful, and had a deep aversion to being a burden. Care and caution coexisted in him. It took nearly an hour of conversation before he fully relaxed.

His appearance showed both continuity and maturity. He wore his hair pulled back as in high school, his light-colored form loosely gathered, evoking the laid-back openness I remember. A manicured mustache signaled adulthood, and his big smile, newly bracketed with braces, lit up his face. He was still recognizable, though the years had transformed him.

When we met in his sophomore year, he had just been removed from school after taking the blame for an incident involving several peers. “I didn’t feel like I had a choice,” he told me now. His friends were his world; he felt free outside his home, surrounded by them. Looking out for other friends, teachers, and anyone in his circle remains central to how he sees himself.

Now 20, Deuces navigates early adulthood alone. After taking over his mother’s apartment lease—made necessary by her absence, as he can’t recall when he last saw her—he finds his father present but still peripheral. A recent car collision while biking, his main mode of

transport, sent him to the emergency room and derailed several goals. Still, his determination to survive is clear. He works steadily, providing for himself, his girlfriend, and their small dog. He also supports his younger brother and friends when possible. Responsibility, shaped by necessity and loyalty, continues to direct his choices.

Deuces shows a persistent commitment to caring for those around him, even when it strains his own resources. He attributes this loving care to his mother, sharing how her big heart led her to care for others and take people in, even at her own detriment. By meeting with me, he honored our relationship and the values he has held since adolescence. These values continue to guide him as he navigates adulthood on his own terms.

### ***Lucas***

I first met Lucas when I was his 6th-grade teacher in a well-off part of town. Now 21 years old, Lucas reflected back on those early years with the benefit of time and distance. As a child, he was silly, outgoing, and full of bright, playful energy. After 6th grade, he moved out of state to live with his father, and I didn't see him again until he entered high school four years later. When we reconnected, he was a foot taller and carried himself differently—still warm, still smiling, but more reserved and observant than the child I remembered.

When we met again for this interview, years later, in a quiet, cozy coffee shop he chose, I began to understand the changes I noticed. Moving to a new community forced Lucas to grow up quickly. His new neighborhood was less welcoming to him as a Black youth. He had to navigate a new racial and social landscape. Without familiar support systems and under

pressure to adapt, his growing awareness of his differences contributed to his more serious outlook.

As soon as I started recording, Lucas told me he wanted to see me. “I have a lot to get off my chest,” he said with a sense of relief. He arrived on time and waited patiently as I searched for a comfortable spot, giving me reassuring smiles and encouraging laughs each time I changed my mind. His gentle tone towards me made me feel at ease. He was focused on making sure I was comfortable, which mirrored the thoughtfulness that was consistent across our interactions—a nod to his mother’s close presence in his life and how she raised him to be thoughtful and tender.

I hadn’t planned to interview him at first because he was not someone I had initially thought to include. Lucas had always been seen as a good kid: never in trouble and known for his kindness. Yet, these presumptions rendered his experience invisible to me, and this invisibility is meaningful in the context for Black students who are not perceived to be in trouble. His struggles were not behavioral but social-emotional. Listening to him, I realized how the two predominantly white communities he lived in had shaped him in profoundly different ways.

Lucas’s story highlights the complexity of a young Black student’s struggle to belong across different socio-economic settings. As I listened to Lucas, I reflected on what his experience reveals about how schools see students like him. The first community where Lucas was raised let him be playful and feel he belonged. In contrast, the other forced him to be hyper-aware of his Blackness and feel like a “sore thumb.”

Lucas's educational experience bounced him between these two communities in two different states. When we connected, he was in town visiting his childhood friends from elementary school—he had chosen to stay in touch with the earlier friendships where he shared he felt “everyone was cojoined.” That movement across communities shaped not only his schooling but also his relationships.

### **Zayne**

Zayne is 19. I knew him through his sister, and while we had crossed paths a few times, our connection was limited. After their mother passed earlier in 2026, I reached out to his sister to check in. In that conversation, I remembered that she had an older brother who had recently left the local high school for a technical college. I asked if she could reach out to him to see if he would be willing to be interviewed for my study. She sent me his number the next day.

We met at a coffee shop halfway between his home and work. He checked in a few times to confirm details, then texted on arrival to see if I was already inside. As he walked in, he greeted me with a big hug. I'm six feet tall; he was even taller. His warm smile, freshly twisted shoulder-length locs, and calm presence immediately put me at ease.

After getting our coffee, we started the interview. At times, he seemed hesitant, worried he would say the wrong thing or misunderstand the question. I recognized that feeling, the carefulness of wanting to share, but not wanting to be wrong. As he spoke, his voice shifted at times, steady then quieter, especially when he spoke about moments when he felt misunderstood. He traced this feeling back to elementary school, describing a moment in third

grade when a teacher who hurt him so deeply that he left school early and ran home crying. He could not recall every detail, but he remembered how it made him feel.

That early experience had stayed with him. Over time, he shared with me how he began to lose trust in teachers. He felt increasingly singled out in school spaces and often felt accused of wrongdoing without proof, and pressured by school administrators to admit to things he had not done. When we spoke, he had already made the decision to leave his high school to enroll in a technical program, seeking a path that felt more aligned with his goals. "I'm tired of the system," he told me.

As I listened, I thought about the ways I had observed him in shared spaces- laughing with peers, carrying an ease that seemed to follow him from one conversation to the next. While our connection had been limited, his presence was familiar to me. His story gave context to what I had not understood at the time about his decision to leave high school. What I had once read as joy did not reflect a sense of support from the adults around him; rather it existed alongside a deep sense of mistrust of them.

The only moment he described a sense of belonging came after his mother had passed, when his teammates reached out to check on him. That small act of care had stayed with him, even as he had already begun to disengage from school. In many ways, it stood in contrast to the experiences that had led him to leave. This reminded me how rarely school itself had been a place where he felt that same sense of care.

## ***Silkey***

Silkey, an 18-year-old young man. We met for the first time in this space, and the connection emerged quickly. As soon as I walked into the room, he asked if I was Native, and the conversation took off from there. The moment of recognition created a shared understanding between us, grounding our time together in a sense of connection.

Silkey spoke in a lyrical, stream-of-consciousness style. He blended raw honesty with generous grace toward others, even when he recounted harm. As he spoke, I found myself leaning in, drawn to the rhythm of his words and the way he simultaneously held pain and care. He told me his family called him Silkey because he had “a full head of hair out of the womb,” and the name stayed with him. His crown of locs remains a defining feature. After each question, his large, bright smile would appear before he even started speaking. His warmth and attentiveness shaped the tone of our conversation.

When we spoke about school, Silkey described it as a space of assimilation—“a place that molds things into your brain.” He resisted that molding, questioning expectations about how to think and who to be. While he found moments of connection through sports, those spaces were limited and fragile. After being seriously assaulted following baseball practice, his relationship to school shifted even further. Despite safety measures put in place, he experienced additional harm, which led him to question the purpose and protection offered by the institution.

For a period of time, he stopped attending school altogether. Eventually, a friend encouraged him to try a reentry program. Although it required a long commute, the

relationships he built there made returning worthwhile. In that space, something shifted. The relationships he formed felt different- more human, more mutual and rooted in care. By the end of our conversation, it was evident that belonging, for Silkey, was not something given by institutions, but something he actively created.

## Methodological Reflections and Emergent Narratives

### Reflexivity in Practice

I started this process feeling hopeful. That hope, however, was quickly unsettled. Over the past 15 years, I have built strong relationships in the communities where I have worked and lived. These connections included not just students, but also their caregivers and local organizations. I naively assumed that these relationships would translate into access. I believed that rapport would afford me the opportunity to hear and hold the stories of young Black men. I entered the recruitment process with confidence shaped by proximity and familiarity. That assumption did not hold: of my initial list of eight young men, I was able to successfully connect with only one young man. The other seven young men declined to be interviewed—some offered direct refusals, others did not respond, and a couple initially said yes but faced circumstances that prevented them from following through. As access narrowed, my attention turned inward. In a reflexive journal, I wrote:

This is such a vulnerable process. I thought my rapport would help me ... and I am surprised how much more challenging this is on my ego. It's making me question if my rapport was as strong as I thought it was...[A]nd what do they owe me? I'm wondering about my own assumptions that this would be 'easy'. What part of painful storytelling is easy? And who am I to hold these stories?

This moment marked a shift in my process—from viewing recruitment primarily as logistics to engaging with it as a reflexive practice. After the initial round of outreach and the refusals I

received, I was compelled to confront my assumptions about access, trust, and entitlement, and to recognize that a relationship does not obligate participation.

Before I could process these challenges, I experienced a significant loss. Soon after I started recruiting, one young man who had agreed to an interview was shot and killed before we could meet. His death was deeply painful. He had often felt like an outsider in his family and in schools and programs. This loss paused my study as I grieved—not just for a participant, but for a life and a story that would never be told. I felt the weight of working in an education system where young Black men are being killed at high rates, and where educators often miss chances to create real belonging.

After taking a break, I returned to this dissertation in praxis with a new approach. I reached out to young people I knew and asked them to help me connect with others. Instead of assuming I had access, I started asking for it. I also made videos to explain the interviews and shared the videos by text and on social media with youth I knew. I was able to confirm two participant interviews through this method. I invited participants to suggest others and to decide for themselves if they wanted to take part. Three of the five reached out to their friends to inquire, but this method did not result in additional participants. Finally, the last participant was recommended by an educational leader and mentor of mine who was familiar with the study; their relational rapport helped to confirm his participation in the study.

One young person, while trying to recruit a close friend from his group home, texted me: “[My friend] is still on the fence about it[,] no one has ever cared to hear how he feels so it's a lot for him to understand. I will keep talkin to him about it though.” This made it clear that my

trust was needed, and that being listened to was new for some participants. Another youth who helped with outreach challenged my assumptions more directly: “I just think you are asking the wrong people to be honest... Let’s just be real.” After reviewing lists of potential participants with her, she felt that the young men would not take this study seriously. Her honesty helped me see that refusal could mean a mismatch, not resistance. Resisting me as a researcher, a representative of institutions that have not cared for their own existence, was bigger than me.

A young man I had hoped to interview wrote:

I’m sorry miss wilson but I’ve been trying to recover and I’m still not feeling all great so I don’t think I can do it. I’m sorry because I really wanted to help you out cause I really appreciated and valued your presence when I was at [school] but I can’t. Maybe in a couple months if you have something new, then I’ll be more than happy to help you and do it for you.

His response reminded me of what I discussed earlier through Maslow’s framework: a person’s ability to engage—whether in school, relationships, or research—is shaped by their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. When those foundational needs are unmet, participation is not always possible.

I also called families, used social media, and tried every contact I could find for young men who fit my study criteria. This process was humbling. It made me consider my role as an educator, student, and researcher in communities shaped by loss, mistrust, and harm. I am deeply grateful to the five young Black men who shared their stories with me. I also respect

those who could not or chose not to take part, and I hold space for them to not be shared. Their absence matters too.

### **The Emergence of Mothers in the Study Context**

While this study centers the knowledge of young Black men and their lived experiences of belonging in PK-12 schooling, the research process also included conversations with five mothers of Black young men. These conversations were not part of the original study design; rather, they emerged through the recruitment process and through relationships that developed along the way. As I moved through the challenges of recruitment, it became clear that mothers held important insight into the schooling experiences of Black youth, and I made a deliberate decision to remain open to these conversations as they arose.

It is important to note that these mothers were not participants in study, nor were they all connected to young men who participated. These conversations emerged through both established relationships and targeted outreach. I initially engaged in conversations with two mothers I knew, primarily as an intentional act of honoring their roles in their sons' lives and to solicit their help to recruit their sons to participate in the study. Additional conversations followed outreach to caregivers of non-graduated students, whose contact information was provided by a school administrator.<sup>10</sup> Three mothers responded and shared reflections on their sons' schooling experiences. Only one of these mothers was the parent of a study participant; the others contribute broader contextual perspectives on schooling and belonging.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The two mothers whom I interviewed in person shared their race as a part of the conversation. As a result, I know that I spoke to one white mother, Sophie, and one Black mother, Lauren. The races of the three mothers with whom I spoke on the phone were not disclosed to me.

<sup>11</sup> There was one mother-son pair involved in the study: Lauren and Jay.

Rather than functioning as a formal methodological strand, these conversations represent an emergent and relational dimension of the research. These maternal narratives did not function as primary phenomenological data, as the central phenomenon under study remains the lived experiences of young men. Grounded in Critical Race Theory's emphasis on counterstorytelling, these maternal narratives provided insight into the often-invisible work of advocacy, interpretation, and protection undertaken by mothers of Black youth, while maintaining an analytic focus on epistemic authority of the young men in the study.

The conversations with mothers varied in length and setting. The conversations were not audio-recorded, nor were there scripted questions. Instead, I shared with the mothers the intention of the study and asked if they had anything they would like to share in relation to their son's schooling experience. I documented these exchanges in my reflexive journal prior, during and after each meeting. All mothers provided informed consent to have their stories shared for the purpose of this study. All mothers were similarly assigned pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Across these conversations, mothers were generous with their time and stories. What emerged from these interactions was not additional data, but relational offering; an extension of trust, care and a desire to have their sons' experiences understood more fully. They expressed gratitude for being asked how they were, how the schooling experiences had affected their families, and what they thought of the study itself. Several asked how I would carry their stories forward. While not a part of this dissertation process, I have committed to sharing their responses with educators and building and district leaders in order to inform and support ongoing professional learning.

In this way, the presence of mothers was not incidental, but meaningful. Their voices do not replace or compete with the participants; rather, they stand alongside them, offering context and corroboration that illuminate the conditions shaping belonging and exclusion for Black youth. Their reflections underscored the importance of listening as an act of our shared humanity and of approaching this research with care, accountability, and responsibility to the families who shared so openly.

### **Contextual Descriptions of Mothers of Black Youth**

#### ***Lauren***

Lauren is the mother of Jay, a participant in this study. We reconnected at a coffee shop, where we had an extended, in-person conversation about her son's school experiences and her role in supporting him. Lauren spoke openly and clearly, reflecting on both the challenges her son faced and the strengths he demonstrated throughout his educational journey.

Her son's pathway to graduation included participation in an alternative program and, ultimately, completion of high school within a juvenile facility. Lauren described herself as both supportive and accountable, consistently encouraging her son as she navigated complex school and disciplinary systems. Her account reflects one of several nontraditional pathways to graduation described across these narratives, highlighting how some Black young men complete their education outside traditional school settings.

#### ***Sophie***

Sophie is the mother of a Black young man whom I have known through my work as an educator. We met in a coffee shop for an in-person conversation, where she shared reflections on her son's schooling experiences and her role as a parent navigating PK–12 systems. As a

white mother of a Black son, Sophie spoke thoughtfully about how she has learned to advocate for him while also recognizing how her own identity shapes her interactions with schools.

Her son's educational journey included participation in an alternative learning program, through which he graduated. Sophie emphasized his strengths, relationships, and the importance of family support, while also acknowledging the challenges he faced within traditional school environments. Similar to Lauren's account, her story reflects a pathway to graduation that diverged from traditional structures, underscoring how access to success and belonging are often uneven across schooling contexts.

### ***Deborah***

Deborah is a mother of a Black young man whose schooling experiences were marked by ongoing challenges across PK–12 settings. I connected with her through outreach to caregivers of non-graduated students, and she agreed to speak with me during a phone conversation that extended beyond the initial call. Throughout our conversation, Deborah spoke openly about her role as an advocate for her son and her efforts to navigate school systems that she often experienced as unresponsive to her concerns.

Her son's schooling trajectory included increasing disengagement beginning in middle school, ultimately resulting in his withdrawal from high school prior to graduation. Deborah described patterns of disciplinary attention, limited academic support, and difficulty accessing meaningful assistance when concerns arose. Her account reflects experiences shared across several mothers in this study whose sons did not complete high school and whose educational pathways were shaped by exclusion and limited access to sustained support.

***Bessie***

Bessie is a mother of a Black young man whose schooling experiences were shaped by challenges related to social connection, labeling, and engagement. I reached Bessie through a cold call to caregivers identified by the school, and she was willing to speak at length about her son's experiences. During our conversation, she described him as quiet and reserved, sharing that while he did not necessarily feel excluded, he struggled to build relationships and gradually became disengaged from school.

Her son received special education services through an Individualized Education Program (IEP), yet Bessie felt that these supports did not consistently translate into meaningful connection or academic engagement. His experiences across elementary and middle school contributed to a growing dislike of school, and he ultimately did not complete high school. Like other mothers in this study, Bessie highlighted patterns of labeling, inconsistent support, and missed opportunities for sustained, affirming relationships with educators.

***Marcia***

Marcia is the mother of a Black young man whose schooling experiences were marked by ongoing behavioral, emotional, and academic challenges. I connected with her through cold-call outreach, and she generously shared her perspective on her son's educational journey. Throughout the conversation, Marcia emphasized her continued efforts to support her son, including seeking resources, relocating for a better environment, and pursuing counseling and intervention programs.

Her son received support related to attention and behavioral needs, including medication and school-based interventions; however, these supports did not result in sustained improvement in his school experience. He experienced multiple disciplinary removals and ultimately did not complete high school. Marcia's account reflects patterns seen across other mothers whose sons were identified as needing support but experienced systems that responded with exclusion rather than consistent, meaningful intervention.

## Findings

My phenomenological approach to the qualitative interviews shed light on the shared lived experiences of belonging in PK-12 schools among five young Black men. I explored the meaning of belonging, how it takes shape through memory, perception, and emotion, what conditions support it, and how participants understand it. Rather than treating analysis as a step-by-step process, I saw it as ongoing and reflective. This process revealed patterns across the semi-structured interviews, highlighting three central themes:

- Schooling as a context of surveillance, control, and racialized harm
- Reclaiming education through dignity, purpose, and self-authorship
- Belonging as environmentally, relationally, and structurally produced

### **Schooling as a Context of Surveillance, Control, and Racialized Harm**

The main theme in participants' stories was that schooling felt like surveillance, discipline, and assimilation rather than learning. For all five participants, early school interactions shaped their view of education as something done to them, not for them. Compliance determined worth, creativity was punished and mistrust replaced care.

#### ***Surveillance***

Participants said surveillance started in elementary school, where their bodies, movement, and voices were controlled and closely monitored. Deuces shared that his parents removed him from his neighborhood school after a teacher labeled his behavior as disruptive. He expressed frustration: "Teachers were causing trouble. I have undiagnosed ADHD. A lot of

rowdiness turned into teachers' [being] overbearing." He described being punished for his actions:

They'd take my chairs away and made me kneel on the carpet. In kindergarten, the first thing I remember—my parents remember, too- is not being in my seat. I think I was standing on it. The teacher told me to sit down, I didn't, then he got a weighted vest from the office and put it on me, it was 25-35 pounds.

This early incident illustrated how institutional responses to young children's behavior operated through excessive physical control for failing to conform to rigid expectations of stillness and obedience. The mothers provided a critical contextual landscape for understanding the participants' stories. They recalled their sons' experiences of disconnection from school beginning as early as third grade and were able to name specific teachers who singled out their children for their outgoing nature, vibrant spirit, and kinesthetic learning styles. These recollections highlighted how early schooling environments shaped trajectories of exclusion.

In addition to regulating behavior, surveillance also silenced and stifled students' creativity. Deuces noted his joy in music and movement was misunderstood by his third grade teacher:

I have always been about music. I've always been drumming from out of the womb, I've always been hitting something, and that was a big problem... [My teacher] didn't like that. She liked her classroom quiet.

Reflecting on these memories, he shared that early on, school stopped feeling safe or nurturing: "That was kind of the first time... school wasn't very great. Or at least who [schools] were

choosing to have as teachers weren't very good role models." Over time, these experiences contributed to an understanding of school as a space that constrained their bodies, limited their expression, and shaped their sense of belonging. These encounters revealed how early surveillance shaped participants' understanding of school as a place that controlled their bodies, expression, and creativity.

### ***Discipline***

Building on early patterns of surveillance, participants described how these experiences intensified into formalized processes of exclusion as they moved into secondary school. As participants grew older, discipline increased, and participants explicitly felt it was racialized. This shift became more visible in secondary school experiences. Jay was suspended from high school because administrators feared his conflict with another student was gang-related—an assumption he said was false. While suspended, he tried to keep up. Jay told me:

I'm at home, I'm emailing my teachers asking for work... I don't want to get behind... but no one's emailing me back. So, I slip behind and behind. A few of them looked at me as an outsider.

He did not feel wanted at the school.

Silkey also felt that his school was more interested in controlling the situation than in caring for him. He recounted an experience when he asked his school for help after being physically assaulted while heading to baseball practice. Instead of care, he got a safety plan which he felt was just another method of control: "The safety plan wasn't really to help me... it

was basically saying I can't fight back, or I'll get in trouble." In both stories, participants felt schools treated them as risks to be managed rather than as students in need of care, which exacerbated the issue by punishing students who were being attacked. These experiences were not isolated.

Four participants described being pushed out of comprehensive schools through discipline systems that offered little choice or transparency. Deuces recounted being held responsible for vandalism carried out by his peers, with minimal evidence: "It was more of you gotta go somewhere, but you can't go here... I pretty much didn't have a choice." Jay described a similar experience, in which prior disengagement, caused in part by lack of access to coursework during suspensions, was used to justify his removal: "They gave me an ultimatum pretty much." Despite being told he could return to his comprehensive school, he later learned that this promise would not be honored: "Junior year comes, and I asked to come back, and they said no... Then I felt like giving up." Deborah described similar patterns, explaining that her son was often "pinpointed by the people he hung out with" and consistently called out more for bad than for good, while her attempts to seek support went largely unanswered.

At the same time, these processes were shaped by ongoing assumptions in daily interactions. Participants also navigated stereotypes and expectations that shaped daily interactions. Jay reflected on the emotional toll of being repeatedly viewed with suspicion: "Some teachers made it worse... saying, 'Gang members, you banged the Red flag or the Blue Flag?'" He described the discomfort of feeling targeted by his teachers as they assumed he was affiliated with neighbor gang rivalries. He also felt targeted by teachers regarding assumptions of drug use: "[Teachers] came over sniffing me... I felt like I was getting targeted at one point."

Jay shared that he had never been gang-affiliated, but educators often put this label on him based on assumptions about his substance use and interpersonal relations.

Participants described school discipline as arbitrary and unchallengeable. Lucas recounted an incident where he and another student had a verbal conflict, yet only he was punished. When he questioned the decision, administrators told him, “It was out of their hands.” At home, this lack of explanation translated into further punishment, as his father deferred to the school’s authority rather than questioning its fairness. Zayne and Silkey had similar disciplinary experiences in which they were accused of being offenders in incidents that did not allow their stories to be considered in the disciplinary decision. Over time, these repeated experiences of being disciplined without clarity or recourse taught them that advocacy did not lead to accountability—only more trouble. Mothers described repeatedly asking questions and seeking intervention, yet encountering silence or deflection from schools, reinforcing the sense that disciplinary decisions were not open to challenge.

These patterns were maintained by structural and material barriers that schools minimized or ignored. Deuces described how even when schools claimed to provide support, that support was conditional and incomplete. During a period of remote learning, he explained, “We didn’t have the internet at home... The school said they could use the internet, but it wasn’t as easy as they were making it seem.” Though vouchers were offered, they were temporary and required navigating systems his family could not afford in the long term. As a result, “I couldn’t do the schoolwork,” and falling behind became inevitable rather than a choice. This absence of support meant that access to education was contingent rather than guaranteed.

Mothers also described how their sons were pushed out of comprehensive educational settings, often without a clear explanation or collaborative decision-making. Four mothers reported not knowing what recourse was available to them regarding exclusionary discipline, and none were aware that suspensions could be appealed. Across narratives, mothers emphasized that they consistently advocated for their sons until there was ultimately no one left to advocate for. This pattern reflects both the persistence of maternal advocacy and the structural limits imposed by schooling systems that marginalize Black families and restrict access to institutional knowledge. Marcia's account echoed these dynamics of exclusion, as she described her son being expelled several times and feeling that "the schools wanted him out," despite her efforts to secure counseling and support. Across these experiences, discipline operated as exclusion rather than support.

### ***Racialized Harm***

As participants reflected on their experiences, they identified how race shaped their treatment in school spaces. Participants described microaggressions that reinforced white normative behavior and positioned them as suspects or out of place. These patterns showed up in everyday interactions. Zayne noticed changes in tone and treatment from white teachers, which made him feel unwelcome. Lucas was humiliated when his name was mispronounced and called "ethnic," making him feel singled out all year. In classroom settings, these experiences often became more visible. Deuces felt racialized during lessons on slavery or Black history: "Every time this comes up, [the teacher] looks at me... I felt like the spotlight was on me."

For some participants, these experiences extended beyond subtle interactions. Jay shared, “It was almost like I was always encouraged to skip because they'd be like, well, if you're not [going to skip], if you're gonna come to school with that attitude, just don't come at all!” Jay’s experiences with hostility from teachers existed even when he tried to do his work: “You know, I come to school, and they go, 'You got your homework?’” You know, I got my homework. You don't stop talking about my homework. Why do you get an attitude, and they start getting spicy with you?”

Mothers’ accounts reflected similar patterns. Bessie reflected that her son “fit the big and Black stereotype,” and because he appeared older, he was treated with heightened suspicion and frequently connected to behaviors he did not support. Deborah similarly questioned why her son would continue attending school “where people don’t want you to be,” highlighting how repeated negative interactions contributed to his disengagement. Marcia shared that her son “felt unloved and was always trying to fit in,” illustrating how these experiences extended into a broader sense of rejection and non-belonging. Across participants’ stories, these moments were not isolated. Surveillance, discipline, and assumptions built up, causing disengagement, exclusion, and mistrust.

### **Reclaiming Education Through Dignity, Purpose, and Self-Authorship**

Despite these systemic harms, participants actively reclaimed education by redefining success on their own terms. Participants reframed achievement as progress and ownership, experiencing belonging when they could author the meaning of their education. Their

alignment with identity, family, and future purpose helped make their learning meaningful, and challenged the negative racialized experiences they faced.

### ***Dignity***

Jay stopped attending school for some time after his comprehensive school repeatedly refused to re-enroll him, and he felt the alternative setting offered was not the right fit. While he awaited a pending court date, he enrolled in GED classes. As he explained,

I just looked at how to get my GED, and then I went through the Goodwill program... I passed every test except math. I went to [juvenile detention], I failed the math test twice, and I was like, you know what? Let me just get my actual diploma.

As Jay's experience unfolded, he took his education into his own hands. Jay reflected that he was never an "A" student—prior to being in trouble, he was mostly a B/C student, "but at [the juvenile facility] it was a 4.0." He attributed this shift to having the right resources around him, noting how regular attendance, personalized support, and a renewed sense of purpose transformed his mindset about school. "They personalized things with us; they helped us out. They did all the things that you wouldn't expect them to do in a prison," he shared.

Jay also recognized the irony of receiving this level of educational support within a juvenile facility. As he put it, "The public schools were more like a prison themselves." He observed that the structure and support at the juvenile facility helped many students graduate, including peers who chose to remain in custody rather than enter group homes because it was the only place they believed they could complete their education without constant distractions.

Lauren's reflections reinforce the dignity sustained even through hardship, as she spoke honestly and proudly about her son Jay's journey, emphasizing his strengths, the privileges he earned while incarcerated, graduating with his family present, and earning a welding certificate at the top of his class. Her focus on his growth and accomplishments underscores how dignity was maintained through recognition of effort, progress, and achievement beyond traditional school spaces.

### ***Purpose***

Participants' alignment with identity, family, and future orientation helped make their learning meaningful and challenged the negative racialized experiences they faced. Rather than relying on schools to define success, participants located purpose in lived experience, relationships, and survival.

Silkey distinguished between "school smarts" and "street smarts," emphasizing that the latter reflected awareness shaped by real consequences, including exposure to violence and loss. He was clear that this knowledge was not about poor behavior, "I'm literally a good kid with a clean record"—but about learning from mistakes and staying alive in environments marked by instability. These forms of intelligence, while largely discounted by schools, were essential to participants' survival and sense of self-worth.

Silkey reflected that valuing his own life was a lesson learned through hardship rather than school: "No one's going to value your life more than yourself." Advice from older peers, including his brother while incarcerated, reinforced a worldview shaped by realism rather than

institutional promises. These lessons, though forged in difficult contexts, became central to how participants navigated danger, loss, and responsibility.

Participants' understandings of survival and learning were inseparable from their racial identities and awareness of systemic racism. Even when describing racism in plain, unscripted terms, participants demonstrated clear racial clarity. As Silkey put it, "we all are one... we use humanly made racism," recognizing racism as a social construction rather than a natural condition. This awareness shaped how participants interpreted schooling, risk, and responsibility, and motivated their efforts to protect themselves and others from harm. Silkey further shared, "The reason I identify as Black is that I really have a strong love for my culture."

This racial awareness was accompanied by the ongoing pressure of navigating competing expectations across racialized spaces. All participants spoke at varying lengths about the complexity of Black identity, including expectations within Black communities alongside pressures to conform to white normative standards. Jay reflected, "Work, as an African American in America, is twice as hard, just to get the same as the average person." His reflections align with W.E.B. Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness, as he described constant surveillance in everyday life, people locking car doors or clutching purses as he passed. At the same time, Jay reframed this burden as a source of resilience, noting that it "builds character" and helped him stand out, reminding himself that "there's always a light... a brighter side to it."

Sophie's reflections further illuminate how purpose was shaped relationally, as she described her son's charisma, his care for peers and family, and her own role in navigating

racism while using her privilege to protect him. Her account highlights how purpose was nurtured not only individually, but through family practices of care, protection, and advocacy.

### ***Self-Authorship***

Reclaiming education was not solely an individual effort; it involved acts of self-authorship in which participants and their families redefined educational pathways and asserted agency over their lives. This was evident not only in the narratives of Zayne, Lucas, Jay, Deuces, and Silkey but also in the decisions of Marica, Lauren, and Sophie, who each moved their sons to different schools in search of greater safety, support, and opportunity. Across these stories, families actively resisted institutional narratives about failure and belonging by refusing to accept assigned schooling trajectories as fixed or inevitable. Through these decisions, participants and their families actively resisted institutional narratives about failure and belonging.

Silkey described being removed from traditional schooling after repeated fights, explaining that his mother anticipated the violence and instability he would face at his assigned middle school. Rather than waiting for institutional failure, she “took it into her own hands and decided to homeschool,” which framed the decision as an act of care and protection. Deuces shared a similar experience of being singled out by a teacher after she learned his mother was making decisions about schooling. In these cases, families refused to accept school discipline as inevitable and instead asserted agency over their children’s educational paths.

These acts of self-authorship and protection unfolded within broader contexts of violence, loss, and precarity. Silkey’s reflections on losing friends to gun violence situate his

understanding of education, responsibility, and awareness within a lived reality shaped by grief and uncertainty. For participants, learning how to navigate loss and danger was inseparable from their understanding of adulthood, accountability, and future orientation—forms of education that schools neither acknowledged nor addressed.

Returning to the ways participants redefined success, belonging, and purpose, these narratives show that even amid violence, grief, racialized harm, and institutional failure, participants sustained a future orientation rooted in accountability, love, and care. By reclaiming education on their own terms, participants affirmed belonging not through institutions that excluded them, but through identity, family, and a vision of becoming that extended beyond school walls.

### **Belonging as Full Recognition of Humanity**

Taken together, the findings reaffirm that belonging is not a programmatic outcome schools can deliver through initiatives or slogans. Rather, belonging is the recognition of full humanity. Yet these same participants also demonstrated persistent acts of reclamation. They sought dignity, purpose, and self-authorship, often beyond the boundaries of traditional schooling. Their narratives align with the iterative process of belonging described by Powell and Menéndez (2024): inclusion, connection, being seen, and agency.

### ***Inclusion***

Being allowed or tolerated in a space is not the same as being truly a part of it. As Jay stated, “You can’t accept me, but you can’t say I don’t belong here... belonging to me means you are meant to be there.” Jay rejected the idea that humanity was something others get to

grant. Acceptance often required assimilation, silence, or erasure. Belonging, as Jay articulated it, recognizes inherent human worth rather than conditional value. Silkey explicitly reinforced this by describing spaces where Blackness itself is affirmed: “I felt super love being Black [in middle school],” where he was surrounded by many Black students and staff. Silkey shared that in predominantly Black spaces, he felt a greater sense of belonging.

### ***Connection***

Participants also described feelings of belongingness in PK–12 settings, often grounding those experiences in relationships with teachers. Jay smiled as he shared memories of his first-grade teacher, describing a sense of comfort and ease that has stayed with him over time: “I don’t even remember that much about the class. I just liked her, I liked how she taught. I like how she ran the classroom. It made me feel good.” Although Jay could not recall specific academic details, his emphasis on feeling good demonstrates how belonging could be rooted in emotional safety rather than instructional content.

Lucas similarly described belonging through relational recognition, recalling his first experience with a Black male teacher in a high school science class. He explained, “I feel like we were the same person. We didn’t talk as much, but when we did it was like I could hear myself in him.” Lucas went on to describe a sense of shared disposition and comfort:

It was more like we didn’t have the same interests but like we still have got along on the same aspect of the same personality, the same style, the same mannerisms. I really relate to him in the sense that I feel comfortable and I feel comfortable in this class. With him being my teacher then I was coming for sure.

For Lucas, belonging emerged through familiarity and reflected identity, even without extensive personal interaction.

In contrast, Silkey shared,

I haven't had any teacher that, like I could genuinely say, has been through some of the same experiences that I've been through in life, because I've never really had a Black teacher... I kind of needed the Black teacher. Especially not having, like, a father figure growing up and stuff.

Silkey's reflection revealed how the absence of such recognition can also shape experiences of belonging.

Participants' narratives also reveal a clear desire for racial representation among educators. Lucas' experience with a Black male teacher created a sense of familiarity and comfort that shaped his engagement, while Silkey later articulated that he "needed" a Black teacher to relate to shared life experiences. Together, these accounts suggest that teachers of color do more than diversify the workforce—they expand the conditions for belonging by offering relational, cultural, and experiential recognition that participants rarely found elsewhere.

This desire to feel good and connected around others was also echoed by Lucas in his memories of elementary school. He described classroom games that emphasized collective participation and visibility: "Sometimes we played games... the games brought us together and made sure that she knew we all belonged. It was fun." He added that this experience was

shaped by continuity and relationships over time: “She was my second and third grade teacher. Whatever miracle she got the same exact kids from last year from 2nd grade to 3rd grade.” These moments illustrated belonging as something cultivated through shared joy, consistency, and recognition within everyday classroom practices and structural shifts within the school.

### ***Being Seen***

Among participants, belonging was represented as recognition—a simple moment that validated their experience and sense of worth. This recognition was often small, yet it had a profound effect on the participants during their school years. It appeared in an interview invitation, a greeting at the door, a quietly offered snack, a teacher remembering a student’s name, or checking in during moments of grief. Silkey articulated this understanding of belonging as both recognition and self-affirmation:

Belonging is like knowing what you're meant to be here for, like you're worth your personal worth, knowing your personal value. Belonging is like motivating yourself, like not having to have anyone else motivate you to do good in life. Be good, do good things and move with peace and love like there's people out here moving with hate and all types of stuff- that's never going to get you anywhere in life. You just have to move with purpose. If you move with purpose, you're going to go very far in life.

Belonging was not approval or popularity; it was being seen. When asked why he agreed to be interviewed, Jay explained, “I was struck by it. Like I never thought anybody would want to interview me... It makes me feel kind of good about myself, you know?” Jay’s response was echoed by other participants. Lucas, for example, exclaimed, “I have so much to say about this,”

as he pulled up a chair to begin his interview. He had been waiting for the opportunity to be seen—to be asked about his experience. Zayne spoke to how interviewing youth about their experiences would be something he would like to do. Lucas also spoke to being seen and understood. When he transferred to an alternative school, he shared how seeing a student and staff member who he had known previously gave him a sense of comfort.

Jay described being greeted at the beginning of the day, asked about his classes, and offered accompaniment: “It felt like someone cared[d] about me getting my education.” He shared a story from his time in juvenile detention, where teachers would greet him at the door and say, “Glad you guys can make it today,” because students never knew whether they would make it to class due to fights or other barriers beyond their control. This care extended beyond daily affirmation into concrete preparation for the future, as Zayne recalled, a staff member who “would try to put me ahead in life, help me with my resume and apply for jobs.”

### ***Agency***

Participants said they only felt like they belonged when they could be their true selves. Lucas shared about a teacher who:

made sure our stories mattered. She taught the curriculum but made it personalized to make us learn from it where we can work from, you know, study how we learned and give a choice in a way that we can talk.

The participants experienced belonging when they are not required to present an acceptable version of themselves. Deuces explicitly named rejection of “fake” identities, while Jay framed belonging as being “meant to be there,” rather than reshaped to fit.

This commitment to authenticity was reflected in how participants described teachers who honored students' agency and interests rather than enforcing compliance. One participant described a teacher whose approach communicated respect for students as decision-makers in their own learning:

He was very open-minded about the students who came to his class, I mean, it wasn't a core class. It wasn't something you needed to graduate, but he gave the students an opportunity to decide whether they were really interested and remove them if they weren't. He wasn't going to make you be in the class if you didn't have an interest in what he was teaching. Neither the student nor he benefited. It would be best for both of them to pursue better opportunities. He wanted what was best for the student. He didn't care how many students were in his class as long as the students were learning something, which really spoke to me.

Rather than equating belonging with attendance or compliance, this account highlighted belonging as rooted in being trusted to show up as oneself, with interests and boundaries respected.

Belonging also emerged through care enacted alongside high expectations. Lucas shared an experience in which a teacher intervened when he began falling behind academically. While the moment felt uncomfortable at the time, Lucas later interpreted it as evidence of care: "I feel like doing that like it showed that [they] care. [They] were looking out for me and were making sure I made it through middle school." In this instance, belonging was communicated not only through ease or affirmation, but also through adults' willingness to act on a student's behalf for the student's future.

## ***Synthesis of Findings***

What began as interviews evolved into a practice of witnessing, requiring me to interrogate assumptions about access, trust, and entitlement. Recruitment refusals, delays, and moments of hesitation further underscored the reality that participation is shaped by timing, health, capacity, and trust—particularly in communities impacted by harm and institutional neglect. In several instances, mothers’ concerns about exposure, retraumatization, and institutional surveillance shaped whether and how young men could participate, making visible the protective labor that often precedes any act of being known. These dynamics clarified that refusal or absence was not disinterest, but a response to lived histories of harm and unmet promises.

Those who participated, as well as those who could not, shaped the study. Presence and absence alike illuminated the conditions under which young Black men are invited, or asked to risk, to make themselves vulnerable to institutions that have not consistently supported them. While these maternal perspectives provided critical context for understanding access and participation, the analytic focus of the findings remains centered on how the young men themselves experience belonging.

Using a phenomenological approach, the findings focus on how five young Black men experience belonging as they move through PK–12 schools. The young men described belonging as having their full humanity recognized: being seen, protected, and able to be themselves without being watched or judged. This emphasis on protection echoed the concerns voiced by mothers during recruitment, many of whom weighed the risks of visibility against the ongoing

vulnerability of their sons within school systems that had previously marked them as problems rather than people.

Belonging faded in schools where students were treated as problems to control instead of people to support. Instead, the young men found moments of true belonging mostly outside regular school settings, such as in alternative programs, detention-based education, peer groups, and self-directed paths. Taken together, the findings illustrate that belonging is shaped not only by inclusion and exclusion within institutions, but also by the ways young Black men actively seek, create, and affirm dignity beyond systems that have repeatedly failed to recognize their full humanity.

### Implications for Educational Practice

Writing this final chapter was difficult to begin. I expected it to be the easiest because I looked forward to it, yet I found myself returning again and again to a writing block. A close friend suggested that when words do not come, it is often because they carry personal weight. She shared that forgetting lines in a play meant the truth of them hurt to say. Her reflection made me pause. Perhaps this chapter is difficult because it holds the stories that linger most deeply, for those who entrusted them to me, and the responsibility I now carry in telling them.

Across interviews with Black young men and their mothers, belonging emerged not from institutional compliance, but from moments when humanity was affirmed—by peers, by family, and by educators willing to see them fully. The mother’s stories illuminated how this recognition, or its absence, reverberates beyond classrooms, shaping family life, emotional safety, and trust in schools. Together, these insights underscored the urgent need for districts, leaders, and teachers to examine the beliefs and identities that inform school culture and professional learning, and to reimagine educational spaces where both students and families can exist with dignity.

Participants’ experiences revealed how schools often undermine belonging through practices rooted in behavior management, compliance, and whiteness. Especially during adolescence—when belonging is deeply tied to well-being, identity, and development—these findings highlight both the responsibility and the potential schools hold. When students are seen, trusted, and allowed to author themselves, belonging is not something dispensed by institutions, but something students live, practice, and cultivate.

## Openings for Deeper Dialogue

The findings reveal serious and persistent problems in PK–12 schools. Participants' experiences affirm longstanding and well-documented inequities in how students experience discipline, belonging and inclusion; these are not isolated events, but show ongoing patterns in how students experience school. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens for understanding how discipline, belonging, and whiteness operate as interconnected dimensions of broader structural inequities. Discipline practices reinforce norms associated with whiteness. When students are punished for not conforming to these norms, they may internalize a sense of exclusion and diminished belonging. Since whiteness is treated as the invisible standard, educators and institutions<sup>12</sup> often normalize these inequitable outcomes, even when they are not consciously recognized as unjust.

While these findings do not introduce new forms of inequity, they offer important insight into how these structural patterns are lived and experienced by students and families. Disparities in school discipline show up in early grades, and can reinforce racial inequality across a student's life (Dumas, 2018; Love, 2019). School leaders must challenge the deeper norms that shape how students are judged, included, and valued, and evaluate how policies, routines, and expectations affect students every day. This involves moving away from harsh, exclusionary discipline systems and toward restorative, relationship-based approaches. Educators and school leaders must interrogate how common norms affect who gets support, who faces discipline, and who feels like they belong. Without these broader system changes, attempts to address

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<sup>12</sup> By institutions, I refer to the interconnected systems of schools, districts, policies and educational norms that shape how discipline is defined, enacted, and justified.

dehumanization will remain limited and fragmented, rather than truly changing the conditions that shape students' experiences throughout the school.

### ***Reframing School Discipline***

**Racialized Discipline as Structural Harm.** Deuce's violent story of being forced to wear a weighted vest while lying on his kindergarten classroom floor is a glimpse of overt cruelty experienced in early schooling. Similarly, Zayne shared a vivid account of a time he eloped from school while upset. Although the exact words spoken to him have faded, the emotional impact of the moment remains. Together, these stories reveal not only individual incidents but also broader patterns of dehumanizing practices of structural bias. Consistent with current research, students of color- particularly Black students- are disciplined more frequently and harshly than their white peers (Dumas, 2018; Vaught, 2011). This reveals how discipline operates as a site of racialized control rather than neutral behavior management (Gillborn, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

From a CRT lens, these stories position participants' lived experiences as legitimate evidence of how institutional practices reproduce inequities through disciplinary actions. What emerges is not simply individual harm, but the normalization of disciplinary practices that reflect and sustain dominant, often white and middle-class, cultural norms. In this way, dismantling punitive discipline requires more than policy revision—it requires a critical interrogation of how power, race, and normativity shape what is defined as misbehavior and how responses to it are enacted. These patterns also reinforce the marginalization of families, whose perspectives and knowledge are often excluded from the disciplinary decision process.

**Restorative Justice as a Transformative Framework.** In response, district and school leaders must move beyond surface-level reform and engage in a structural analysis of disciplinary systems. This includes interrogating how rules may privilege certain cultural behaviors, and investing in educator learning that addresses implicit bias and systemic inequities. These efforts demand a reframing of discipline— not as control, but as relational accountability and community care.

Restorative Justice (RJ) offers one such reframing. RJ is not a single program but a comprehensive, relationship-centered framework grounded in connection, reparation, and transformation (Lodi et al., 2022). Rooted in Indigenous traditions, including talking circles (Muiniskw, n.d.), Restorative Justice shifts the focus from punishment to repairing harm and rebuilding relationships. Restorative practices—such as circles, mediation, and conferencing— operationalize this framework by creating structured opportunities for dialogue, accountability, and healing (Lodi et al., 2022).

Restorative Justice is both proactive and responsive. It builds relational trust and community cohesion before harm occurs, while also providing processes to address conflict when it arises. These practices cultivate social and emotional competencies—such as empathy, responsibility, and mutual respect—and engage the broader community rather than just those directly involved in an incident (Lodi et al., 2022).

To move from theory to transformation, Restorative Justice must be embedded across the institution rather than implemented as an isolated initiative. In practice, this means integrating restorative approaches into core areas of schooling: equity work, curriculum and instruction, safety and security, human resources, and student services. Such integration

ensures that restorative principles shape not only disciplinary responses but also the daily conditions of teaching, learning, and belonging.

Participants' narratives further suggest that discipline cannot be separated from other systems of control within schools. Surveillance extends beyond formal discipline into instructional practices, where compliance-based expectations limit flexibility and student agency. These findings illustrate how discipline operates across multiple layers of schooling, district policy, building leadership, and classroom instruction, shaping students' daily experiences in cumulative ways.

At the practice level, consistency is critical. Educators must share a common language around harm, accountability, reflection, and repair so that discipline is not experienced as arbitrary or dependent on individual authority. Restorative processes, such as community-building circles, restorative conferences, and mediated dialogues, provide a predictable and transparent structure for addressing conflict. This consistency interrupts patterns of exclusion and replaces them with relational accountability.

Equally important is the concept of repair. Repair requires intentional reconnection, where students are reintegrated into the community without stigma or lasting labels. Rather than public shaming or exclusion, restorative approaches emphasize check-ins, relationship-building, and the co-construction of expectations and common agreements. In this sense, Restorative Justice demands a cultural shift: from removing students to restoring them.

Finally, centering the voices of families—particularly mothers—highlights the need for partnership rather than exclusion in disciplinary processes. Too often, caregivers are informed

after decisions are made, reinforcing mistrust and disconnection. A restorative approach requires engaging families as collaborators in problem-solving, and accountability. This includes inviting families into decision-making processes before disciplinary action is taken, recognizing their knowledge of their children as a critical expertise, and creating structures for ongoing dialogue. Transparent communication and inclusive processes are essential to disrupting cycles of harm and rebuilding trust between schools and communities.

### ***Cultivating Belonging***

Deuces described becoming “a ghost” for several months after transitioning to a new school, explaining that invisibility felt like the safest way to “integrate myself in a place I felt like I didn’t belong.” From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, Deuce’s account reflects how students internalize and adapt to racialized schooling environments where safety is not guaranteed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Vaught, 2011). This account illustrates how students learn to minimize their presence as a survival strategy in environments where their full humanity is neither seen nor protected. His decision to become “a ghost” is not simply an individual coping strategy, but a response to schooling institutions that have historically conditioned students of color to associate visibility with risk, surveillance, and punishment (Dumas, 2018; Gillborn, 2005). In this context, invisibility becomes a form of self-protection. Rather than interpreting Deuce’s withdrawal as a behavioral or social adjustment, CRT reframes it as evidence of institutional failure. The responsibility shifts from the student to the school to create environments where visibility is safe and affirmed.

Deuces also spoke to how belonging can feel elusive, explaining, “Yeah, it may be more of an ideal... It’s a way to describe something, but not something I can grab, if that makes sense. It’s a feeling.” This elusiveness is not accidental; it is produced through schooling structures that prioritize compliance and containment over relational care (Freire, 1970; Love, 2019). When belonging is not actively cultivated, it becomes ambiguous, abstract, or absent. Schools are places where belonging is structured by power: students closest to dominant norms experience affirmation, while others navigate exclusion (Dyer, 1997; Leonardo, 2022). Deuce’s narrative functions as a counterstory, revealing that recognition and humanity are not inherent in schooling. Deuce’s sense of not belonging reflects how schooling spaces are structured around implicit norms that privilege certain ways of being (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

These findings align with research demonstrating that belonging is a critical condition for student engagement and success, particularly for students who have been historically marginalized (Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011). However, belonging cannot be reduced to individual feelings, it must be structurally cultivated through environments that affirm dignity, identity, and connection (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019; Powell & Menendian, 2024). Within this literature, Restorative Justice further positions belonging as relational and collective, grounded in community, accountability, and repair (Lodi et al., 2022).

Belonging must therefore be actively produced through intentional relational practices. If being “seen” is not guaranteed, then schools must intentionally cultivate spaces that affirm students’ identities, voices, and experiences as essential to the learning environment. Embedding restorative practices across schooling systems creates spaces where students and families can be visible, heard, and held in community, rather than managed through avoidance.

Participant narratives like Deuce's must inform decision-making processes, shaping how schools define safety, engagement, and success (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

At a structural level, cultivating belonging requires rethinking how schooling defines participation, behavior, and achievement. This also includes prioritizing the recruitment, hiring, and retention of teachers of color, whose presence can disrupt racialized norms of recognition and expand students' access to relational safety and affirmation. As participants' experiences demonstrated, racial representation among educators is not merely symbolic, but shaped their sense of connection and engagement, making access to teachers who share or understand their lived experiences is central to cultivating belonging.

These dynamics must be understood within the broader context of schooling as a system that has historically functioned as sites that reproduce inequality while maintaining the appearance of neutrality (Anderson, 2020; Bell, 1992), making it necessary to interrogate how policies and practices perpetuate exclusion. Belonging must be co-constructed through relationships among students, educators, and families and institutionalized through policies, curriculum, and instructional practices that affirm dignity and disrupt marginalization (Au et al., 2016; Sleeter & Zalava, 2020). In practice, this means redefining success—from a narrow emphasis on compliance and standardized achievement to broader focus on belonging, cultural affirmation, and critical engagement— and creating flexible, culturally sustaining instructional spaces that center students' lived experiences and provide multiple ways to participate and demonstrate learning.

**Classroom Practices.** Teacher-student relationships emerged as critical sites for fostering genuine belonging. Participants emphasized the importance of educators recognizing their

cultural intelligence, lived knowledge, and survival skills as legitimate forms of expertise. This aligns with calls for education that honors students' humanity and positions them as knowledge holders rather than subjects of control (Baldwin, 1963/1985; Dillard, 2022). Restorative approaches reinforce this recognition by creating space for student voice and shared accountability, rather than compliance-driven interactions (Lodi et al., 2022). This requires a structural shift from compliance driven models of schooling toward institutionalized relational practices, where recognition, voice and shared accountability are embedded in policies, evaluation systems, and everyday instructional design.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that classroom practices must shift from managing behavior to nurturing dignity, agency, and relationships while also aligning with broader structural transformation. Deuce's earlier mention of his teacher who valued students' genuine interest and learning underscores educators' vital role in communicating that students are valued for who they are, not for how well they conform. When schools fail to create conditions for recognition, mothers noted that their children did not thrive but instead withdrew, silenced themselves, or emotionally disappeared. Allowing space for emotion, movement, voice, and cultural expression without categorizing students as disruptions transforms belonging from an abstract ideal into a lived, relational reality, one that mothers understood as essential to their children's persistence, engagement, and sense of self in school spaces. This shift reflects a broader call across scholarship to reimagine schooling as a space of freedom, liberation, and collective care, rather than control (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Love, 2023).

### ***Rethinking What Schools Value***

Silkey describes learning how to “dip,” to separate himself from danger, and navigate away from violence, while Deuces describes a student body that trusted each other’s voices and resolved problems collectively. In these accounts, Silkey demonstrates how to move away from harm, while Deuces illustrates a form of safety grounded in collective trust and shared responsibility among peers. These examples show how participants created a sense of belonging through self-authorship, choosing whom to invite, how to survive, and what counted as meaningful learning. Rather than a disengagement, these actions reflect critical awareness and adaptive strategies within systems that did not fully recognize their humanity. The mothers’ accounts extended this understanding, showing how these strategies are often reinforced at home as families prepare their children to navigate institutions that do not fully value them.

These experiences align with Ethnic Studies scholarship, which argues that schools systematically marginalize the knowledge systems and epistemologies of communities of color while privileging dominant cultural narratives (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020; Zamudio et al., 2011). In this way, schooling becomes a site of assimilation rather than affirmation, where students are expected to suppress or fragment parts of themselves in order to succeed. Education either reproduces the logic of the existing system or transforms it (Freire, 1970). Participants’ experiences, alongside mothers’ insights, suggest that schooling more often reinforces existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

At the same time, participants demonstrated ways of resisting these conditions. They engaged in what hooks (1994) describes as self-definition, resisting imposed meanings and

asserting their own ways of knowing and being. Education became something they did for themselves, while schooling was something that was done to them. Mothers' narratives reflect parallel forms of resistance, as they created spaces of affirmation, care and cultural grounding outside of school. These forms of learning, largely invisible within dominant schooling structures, represent alternative epistemologies rooted in survival, care, and collective responsibility.

Whiteness is the invisible norm that structures what is recognized, rewarded, and legitimized in schools. It shapes not only discipline and belonging, but also what is considered knowledge, success and appropriate ways of being. Participants' experiences of racialized scrutiny and microaggressions reflect the operation of whiteness as a regulating force within classroom spaces. From a CRT perspective, this invisibility allows whiteness to function as a neutral standard, while positioning students of color as deviations from that norm (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2002). The implication is not simply to acknowledge difference, but to make whiteness visible as a structural force that organizes policies, expectations and opportunities. As Leonardo (2002) argues, dismantling whiteness requires explicit naming and confrontation rather than silence—yet participants' schooling experiences were characterized by avoidance rather than engagement. Together, these dynamics reveal what schools recognize, reward, and legitimize is not neutral but shaped by racialized norms. Rethinking what schools value requires redefining knowledge, participation, and success in ways that move beyond compliance and assimilation toward dignity, cultural affirmation, and self-definition.

**Structural Shifts.** At a structural level, rethinking what schools value requires disrupting the dominance of whiteness across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. To do so, schools must take intentional steps in at least three areas: building the curriculum around the students' lived experiences, redefining participation beyond compliance and recognizing voice, movement, and cultural expression as legitimate forms of engagement and learning. This includes centering culturally sustaining and community-rooted knowledge systems at the core of learning, rather than treating them as supplemental (Au et al., 2016; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). In practice this looks like building the curriculum around the students' lived experiences.

Participants' and mothers' experiences also highlight the importance of counter-spaces as environments where students' identities and knowledge are affirmed. hooks (1990) describes homeplace as a site of resistance, where individuals are nurtured and affirmed in their full humanity despite oppressive external conditions. Within schools, and communities, these counter-spaces can take the form of affinity groups, family networks, community partnerships, and relational learning environments where students can engage without surveillance or marginalization.

Embedding these spaces within school structures is not an addition, but a necessary shift in how schools define learning itself. When students and families are given opportunities to shape their learning, build relationships, and center their lived experiences, education moves closer to what Freire (1970) describes as the practice of freedom. In this way, rethinking what schools value is not only about curriculum reform, but about transforming the fundamental purposes of schooling—from control and compliance toward dignity, agency, and collective well-being. Across the findings, families, particularly mothers, emerge not only as advocates,

but as critical knowledge holders who interpret, respond to, and resist schooling practices in real time. Black family engagement is a central component of educational transformation.

### **Call to Action**

*Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish (Lorde, 1984, p. 112).*

Lorde's insistence that survival is not the same as flourishing grounds this study's central invitation: educators must move beyond managing students on the margins and begin standing with them to collectively imagine something else. This study emerged from a desire to understand how educators might better support students who feel disconnected, othered, or excluded—students who experience themselves as outsiders within public education. This dissertation in praxis confronts the possibility that the system is not broken, but working as intended, requiring us not to fix it, but to reimagine and build otherwise.

This work begins with adults. Teachers, administrators, and staff require consistent support, ongoing learning, and accountability, to students, families, and one another, for creating school environments that affirm dignity and do no harm. Institutional structures matter as well—how schools define success, communicate purpose, and prioritize control or connection significantly shapes student experience. Above all, relationships matter. Belonging is built and broken in everyday interactions, in moments that may feel insignificant to adults but are enduring for young people.

There were moments throughout this process when I questioned whether this work mattered—whether it contributed anything new, whether the hours spent reading and writing had meaning, whether I had done justice to the young men and mothers who entrusted me with their stories. I now recognize that the value of this work is not in exposing something new, but in making visible and undeniable the lived realities of inequity long documented in scholarship. Humanization must begin with the honest acknowledgment that some students are systematically oppressed, and that schools are not neutral spaces. Oppressive systems fail to recognize difference as a generative and collective strength, instead treating it as a threat (Lorde, 1984). As Love (2019) reminds us, the system is often functioning exactly as designed—but disruption requires educators to show up differently, to model humanity where institutions do not.<sup>13</sup>

The crux of this research is not merely to critique schooling but a call for educators to more responsive and humanizing practices. As hooks (1994) challenges, educators must approach students with a willingness to respond to their unique beings, even when conditions do not allow for full mutual recognition. This study offered me the opportunity to engage in research as a humanizing practice—to be authentic, to listen deeply, and to create spaces and places that could be fully seen.

I also hold this work in relation to ancestral knowledge and living community. I think of my mycorrhizal network—the interconnected roots, relationships, and wisdom that sustain us.

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<sup>13</sup> The term institution extends beyond schooling to include other systems of social control, such as the penal system. This connection highlights the often unspoken but direct relationship between schools and incarceration, commonly referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline, wherein disciplinary practices and institutional logics contribute to the regulation and confinement of marginalized youth.

brown (2017) offers the image of dandelions that transform toxins and bring healing. This research does not exist in isolation; it is held and carried by communities that have long learned how to survive conditions never designed for their flourishing—and, in doing so, have cultivated ways of seeing, knowing, and relating that dominant systems both ignore and need. As Lorde (1984) reminds us, survival alone is not the goal. Outsider positioning, while produced through exclusion, can also become a source of collective clarity and strength, making possible new forms of connection and world-building. I envision a community of educators and healers, grounded in ancestral knowledge, committed to listening to students on the margins—students who identify as outsiders—not to fix them, but to stand with them in defining and seeking a world otherwise. I look toward a future in which schools are places where we no longer ask students to survive, but where we actively create the conditions for all of us to flourish.

## Reciprocity

The goal of this research was to learn from former students who struggled in mainstream education, as their experiences and critiques of schooling are often absent from conversations about belonging. Their voices offered essential insights into how educational spaces can affirm identity and actively erase it.

I approached this work not as an act of extraction but as a relational exchange. This inquiry was not a one-sided process, but a bridge for deeper understanding. I have been deeply reflective about how I represent the stories entrusted to me and how I show up in these spaces, remaining mindful of what participants and mothers of Black men shared with me. This work asks not only what I learn, but how I carry, honor, and return that knowledge with care.

The use of a reflexive journal was integral to this process, allowing me to document how my own biases surfaced in conversations, interpretations, and internal thought bubbles throughout the study. At times, I found myself questioning why participants did not address situations I had prior knowledge of, and I experienced frustration rooted in what I perceived as a lack of self-awareness. The journal became a space for me to sit with and release these assumptions, judgments, and observations. Yet these moments did not remain confined to the page. Each time I left an interview, I found that the process of bracketing was incomplete. My reflections challenged me to confront how I listen, interpret and respond in my own teaching practice.

In particular, the narratives shared by the mothers prompted me to reconsider how I engage families in my work. Their experiences brought to light the ways in which schools often

overlook families as sources of knowledge, care, and advocacy. Participant words have changed the way I mother, the pedagogical moves I make as an educator, and how I envision myself as an emerging leader, colleague, and friend. In this way, their knowledge extends beyond this study and lives within my practice.

This research was not about gathering knowledge; it was about cultivating a community grounded in dignity, care, and mutual growth. I remain committed to ongoing self-examination as an educator and researcher, and to listening with curiosity, humility, and wonder. In this way, this work becomes a nourishing force—one that honors the wisdom of those who have been marginalized and contributes to the healing and transformation of educational spaces.

What was shared in this process was more than stories; they were seeds—drawn from deep, tangled roots of experience, memory, and survival. These roots hold histories of harm, but also of resilience, care, and collective knowing. The seeds are abundant, offering possibilities for reimagining education, yet they require tending. The question is not whether the seeds exist, but who is willing to cultivate them.

To take up this work is to recognize that we are already connected—to one another, to the land, and to the histories that shape us. These young men and mothers call educators to see themselves not as distant observers, but as participants responsible for nurturing what has been entrusted to them. In this sense, the work is not to extract knowledge, but to tend to it—to create the conditions where something new can take root, grow, and sustain future generations. The seeds are already here; the question is whether we are willing to tend to them

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