"TWISTED GARDEN": UNEARThING YOUTH VOICE AND CULTivating CHANGE IN THE NEW ORLEANS EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

RAE STEVENSON. "Twisted Garden": Unearthing Youth Voice and Cultivating Change in the New Orleans Education Landscape. (Under the direction of DR. SAMANTHA FRANCOIS, CHAIR)

This dissertation project addresses the need for culturally relevant and community-driven research with Black youth in the field of education. Traditional research approaches are often perceived as exploitative and disconnected from the needs of marginalized communities. As a result, policy reforms fail to adequately address the needs of Black children and youth. Community-engaged approaches have emerged as a promising alternative, but new approaches are needed to disrupt traditional power dynamics between adults and youth while remaining developmentally appropriate. This project explores the use of comics-based research as a method for co-creating culturally relevant and accessible research products with Black youth. Utilizing collaborative graphic autoethnography as method, this project positions youth co-researchers as primary knowledge producers. By centering participant-created comics as the dissertation product, this research aims to decenter the researcher and engage youth in a developmentally appropriate research process. Through participatory arts-based methods, critical autoethnography, and counter-storytelling, this collaborative approach fosters cooperative inquiry, analysis, and social change. The dissertation project seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary efforts to refine transformative collaborative processes and represent youth stories of school experiences in a humanizing, culturally relevant, and impactful manner for them and their communities.
DEDICATION

THIS DISSERTATION IS DEDICATED TO MY YOUTH CO-RESEARCHERS.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING YOUR STORIES WITH ME.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Traditional research approaches have a reputation in communities of color for extracting research from those communities in ways that are exploitative and ultimately do not serve anyone beyond the ivory tower (Fals-Borda, 1988; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Sondel, Kretchmar and Dunn, 2019; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Blaisdell, 2021). In the field of education, this lack of cultural relevance and community voice leads to policy reforms that continuously fail to meet the needs of Black children and youth (Dumas & Anderson, 2014; Luguettia et. al, 2022), indicating an urgent need for the voices of Black youth in school reform conversations. Although community-engaged approaches to scholarship have emerged as a pathway to more meaningful research with Black communities, participatory projects with youth are uniquely vulnerable to reproducing unequal power dynamics between adults and youth (Boser, 2007; Giniwright & James, 2002). This research project aimed to explore the efficacy of comics-based research as a method for co-creating culturally relevant research products that are accessible and developmentally appropriate, while also fostering social action and systems change that directly benefits Black youth and their communities. This dissertation aimed to respond to critical race theorists’ call for a counter-narrative of racialized experiences in charter school systems (Buras, Randels, & Salaam, 2010; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Ruth, 2020; Henry, 2021; Perrelli & Vaccaro, 2022) by engaging New Orleans public high school students in a participatory action arts-based research project, focused on storytelling racialized experiences in the New Orleans school system through comics narratives.
1.1 Statement of the Problem

A common tension in participatory scholarship is the tendency to lose levels of participation at later stages of the collaborative process (Banks et al., 2013), especially in the data analysis and dissemination stages. Participatory projects with youth face additional challenges, including the challenge of maintaining developmental appropriateness throughout the research process (Kim, 2016). Participatory dissertation projects in particular suffer from the necessity of "translation" (Behar, 2003) – the need for the doctoral candidate to contextualize and analyze the research products and processes in order to meet the requirements of the dissertation process. This act of translation is not without political and epistemic consequences, and ultimately privileges the authorial voice of the university-trained scholar over the participant-researchers. Such hierarchical discrepancies in authorship and knowledge production underscore a broader issue within the social sciences – a systematic undervaluing of participant-contributed knowledge. That issues with participatory authorship, data collection, analysis, dissemination are all common themes in participatory scholarship indicates that there is a need for radical new approaches that challenge and reimage what is deemed academic scholarship, while extending the reach of scholarship through more inclusive knowledge products.

Comics as method (McNicol, 2019; Forde, 2022) or collaborative graphic autoethnography (Meer & Müller, 2021) is an emerging research method that offers promising new possibilities for transforming authorship conventions in participatory projects. By presenting participant-created comics as the dissertation product, this project seeks to de-center the researcher by positioning youth co-researchers as the primary producers of knowledge. Comics-as-method also presents as an ideal method for engaging youth in a developmentally appropriate approach to engaging in the research process. A number of studies suggest that using comics to convey scholarship to readers can boost motivation and engagement while conveying the same amount of
information as text (Farinella, 2018; Lin et al., 2015). This collaborative method engages youth in cooperative processes of inquiry, analysis, and social change through a combination of participatory arts-based methods, critical autoethnography, and counter-storytelling. Using comics-based research methods allows youth to have full authorship of their stories, theorize as they create, and share their findings with a broad range of audiences in an accessible multimedia format.

This project is anchored in its New Orleans context, where the discrepancy between community experience and education policy and research is especially pronounced. The city’s public-school system was converted to an unprecedented market-based school choice model following the devastating damage from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Education policymakers used the tragedy as an opportunity to overhaul the existing school system, which had long struggled with low graduation rates, allegations of corruption, and failing academic performance (Harris, 2015; Buras, 2013). New Orleans is now the only school district in the country composed entirely of charter schools (Harris, 2015). Years after this controversial decision, education policymakers nationwide are looking to evaluate the New Orleans model. Already, policy analysts are arguing that this charter school experiment should be replicated in low-income urban districts throughout the country (Osburne, 2012).

Traditional measures of academic success in New Orleans (e.g. test scores and graduation rates) have provided evidence in favor of the charter school system. Test scores and graduation rates have improved from pre-Katrina rates (Harris, 2015). However, many scholars argue that these traditional measures of success do not offer us a full picture (Dumas and Anderson, 2014). Test scores for students of color are often a poor indicator of future academic success (Sondel, 2015). Critical race theorists in education argue that standardized testing for students of color is vulnerable to the same structural biases that are embedded in the broader society (Rector-Aranda, 2016; Sondel, 2015). At times, standardized test scores have been weaponized by
policymakers and scholars alike to alternately hide and justify the racialized suffering that persists in schools where standardized test scores improve (Rector-Aranda, 2016). Additionally, these measures do not capture holistic well-being and the socioemotional and developmental goals that have long been addressed as priorities for schools alongside academic performance. Similarly, the extant literature does not capture how these reforms have impacted curriculum and instruction—both important markers of school experience. In short, traditional academic measures allow the charter school system in New Orleans to claim success while failing to adequately reflect the holistic lived experience of students attending these schools.

Looking at the racial asymmetries between charter school teachers and students in New Orleans cracks the charter system’s facade of success even further. The current school system has come at the cost of irreparable harm to New Orleans’ Black teaching force (Buras, 2013). Indeed, the nation has suffered no greater loss of a Black teaching force all at once since desegregation (Dixon Cook, 2013). Without a centralized school district, the charters have largely filled these vacancies with young, white, inexperienced teachers and administrators (Sondel, 2019) who are often from out of state, hired through Teach for America and other alternative certification programs. In contrast, the city’s student body is one of the most segregated in the nation; over 89% of students in its public charter schools are students of color, 76% of whom are Black (Babineau, Karapetyan, & Rossmeier, 2020). In Chapter 2, I will discuss the history of how the city’s schools came to be so segregated, and how the current charter school reform project has failed to remedy the problems associated with segregated schools.

Sondel, Kretchmar and Dunn (2019) argue that the racial discrepancy between teachers and students allow white supremacist practices to proliferate. For example, many New Orleans charter schools have adopted austere "no excuses" policies that disproportionately impact Black students. Critics of these policies contend that they
prioritize keeping children on task rather than engaged, and emphasize surveillance and control rather than play, joy, and exploration (Sondel, 2016; Stahl, 2020). Studies suggest that teachers in "no excuses" schools often hold deficits-based perspectives that were highly critical of local community values (Marsh & Walker, 2022). When we consider the ways Black childhood functions in the public imagination, these outcomes become unsurprising. Dumas and Nelson (2016) reason that Black children, and Black boys in particular, are understood only ever as Black young adults and future problems. The pervasiveness of anti-Blackness leads education policymakers to legislate based on anxiety and fear over Black youths’ futures, rather than their developmental and educational needs.

Dumas and Anderson (2014) further complicate our understanding of education policy by demonstrating the ways policymaking is influenced more strongly by the policymaker’s pre-existing ideology than education policy research. They offer neoliberal market reform of schools as a specific example of policy where quantitative data was used to justify policy after implementation, rather than at the policy design phase. In Chapter 2, I describe how neoliberal policymaking routinely fails to acknowledge systemic challenges such as structural racism, leaving the people most impacted by those systemic challenges to be held individually accountable for failure to perform. Dumas and Anderson argue that education policy research is better tasked with creating critical policy knowledge rather than policy prescriptions. In other words, where researchers commonly create studies that are meant to offer a set of recommendations, there is a need for studies that cultivate a new common sense to be shared with policymakers and diverse audiences that also impact policy in direct and indirect ways. Similarly, critical race theorists assert the necessity of story in a society situated in white supremacy. Critical race theory recognizes the importance of "the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge" (Dixson Rousseau, 2005 p. 35). In this way, storytelling can be used to
highlight the racial injustice that is firmly rooted in the American education system and its culture’s unspoken norms. Critical narratives serve to debunk the dominant narrative assertions of racial neutrality in education policy, revealing that racism and racial discrimination are commonplace occurrences in the lives of students of color. Amidst the mounting literature weighing the success of the New Orleans system, the voice of the students of color impacted by these policies has been missing from the conversation. This dissertation utilized comics-based research to center the counter-narratives of Black youth in New Orleans schools in order to create a new definition for success that is inclusive of their lived experiences.

1.2 Purpose

In response to critical race theorists’ call for a counter-narrative of racialized experiences in charter school systems, the purpose of this youth participatory action research (YPAR) dissertation was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Black youth in New Orleans public schools as they relate to well-being. A combined framework of critical race theory and youth participatory action research methodology informed the research questions and supported the inquiry, analysis, and interpretation of the experiences of Black youth. Consistent with the YPAR methodology, this project also sought to engage youth in transformative social action designed to inform education policy stakeholders on how to improve the immediate conditions of their schools. Ultimately, this dissertation project aimed to achieve two overarching goals: 1) to create culturally relevant research products that are accessible, developmentally appropriate, and politically useful to Black youth and their communities and 2) to respond to critical race theorists’ call for a counter-narrative of racialized experiences in charter school systems.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by discussing the theoretical framework underpinning this research, critical race theory. Special attention will be paid to the application of critical race theory in the field of education. Next, I will discuss the particularities of the New Orleans context that undergirds this research project and describe the racialized outcomes of the unique charter-only public school system adopted by the city post Hurricane Katrina. Next, I will provide a comprehensive review of youth participatory action research (YPAR) methodologies, which provides the methodological anchor for this project. I include a discussion of how participatory scholarship struggles with and against conventions of the dissertation process, thus necessitating the need for radical new approaches to data analysis, authorship, and research dissemination to push the field forward. Finally, I offer a brief synthesis of projects that utilize comics-based research as an anti-racist method for radically accessible and collaborative knowledge products.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Education scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Lynn & Dixson, 2013) have long mobilized critical race theory (CRT) in the analysis of the experience of students of color through the American public-school system. Critical race theory (CRT) insists that racism is the norm in U.S. society (Bell, 1991). It is both foundational and systemic, embedded in all aspects of daily life and how we understand our world. Critical race theorists in education are attuned to the ways schools function as socializing spaces which are designed to uphold white supremacy. CRT draws our attention to the myriad of structural processes that reify white
supremacy in schools every day. Curriculum centers whiteness, white achievements and white ways of knowing (Yosso, 2002). Instruction presumes a deficit model for Black students, resulting in disproportionately high levels of surveillance and control in schools that serve Black youth. Historically, testing has been used to reify stereotypes about Black deficiency while ignoring the structural challenges that shape test scores (Tate, 1997; Sondel, 2015). Inequality in school funding is a function of structural racism (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005); because municipal property taxes account for a large percentage of school income, the historic undervaluation of minority-controlled regions continues to have a direct influence on educational financing (Badger 2017, 5).

Blaisdell (2016) argues that without specific, strategic counter-effort, even the most well-intentioned schools will uphold and subsist white supremacy. The task of critical race theory in education, then, is twofold: to identify the workings of white supremacy in schools and to dismantle them through scholarship, praxis and pedagogy. Naturally, these tasks are inherently threatening to existing power structures and the status quo. The critique inherent in CRT demands that schools change. For that reason, the application of critical race theory in schools is a highly contested arena in both scholarly and public spheres. Yet for students of color, there is perhaps no better framework for naming and changing the racialized harm that proliferates in schools.

2.1.1 An Emerging Field

Critical race theory began as an outgrowth of critical legal studies. The critical legal studies movement of the 1970s contended that law was not, in fact, a neutral institution founded on objective principles (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995). Instead, law reified existing inequalities and reinforced the dominant social hierarchy. Critical legal studies offered a powerful analytical tool for the study of inequality and law, but a growing group of scholars in the 80s felt that it rang hollow without meaningfully
engaging with the question of race. These lawyers and activists began to see that "the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995, p.4). The traditional, incremental approach to racial progress was not working. Critical race theory grew from the discontent of legal scholars of color, and the need for new ways of approaching change and understanding race in America (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995).

In 1989, many of these scholars converged at the University of Wisconsin at a retreat which Kimberlé Crenshaw dubbed "New breakthroughs in critical racial theory" (Cobb, 2021). This conference laid the groundwork for a new body of literature at the intersection of critical legal studies and race. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (1993, 1995), Patricia Williams (1991), Mari Matsuda (1987, 1991), and Alan Freeman (1977, 1988), among others, began publishing work in legal journals that advanced the conversation on racism, power, and the law. Among these early works were that of Crenshaw and Freeman. In 1989, Crenshaw wrote an essay in the University of Chicago Legal Forum titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," which established intersectionality as one of the most well-known tenets of CRT. Her views regarding intersectionality as a legal blind spot are now used in a wide range of academic disciplines including literature, sociology, history and public policy. Alan Freeman’s foundational works argued that the U.S. Supreme Court functioned as a placating entity, which "ensures that racial progress occurs at just the right slow pace" (Delgado & Stefancic, 1995, p. 6). The timing and nature of their concessions routinely allowed for the protection of the interests of white elites while preventing racial unrest and instability. Freeman and Crenshaw were joined by other like-minded scholars who forged the movement through meetings, conferences, panels, and roundtables.
2.1.2 Expanding Into the Field of Education

Critical race theory was introduced to the field of education in 1995 by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV with the introduction of their paper "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education". The controversial paper took on the task of both explaining the legal scholarship and precedents behind CRT, as well as discussing its significance and applicability in education. Shortly after, Solorzano (1997) began publishing important contributions to CRT in education. While developing these foundational texts, Ladson-Billings, Tate, and Solorzano had opportunities to discuss the developing field with CRT’s key theorists, including Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Crenshaw, in particular, held teaching appointments at both the University of Wisconsin-Madison and UCLA and was influential in fostering the growing CRT project among education scholars. Later Parker et al. (1999) Lynn (1999), Taylor (1999), Solorzano and Yosso (2001), and Delgado Bernal (2002) were among the scholars who contributed to the early literature.

CRT’s foray into education has helped to reveal the pervasiveness and "permanence of racism" (Bell, 1991) in the United States. Scholars of CRT in education have worked to understand how race shows itself in supposedly "race neutral" circumstances, in addition to criticizing racial segregation in public schools. In the field of education, critical race theorists have questioned the way prevalent assumptions about people of color and their communities are projected unto schools. Critical race theorists of education have identified schooling as a common site of suffering for students of color (Dumas, 2014) – as well as a space of radically liberatory potential. CRT in education acts a powerful theoretical, methodological and pedagogical tool for educators working toward social justice.
2.1.3 Core Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is characterized by core tenets that have been shaped over time through the collaborative effort of scholars in legal studies, education and beyond. Delgado and Stefancic (1995) introduced the earliest iteration of these tenets in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, which remains the most widely-cited iteration of the tenets to date. The tenets draw from the foundational scholarship of CRT including ideas introduced by Bell, Crenshaw, and Freeman, among others. The seven core tenets defined by Delgado and Stefancic are outlined in this section: Ordinariness of Racism, Social Construction, Critique of Liberalism, Interest Convergence, Property Rights and Whiteness, Storytelling Tradition, Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism.

The applicability and relevance of these tenets in education have been articulated by a number of scholars, including Ladson-Billings (1998), Tate (1997), Decuir & Dixson (2004), and Solorzano & Yosso (2002), and others. These tenets have proven to have far-reaching applicability, ranging from legal scholarship to education policy and beyond. Although this dissertation draws directly and indirectly from all of these tenets, special attention will be paid to the storytelling and intersectionality tenets as they relate most directly to this project. These tenets have shaped the research design, analytical approach, and epistemic convictions of this project by making the narratives of Black youth the priority, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are not merely included but are fundamental in co-creating knowledge. This principle of elevating lived experiences through storytelling and recognizing the complex layers of identity informs every aspect of the work, fostering a research environment where students' contributions are deeply intertwined with the tenets' ethos.

2.1.3.1 Ordinariness of Racism.

Critical race theory insists that racism is both foundational and systemic in U.S. society (Bell, 1991, 1992) and is embedded in all aspects of daily life and how we
understand our world. Racism is enmeshed in our social processes and structures, written into our history, and inseparable from our culture as we understand it. It is routinized in our everyday practices and beliefs, and reified every day through social processes. Without a specific, strategic counter-effort, racism will continue to reproduce itself. The ordinariness of racism is evidenced in the many racial disparities in the K-12 public education system. Black children are three times as likely as their white peers to be suspended or expelled for the similar infractions (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2021) and are more likely to interact with the juvenile justice system over school behavior (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2021). They are more likely to receive instruction from inexperienced teachers and less likely to attend well-resourced schools (Bacher-Hicks, et al., 2021).

2.1.3.2 Social Construction.

Critical race theory is anchored in the idea of social construction. The notion of race as a social construction is widely accepted in the social sciences (Obach, 1999). Genetic studies consistently find that the genetic variation in the human species is infinitesimally small (Obach, 1999). Race, then, is not a biological reality but a human-made classification system. Race is a sociological and political construct that is defined, quantified, and experienced in significantly diverse ways across and within civilizations across time (Haney-Lopez, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 1995). Critical race theorist Camara Jones (2001) writes: "Race is a social construct, a social classification based on phenotype, that governs the distribution of risks and opportunities in our race-conscious society... (it) measures a societally imposed identity and consequent exposure to the societal constraints associated with that particular identity" (p. 300).
2.1.3.3 Critique of Liberalism.

CRT emphasizes the large scale and radical nature of change needed to dismantle racism. Accordingly, critical race theorists are critical of liberalism as a pathway for meaningful change. Liberalism, Ladson-Billings (1998) writes, "has no mechanism for such change" (p. 12). Central to this critique is the critique of incrementalism, which Crenshaw (1988) characterizes as the popular idea of "civil rights crusade as a long, slow, but always upward pull" (p. 1334). Whereas liberal ideology has an invested trust in our systems of law to eventually improve conditions of injustice based on civil rights, "CRT calls into question this faith in the system as an instrument of justice" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 16). Liberal ideology is characterized by a tendency to blame the individual for problems that have structural causes, asserting that the best solution to ending inequality is "by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity" (Williams, 2011, para. 1). Liberalism obscures the cultural differences, prejudices, and beliefs that underpin and sustain inequality (Asare, 2017), and does not account for historical wrongs that have not been meaningfully addressed, such as Jim Crow and redlining (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Critical examples of this tenet reach our headlines with dizzying frequency, every time law enforcement officers engage in another act of racially motivated police brutality. The persistence of these violent, high-profile incidents despite widespread protest serves as concrete evidence of the limitations of incrementalism and the need for radical change to address structural racism.

2.1.3.4 Interest Convergence.

Derrick Bell’s concept of interest convergence asserts that white supremacy prohibits civil rights advances unless whites gain from the new legislation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In other words, Black interests must converge with white interests for any change to happen, which necessarily limits the parameters of social justice.
to changes that do not upset the racial order. The quintessential example of interest convergence that Bell offers is *Brown v. Board of Education*. Bell argues that desegregation occurred at this time because it benefited white people (Bell, 1980). Bell (1980; 1991) argued that the Supreme Court ruled in favor of ending school desegregation at the time that it did because racial segregation was detrimental to U.S. foreign policy interests during the Cold War (Bell, 1987). Bell points out that many of the civil rights gains made during this time were later undercut in subsequent legislation (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Meaningful changes, Bell (1980, 1987, 1991) argued, would have required equitable access to all school facilities and resources, as well as representation on school boards and other policymaking bodies, to ensure Black parents’ participation in official decision-making processes. The interest convergence tenet uses these and other examples to highlight how enforcement of civil rights has operated on a swinging pendulum anchored to white interests, where white interests have always been prioritized (Bell, 1987).

We can look to recent headlines for compelling examples of the interest convergence tenet in practice. On June 29, 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to end affirmative action admission programs at colleges and universities nationwide. Although affirmative action was created in an effort to correct historical wrongs and account for bias in the selection process, public approval of this policy has waned over the years (Pew Research Center, 2023). Public support for affirmative action has often been linked to white Americans’ perception of how it benefits them personally (Shteynberg et al., 2011; Hall, 2016). In a study on trends in support for affirmative action, Hall (2016) argued that white support for affirmative action increases when the policies are framed as benefiting white women rather than solely racial minorities. When affirmative action is seen as potentially challenging white privilege or disrupting the racial status quo, we see greater opposition. With the interest convergence tenet in mind, it becomes unsurprising that affirmative action would be struck down after a
period of racial unrest and mass protests.

2.1.3.5 Property Rights and Whiteness.

The role of property rights and whiteness in the United States legal system is another central idea in critical race theory. Bell (1980; 1991) argued that there is an inherent contradiction between property rights and human rights – one which curtailed the efficacy of the civil rights movement and continues to halt the progress of civil rights into the present. The United States was founded on the idea that only those who owned the land had the right to make decisions over it; citizenship became tied to property (Lopez, 1997). The government’s primary goal was to safeguard society’s most valuable asset: property. A government built to preserve property owners’ interests lacked the motivation to guarantee human rights for all its people (Lopez, 1997; Harris, 1993). Enslaved Africans were objectified as property within a system designed to uphold property rights (Lopez, 1997; Harris, 1993). This contradiction racialized notions of property and placed property rights at odds with individual rights (Lopez, 1997; Harris, 1993). Whiteness itself then became a fiercely protected property, granted only to those who could meet a stringent proof requirement (Harris, 1993). Harris (1993) argues that the law has granted "holders" of whiteness the same rights and advantages as other sorts of property owners (Harris, 1993). In examining the United States public education system, the legacy of these legal and societal constructs becomes starkly evident. The historical prioritization of property rights over human rights, entwined with the racialization of both property and citizenship, has had a profound impact on educational equity.

"Whiteness as property" in education can be observed in the ways resource allocation continues to fall along racial lines. Research consistently shows unequal distribution of resources, with predominantly white schools receiving more funding, more modern facilities, more advanced technology, and a wider variety of educational programs compared to schools that serve primarily communities of color (Smith et al.,
This disparate allocation of resources reifies the function of whiteness as a form of property. One particularly timely example of this tenet in practice is legacy admissions in higher education. A number of scholars, including Ladewski (2010) and Rosinger et al. (2021), have highlighted the ways that this practice, which gives preferential treatment to applicants with family connections to an institution, disproportionately benefits white students due to historical patterns of racial exclusion and privilege. Everyday educational practices like this tacitly continue the practice of consolidating power and advantage within white families, further entrenching the function of whiteness as property.

2.1.3.6 Storytelling and Counter-Storytelling.

African scholar Chinua Achebe (1994) wrote, "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." This quote encapsulates the sensibility of the storytelling/counter-storytelling tenet of CRT. This tenet emphasizes the capacity stories have for reifying ethnocentric and hegemonic cultural narratives. Stories express the point of view of the storyteller. On a societal level, stories highlight what the majority and those in positions of power consider important. Often the result is cultural narratives that are valorizing and ethnocentric. Although these kinds of cultural stories are common, acceptance of that presentation as "truth" and "universal" has far-reaching consequences (Ladson-Billings, 2000). When one group refers to their worldview or tale as "actual history," "truth," or "objective science," while the worldviews of others are referred to as myth and folklore, we validate one narrative while devaluing the other. Critical race theorists see counter-storytelling as a tool for deconstructing the harmful master narrative.

In American law, opposing attorneys are said to have the same evidence from which to build a narrative – a story to tell a judge and jury. Both sides assert that they are telling the "truth." Regardless of how the audience is told the story, there is a "counter-story" that tells the story from a different perspective. The capacity to tell
that story is vital as a defense technique. The counter-story encourages individuals to think beyond accepted realities and encourages them to investigate alternatives. Oppressed people have always resisted their oppression through counter-story, whether it is recounting tales of marginalization and abuses of power or stories of unsung heroes of the resistance. The counter-story is used by critical race theorists to demonstrate and emphasize broad legal ideas about race and racial/social justice. In the field of education, teachers, scholars and students can use counter-stories to disrupt our cultural narratives about the role and function of education.

Derrick Bell’s "The Space Traders" (1992) is an example of a counter-story that illustrates racial justice principles and challenges the master narrative. The short story asks us to imagine that aliens from outer space have come to visit a dystopian, futuristic United States. In this story, the aliens offer the United States a magical solution to all its problems in exchange for the capture of America’s Black people. After some deliberation, the United States decides to make the trade, and the aliens take Black people away in their spaceship. The question at the heart of the story quietly asks: Can we really imagine that America would do otherwise? Bell’s chronicle conveys the pervasive nature of racism and racial discrimination, illustrating that racism and racial discrimination are deep and enduring parts of the everyday existences of people of color.

Critical race theory asserts the necessity of story in a society situated in white supremacy. Recognizing that much of reality is socially constructed, CRT values the unique voice of people of color. This includes the subjective and the experiential – that which is not yet proven, or can never truly be proven. Critical race theory recognizes the importance of "the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005 p. 35). Stories are used to highlight the racial injustice that is firmly rooted in American law and culture’s unspoken norms. These narratives debunk traditional legal discourse’s assertions of
racial neutrality, revealing that racism and racial discrimination are commonplace occurrences in the lives of people of color.

This dissertation takes seriously the importance and offerings of storytelling for educational research. In a parallel to Derrick Bell’s 'Space Traders,' the comic narratives created for this dissertation act as a fictional mirror reflecting the racial and ethical inequities faced by society. Just as Bell’s narrative confronts the reader with a stark choice rooted in racial injustice, the use of fantastical storytelling techniques invites our audience to examine similar dilemmas through the use of allegory and symbolism to depiction in its full emotional weight the trade-offs made in the face of systemic discrimination.

Our approach exemplifies the power of narrative to challenge dominant cultural scripts and to illuminate the experiences of marginalized groups. Using comics-based research as a vehicle for story, our comic narratives function as allegorical devices, presenting complex racial and ethical issues in an accessible manner. Through these stories, readers are prompted to grapple with profound moral questions, mirroring the stark choices highlighted in Bell’s work. This method of storytelling, rich with allegory and symbolism, aims to vividly capture the emotional resonance of systemic discrimination, urging a reevaluation of the role and impact of education in perpetuating or challenging social inequities.

2.1.3.7 Intersectionality and Anti-Essentialism.

Another foundational tenet of CRT is intersectionality. According to Delgado & Stefancic, "Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings" (2001, p. 51). Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how anti-discrimination laws fail women of color (Crenshaw, 1990). Although existing laws banned discrimination on the basis of race and sex, the kind of discrimination experienced by Black women seemed to fall outside the bounds of either category. In-
tersectionality drew attention to the fact that current law is ill-equipped to address discrimination against people who fall into multiple categories. Because the experiences of women of color are often the result of the intersection of both racism and sexism, speaking of oppression in general terms oversimplifies the complex power dynamics that undergird inequality.

In education, critical race theorists use intersectionality to interrogate the way compounding identities impact the experiences of students, teachers and others in school systems. For example, schools are a space where Black girls face harms that are specific to their mutually constitutive identities as Black girls. Epstein et al. (2017) found that Black girls are seen as more adult than their white peers and therefore less innocent and more sexual. As a result, Black girls in schools are more targeted for dress code violations in school because school administrators and staff perceive them as overly sexual (E. W. Morris, 2005). In general, Black girls experience high rates of hyper-surveillance in schools (Wun, 2016a). For instance, Black girls are twice as likely to be disciplined for a minor behavioral violation in school than their white peers (Epstein et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the antithesis of intersectionality is essentialism. Critical race theory strongly opposes essentialism. Essentialism holds that all members of a group share the same thoughts, behaviors, and convictions. Stereotyping and misunderstanding are common outcomes of this mindset. Although social, cultural, and political factors often necessitate that individuals participate in community solidarity, individuals do not give up their own rights or opinions because they belong to a group (Guinier & Torres, 2003). The tenet of anti-essentialism works with intersectionality to call for more nuanced, humanizing understandings of marginalized groups. In order to create new, more equitable systems, it is critical to note the ways in-group perspectives, goals, power and access diverge.

The design of this study takes seriously the task of anti-essentialism by providing
the youth in our study autonomy over their narrative. Each participant was able to tell the counter-story that resonated most deeply with their personal experiences. For example, one participant chose to highlight misogynoir, shedding light on the intersectional experiences of sexism and racism in educational settings. Another chose to explore a narrative of grief, while others delved into bullying, the power of art, and various personal struggles and triumphs. By allowing each participant to control their narrative, this study not only honors the individuality of their experiences but also rejects the notion of a monolithic Black experience. The array of stories collected reflects a spectrum of realities - some narratives conclude with a sense of hope, while others end on a more somber note. These stories, in their individuality and collective diversity, underscore the critical necessity of anti-essentialism within CRT.

2.1.4 Putting It All Together

In sum, critical race theory offered this project a robust framework for examining the factors that contribute to persistent racial inequality in New Orleans’ public schools. This project utilized the tenets of CRT as the basis of critical consciousness building for Black youth in this study (described further in Chapter 3). Throughout this project, youth who were involved engaged in discussions that engage these tenets, such as the intersections between race and other identities, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and others. This theoretical anchor equipped youth with the analytical tools needed to parse their school experiences, and informed the counter-stories youth choose to tell. Similarly, CRT shaped the scope of this project through its emphasis on the ways the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continues to pervade our nation’s social fabric. In this project, we used CRT to illuminate the way racism is frequently concealed under supposedly "neutral" policies, ideas, beliefs, or behaviors in schools.

CRT's tenet of counter-storytelling is a key feature of this dissertation. Derrick
Bell’s initial counter-stories were works of creative fiction employed as knowledge products. Controversial at the time and even today, these stories elicited emotional reactions from the reader and sought to drive home truths that traditional scholarly knowledge products could not capture. These stories were legible to scholars and community members alike, abandoning jargon and scholarly language for word choices and narrative images that would resonate with people in his home community. This dissertation sought to create a counter-stories with Black youth that fulfill those same goals. With a number of noteworthy exceptions (Dixson & Dixson, 2013; Tafari, 2018), contemporary critical race theorists in education most often utilize traditional qualitative methods to tell counter-stories, in order to conform to the conventions of academic journals and the requirements of tenure processes. This dissertation was an effort to return to counter-storytelling’s more radical roots by utilizing unique and creative methods (see Chapter 3) to generate knowledge products that ring true for Black youth, are developmentally appropriate and legible to them, and can be used in service of social change that directly impacts them.

2.1.5 Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical race theory has been intimately connected to the field of education from its inception. Many of Bell’s foundational ideas were anchored in a critique of school desegregation and the legal battles in that arena. For this reason, it is no surprise that CRT has grown and flourished in the field of education. In the field of education, CRT has a number of distinct characteristics that distinguish it from its predecessor in legal studies. For example, while legal studies laid the groundwork for CRT in education, CRT in education also draws from race studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies, as well as in Freire’s critical pedagogy. CRT in education builds on the merits of these traditions as an analytical framework by relating them to the study of race and racism in education. Additionally, CRT gains knowledge from the blind areas of several of these discipline domains. For example, there is a trend toward de-centering
or downplaying race in women’s studies, toward ignoring gender in race and ethnic studies and Freirean education, and toward ignoring race and gender in class-based analyses (see McGrew, 2011; Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004).

CRT remains critical in the classroom. In the years since Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced the foundational article on the concepts and research of CRT in education (p. 48). Other additional researchers have contributed to building a robust CRT framework equipped to interrogate the challenges of K-12 education. Dixson & Rousseau, (2005, p. 18) write, "CRT [...] offers a necessary critical vocabulary for analyzing and understanding the persistent and pernicious inequity in education that is always already a function of race and racism." CRT has also been utilized in the field of education to cast doubt on the variables chosen (or not chosen) in quantitative research and to generate counter-narratives through qualitative research (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Educators who use CRT advocate for an examination of how education and the schooling process are intimately related to racial ideology. Race influences issues of privilege and racial violence, as well as how curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture are constructed. The following sections outline consistent themes found in the literature of critical race theory in education, including critiques of racialized school practices regarding assessment, school funding, desegregation and neoliberal policies. Consistent with the CRT practice of counter-storytelling, this section utilized the story of the privatization of New Orleans public schools to illustrate the real-world applicability of CRT to K-12 education.

2.1.6 Critique of (Neo)Liberalism and School Assessment Practices

Critical race theorists in education also engage in a critique of liberalism, including the neoliberal economic system that comes from liberal ideology. Neoliberal economic policies the world over have been on the rise since the 1970s (Kretchmar, Sondel & Ferrare, 2014). Neoliberalism is a social and economic framework that prioritizes individualism, personal responsibility, and the free market (Sondel, 2015). Neoliberal
ideology posits that privatization improves efficiency and offers consumers greater choice (Kretchmar, Sondel & Ferrare, 2014). In practice, this system has led to deregulation in favor of unbridled capitalism, increasing privatization and defunding of public social goods (Kretchmar, Sondel & Ferrare, 2014). This tenet is especially apparent in education systems.

In recent years, the United States has seen a nationwide expansion of charter schools and voucher programs, which divert public funds once earmarked for traditional public schools. This reallocation of resources has had a number of negative consequences. Neoliberal approaches to education encourage market-oriented approaches like school choice and competition, creating fertile ground for profit-driven entities to seek opportunities in the education sector (Hill, 2010; Baltodano, 2012). This leaves for-profit charter schools and the many profit-driven organizations that surround them vulnerable to the temptation to prioritize profit generation over educational quality, resulting in a lack of accountability and negative educational outcomes for students. The profit motive can discourage schools from addressing existing educational inequities, creating compounding problems like substandard infrastructure, limited investment in high-quality instruction materials, and reduced support for programs like arts, music, and extracurricular activities (Bernstein, 2012).

Critical race theorists in education argue that the neoliberalization of education impacts schools serving Black children in two ways. First, emphasis on personal responsibility places the blame for underperforming schools on individual failings such as teachers’ unions, poor management, lack of accountability, and bureaucracy – rather than systemic issues such as underfunding (Sondel, 2015; Buras & Apple, 2005). This perspective allows the proliferation of policies that disproportionately impact Black students, such as high-stakes testing (Sondel, 2015; Buras & Apple, 2005). High-stakes testing, a hallmark of neoliberal education reform, refers to standardized assessments that bear significant consequences, such as determining students’ ad-
vancement, the allocation of school funding, or whether to close a school based on the test results. It has been criticized for encouraging teachers to teach to the test, leading to a focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking and creativity (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Au, 2011). Studies have found that high-stakes testing exacerbates educational inequities, as schools with predominantly Black student populations are more likely to be labeled as failing and face punitive measures such as funding cuts, staff layoffs, and closures (Au, 2007; Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015).

Sondel (2015) connects the emergence of "no excuses" and "zero tolerance" charter schools to the intense focus on standardized test performance. These schools utilize curriculum that teaches to the test, leaving little room for cultural relevance or engagement with real world problems. These schools use behaviorist pedagogical approaches characterized by exacting demands on how kids communicate, behave, and move their bodies (Garrison, 2018). This emphasis on rote memorization and test-driven instruction prioritizes opportunities for students to develop unique perspectives and agency (Garrison, 2018). The impact of these policies is particularly problematic for students from under-served communities, who often face the additional challenge of systemic and historical inequities in education. Emphasis on high stakes testing encourages a one-size-fits-all model of education anchored to the goals of the test, either tacitly or openly discouraging teachers from differentiating instruction in ways that take into account the cultural backgrounds, experiences, and strengths of diverse students (Polesel, 2014; Sondel, 2015). A number of studies suggest that this kind of instruction can lead to disengagement, low self-esteem, and a sense of alienation from the educational process, particularly for students whose cultural identities and ways of knowing are not validated (Mora, 2011; Kearns, 2011).

In the wake of the No Child Left Behind era, testing has become the de facto metric by which schools are appraised as succeeding or failing (Buras, 2013). High-stakes testing shifts the major objective of schools to the collection of evaluation data - which
in turn fosters a school culture where adherence to white cultural standards becomes a necessity. This is especially troubling in schools that predominantly serve students of color. Research has shown that standardized tests often reflect and reinforce dominant white cultural norms and values. They tend to favor white, middle-class students, as the questions, content, and context often align with their cultural backgrounds and experiences (Au, 2016). This bias means that students from different cultural backgrounds are taking these tests at an inherent disadvantage. Unsurprisingly, these biases, paired with the far-reaching problems created by systemic inequality, shape evaluation outcomes. Black students consistently perform at lower levels on standardized tests compared to their white peers (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The biases inherent in standardized testing also create a feedback loop where classroom instruction prioritizes the cultural norms and values of white Eurocentric perspectives, while other cultural perspectives are marginalized or excluded (Au, 2010). This Eurocentric focus can lead to education processes that alienate students, offering them only a limited and distorted understanding of their own histories and erasing the contributions and experiences of non-white cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Often, the rhetoric employed by education reformers describes testing as an equalizer, that allows educators to objectively assess whether all students are being taught up to a common standard and reaching appropriate learning milestones (Buras, 2013). In practice, testing has functioned as "a movement to legitimate African American student deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 19). For these reasons, the task of critical race theorists in education is to deconstruct the prevailing narrative that standardized testing is a neutral and equitable method of assessing student ability.

Disparities in testing reflect both the broader systemic inequities that disproportionately affect Black students, and disadvantaged students from diverse cultural backgrounds experience navigating curriculum and testing not designed with their
cultures in mind (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Au, 2009). Despite this, high stakes testing continues to issue consequences for "poor performance" - like school closures - that do nothing to address these underlying issues. This leads us to the second key problem critical race theorists identify with neoliberalism. Neoliberalism fails to acknowledge systemic challenges, leaving the people most impacted by those systemic challenges to be held individually accountable for failure to perform (Tate, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Sondel, et al., 2019). The neoliberalization of education has perpetuated the myth of meritocracy, where individual success is attributed solely to personal effort and ability. This perspective ignores the systemic barriers and inequities that disproportionately affect Black students, such as inadequate funding, racial segregation, and limited access to resources and opportunities (Sondel, 2015; Buras & Apple, 2005). By placing the blame on individual failings rather than addressing structural issues, neoliberal policies divert attention from the need for systemic change and reinforce the narrative that educational success or failure is solely the result of individual choices. In this way, neoliberal ideology in education further entrenches racial inequalities because it renders schools and school systems either or unable or unwilling to take the radical steps needed to meaningfully address these problems.

2.1.7 Theory/Practice Gap

Schools are one of our last remaining public goods. They have the potential to model the democratic process, generate engaged citizens, and nurture the holistic growth of young people. Unfortunately, public schools routinely fail students of color, becoming spaces that are "toxic to the aspirations and dignity of students of color" (Kirshner, 2015, p. 135). Black students, in particular, bear the heaviest costs of an education system not designed for them. By the numbers, Black children are still the most disciplined and most policed in schools (Dumas, 2014). They are the most vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline (Dumas, 2014). These disparities have persisted over time. In many regions, the situation continues to worsen every year
These persistent inequities exist despite a significant body of scholarship on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education. Although CRT in education has grown tremendously in the past two decades, the actual impact of CRT on educational settings and marginalized communities has been limited (Dixson & Anderson, 2018). Despite the CRT's mainstreaming into education policy conversations, it is rarely incorporated in a way that fundamentally challenges prevailing power structures. Some scholars contend that the transformative potential of CRT has been undercut as it has become more mainstream (Khalifa et al., 2013). The co-optation and sanitization of CRT by corporate entities, DEI professionals, and others with only a cursory understanding of the theory dilutes its revolutionary spirit and relegates it to a superficial add-on within existing educational frameworks that prioritize compliance over true social transformation. CRT risks becoming a hollow buzzword or a superficial diversity training exercise, rather than a catalyst for substantial systemic change.

This disconnect presents a theory/praxis gap in the literature, where CRT has been depoliticized and its radical essence blunted. In an effort to address this gap, this dissertation is an effort to explore more direct translation of CRT into meaningful action within schools and communities. The current research aims to offer CRT scholars and activists a new approach to establishing collaborative partnerships with Black youth, utilizing their experiences as a form of praxis to influence policies, practices, and outcomes positively within educational contexts. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this study aspires to provide valuable insights and recommendations for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers dedicated to creating equitable and inclusive educational environments.

2.2 The New Orleans Context

In many ways, New Orleans can be understood as "ground zero" for understanding the diverging goals of neoliberalism and critical race theorists for school reform. New Orleans has one of the highest segregation rates in the country, with the vast
majority of its white students in private schools while their Black peers attend charters (Parsons and Turner, 2014). Of the white students who do attend charters, two thirds are concentrated into three selective admissions charters (Parsons and Turner, 2014). Policymakers of today are ill-equipped to address this disparity without a nuanced historical, race-critical view of New Orleans schools. In a city where over 93% of students in its public charter students are Black (Parsons & Turner, 2014), New Orleans' market-choice approach to reform has largely ignored New Orleans’ troubled history of racial disparity, segregation, underfunding, and neglect. This leads to a "colorblind" approach to school policymaking, which disproportionately harms communities of color. Critical race theory and an eye towards history renders the conditions of today unsurprising; New Orleans schools essentially never desegregated.

2.2.1 Impact on Teaching

A number of studies have raised concerns about the efficacy of Teach for America (TFA) and other common alternative certification programs in adequately preparing teachers for diverse classrooms (Brewer, 2014; Thomas et al., 2018). For example, Kee (2012) reports that TFA teachers often describe feeling less prepared than teachers with traditional training, especially in areas like classroom management. A study by Jackson & Miller (2020) found that that teachers with alternative certifications are more likely to feel unprepared to address the needs of students with disabilities and English language learners. Other scholars have raised concerns about TFA’s brief training period, which typically lasts only a few weeks and may not afford prospective teachers adequate time to develop essential pedagogical skills, cultural competency, and knowledge of inclusive practices (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2020).

Additionally, reformer’s outsourcing of teacher talent is felt by some members of the New Orleans community as a direct attack on union teacher’s collective bargaining rights (Rasheed, 2006). The New Orleans teachers union was decimated by the mass firings after Katrina, and no comparable union presence has resurged in the years since
the disaster. This absence undermines the collective influence and bargaining power of teachers, resulting in limited capacity to negotiate for fair compensation and improved working conditions. The outsourcing of teacher talent exacerbates the situation, creating a sense of insecurity among unionized teachers and compromising instructional stability (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015). One dominant narrative associated with this reform choice is that Black teachers were the problem with pre-Katrina schools (Sondel, Kretchmar, & Dunn, 2019) and that no solution could include them. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many Black teachers were displaced from their positions as schools were closed or converted into charter schools. Despite their expertise and deep connections to the community, they were systematically excluded from the new educational landscape (Sondel, Kretchmar, & Dunn, 2019). This is also evident in policy briefs assessing the impact of this change. One such policy brief (Osburne, 2012) praises recruits from Teach for America as uniquely skilled and qualified to usher New Orleans students into this new era of success.

The charter model presents other negative impacts on teaching. Charters have significantly higher rates of teacher turnover than traditional schools. Charter school teachers are nearly three times more likely than public school teachers to leave the profession or move schools from year to year (Stuit & Smith, 2010; 2012). As a consequence of these turnover rates, charter school teachers are also more likely to be inexperienced, with early studies reporting one out of every three charter teachers has fewer than three years of teaching experience (Stuit & Smith, 2010; 2012). Many of the reasons behind high turnover rates can be traced back to a lack of union protections. Working conditions, job satisfaction, and organizational differences are all factors that contribute to turnover (Stuit & Smith, 2010). Retention issues have far-reaching consequences, negatively affecting instructional quality and consistency, and diminishing relational trust between teachers, students, and the community (Stuit & Smith, 2010).
The high level of turnover also means that many teachers never have the opportunity to develop their classroom management skills. Instead, these inexperienced teachers are more likely to rely on rigid disciplinary approaches in order to maintain control of their classrooms (Browne, Losen, & Wald, 2001). We can see evidence of this trend at the school level. Several studies suggest that schools with higher concentrations of inexperienced teachers may be more likely to adopt strict disciplinary approaches, including "no excuses" and "zero tolerance" discipline approaches (Kinsler, 2011; Torres, 2016). These approaches are characterized by austere school discipline policies that prioritize keeping children on task rather than engaged, and emphasize surveillance and control rather than play, joy, and exploration (Sondel, Kretchmar & Dunn, 2019).

These policies run contrary to evidence-based best practices for successfully teaching students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1997, 2004). Schools utilizing these approaches typically have higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary actions than schools without these policies (Losen & Skiba, 2010). These punitive disciplinary practices disproportionately affect students of color, making them vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline and contributing to persistent racialized disparities in education outcomes (Losen & Skiba, 2010). These policies also have an impact on the social-emotional wellbeing and development of the students who attend these schools. The emphasis on strict control and compliance in the classroom can stifle creativity, critical thinking, and student agency (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Students may be discouraged from expressing their thoughts, taking risks, or exploring their interests, leading to a more restricted and standardized educational experience. Critics of "no excuses" and "zero tolerance" discipline argue that these approaches prioritize obedience and conformity over the holistic development and well-being of students (Ravitch, 2013).
2.2.2 High Stakes Testing

Troublingly, many post-Katrina reformists in New Orleans offer a narrative of abysmal failures followed by glowing, unprecedented success with a clear causal link to the new system (Osborne, 2012). Proponents of school reform paint a portrait of a previously underperforming district with high levels of corruption at an administrative level (Harris, 2015). Claims of corruption are not unwarranted. This was a system that came under FBI scrutiny for fraud (Harris, 2015). This was a system with some of the worst test scores in the nation (Harris, 2015), but focusing on corruption alone does not offer a full picture.

*Charter School City* (2020) by Doug Harris extensively explores the impact of post-Katrina education reforms in New Orleans, presenting a quantitative analysis suggesting significant improvements in test scores and graduation rates. Harris argues that these reforms, spearheaded largely by affluent white individuals, were instrumental in transforming the education system, leading to positive outcomes. His analysis emphasizes the merits of the charter school model, highlighting improvements in academic metrics as evidence of the success of the post-Katrina reforms. Harris contends that the mass firing of unionized teachers, although regrettable, was a necessary step for achieving reform and improving educational outcomes.

However, critical scholars such as Louisiana educator Mercedes Schneider (2021) have raised questions about the integrity of Harris’s data and his failure to consider larger systemic issues, including racial and economic inequities. Schneider argues that Harris’s analysis lacks a nuanced understanding of the long history of racial segregation and economic suppression in New Orleans, which significantly influenced the educational landscape. Moreover, Harris’s celebratory tone regarding the reforms overlooks the intentional marginalization of the city’s Black community in the planning and execution of these changes. A more detailed examination of Harris’s book reveals a top-down, quantitative perspective that predominantly focuses on broad
improvements in test scores and graduation rates. This approach, while providing a high-level overview of the purported successes, raises questions about the depth of analysis and consideration given to the multifaceted challenges within the education system.

Under the charter model, there is no centralized school district to appeal toward. Individual schools have complete discretion at nearly every level of policy, from discipline to dress codes to hiring decisions. The primary form of external oversight for these schools is concerned with test scores and little else (Sondel, 2015). Pre-Katrina teachers who stayed in the district have also shared serious misgivings about the charter schools' commitment to students (Ciolino, Kirylo, & Frazier, 2014). In one study, a sample of these teachers voiced concerns about the spurious use of expulsions to maintain high test score averages (Ciolino, Kirylo, and Frazier, 2014). Now, the handful of schools that will accept these students have become schools of last resort for students who are pushed out elsewhere (Ciolino, Kirylo, & Frazier, 2014). Children who are academically behind and have behavioral struggles become clustered in one place, multiplying the challenges to meeting their academic needs (Ciolino, Kirylo, & Frazier, 2014). Reformers acknowledge there are concerns about whether these are the result of charters "teaching to the test" at the detriment of deeper learning, but little has been done to address the issue substantively (Harris, 2015).

In this context, qualitative research such as the work of Amanda Lu (2023) becomes pivotal, offering a complementary perspective that delves into the micro-level experiences of students, particularly Black youth, within the charter school environment. Lu’s work critically examines the challenges faced by students of color, providing a detailed exploration of biases in disciplinary actions, curriculum content, and teacher-student interactions. Unlike Harris’s broad strokes, Lu’s research provides in-depth insights into the daily hurdles encountered by students and underscores the long-term impact of these challenges on academic achievement and emotional well-being. This
qualitative lens adds a crucial layer to our understanding of the educational landscape, prompting a call for more participatory scholarship that amplifies the voices of youth and celebrates their unique ways of knowing.

The experiences of youth are largely missing from conversations that assess whether the charter model is working or not. Although some studies have made an effort to capture student experience, they are often captured by proxy of adults, such as parents and educators (Warren & Marciano, 2018). The studies that have tried to capture youth experience in New Orleans schools tend to be quantitative, measuring success on terms defined by the researcher (Buras, Randels, & Salaam, 2010). There is an urgent need for participatory scholarship that tells the stories of youth’s charter school experiences on their own terms, in their own voices, in ways designed to capture a full, rich, and nuanced understanding of those experiences. This dissertation research was an effort to fill this gap in the literature by providing an opportunity for youth to add their voices to education policy conversations in ways that celebrate their unique ways of knowing, along with the agency and expertise they hold to help adults understand their experiences.

2.2.3 Summary

The educational setting in New Orleans is deeply racialized, as is the case in many metropolitan regions. Critical race theory offers a unique analytical tool to assess the subtleties of this racialized school system. New Orleans’ privatized public school system holds more complex truths than standardized testing might suggest. Critical race theory encourages us to question the impact of a majority-white teaching force in a predominantly Black school system, or the continued racial segregation in school attendance, even as New Orleans is described nationally as a "model city" for education. This dissertation research seeks to add to our understanding of the way race has shaped New Orleans schools by providing the students of those schools an opportunity to speak out on their own experiences through counter-storytelling.
2.3 Critical Inquiry and Participatory Research Methods

Critical race theory’s commitment to troubling conventions of knowledge production necessitates critical approaches to research that also deconstruct power. For this reason, this project utilized youth participatory action research (PAR), a methodology anchored in critical theories, including critical race theory and attentive to the ways power, marginalization, and resistance manifests itself in society (Reza, 2007, Kim, 2016). Among the critical theories that inform youth participatory action research are: feminism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, and critical race studies (Reza, 2007). It is also important to note that "the critical tradition from which YPAR emerges is built on the backs of social movements" Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell (2015, p. 18). In other words, as Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell (2015) so poignantly state, "action begets theory."

K-12 education research suffers from a lack of cultural relevance and community voice (Luguettia et. al, 2022). The policies that emerge from this kind of research are unsurprisingly out of step with the experiences of the people most strongly impacted by those policy changes – school-age youth. In this section, I argue that youth participatory action research methodologies offer a powerful framework for challenging this harmful pattern of research and policy. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a collaborative approach to research that allows young people to take ownership of the research process. YPAR projects equip youth with the skills needed to design and carry out their own research, in order to gain the knowledge they need to create change in their communities. This approach to research lends itself well to the counter-storytelling tenet of critical race theory, because it provides a clear process for capturing youth stories in scholarship. Where traditional methods of research collection, analysis and dissemination are rarely developmentally appropriate or legible to youth, youth participatory action research is designed to meet youth where they are in order to facilitate deeper and more meaningful understandings of
how young people are affected by policies and practices that affect them, and how they might be able to change those policies and practices. Education policy in particular stands to benefit tremendously from mechanisms that allow for greater youth voice because youth are the primary stakeholders of those policies.

The tradition of participatory scholarship acknowledges that traditional science routinely reflects the social values and concerns of dominant societal groups (Fals-Borda, 1988). Participatory scholarship attempts to address these discrepancies by placing an emphasis on the nature of knowledge. It allows us to ask, "How is reality constructed? How do we know what we know? What legitimizes that knowledge?" These questions are especially important in a fraught political moment where the future of public education is as uncertain as ever. Recognizing the role of youth as knowledge bearers in this context is crucial, as their active participation could lead to transformative shifts in educational paradigms and policies. In the city of New Orleans, for example, there is an unsettling dichotomy between the way the New Orleans community talks about its schools and the way researchers and policymakers discuss the schools. While many in the local community of New Orleans despairs over the state of our schools, the dominant narrative of the reform project nationally is one of glowing success (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015). Traditional research has proven itself to be ill-equipped to parse these contradictions. Many New Orleans parents feel that their children have put under a microscope, subjected to endless experiments, even while their communities are ignored at the policy level (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Buras, Randels, Salaam, & Students at the Center, 2010). By elevating the experiences and insights of the youth, we can bridge this dichotomy, fostering a public education system that is more reflective of and responsive to the needs of its diverse student body. Youth participatory action research offers this project an opportunity to sidestep the microscope entirely, allowing youth to be their own researchers – to see themselves as subjects of study and to create the research they want to see. This
project utilized youth participatory action research to examine how schools are valued by the community and how their values are reflected back to the community through their operations. This can help provide a more complete picture of these schools’ impact on students and communities than traditional methods of research, which tend to look only at the effects of charter school expansion on students’ test scores and attendance rates. This methodology is especially suited to this project because of its emphasis on building community and relational trust—key components needed to the counter-story of an unequal school system where some students thrive while others struggle with financial insecurity, social isolation, or academic failure.

In this section, I explore the history and significance of youth participatory action research as a powerful tool for liberatory, equitable research in education policy and the field of social work. I first provide an overview of youth participatory action research methods before discussing how they can be used by researchers who wish to engage with marginalized groups. I examine how YPAR is used to create positive change for young people and their communities. This section also discusses how YPAR differs from traditional education research, especially with regard to its focus on youth empowerment and community-based learning. I also examine the benefits of using this method when conducting research on issues that concern young people. Through this exploration of youth participatory action research, I argue that the youth most capable of leading the way to solutions, offering critical context and insights, are the ones most routinely denied a seat at the table. My research seeks to acknowledge that the table is theirs. I am choosing to join the ranks of scholar-activists who insist, "Nothing about us without us."

2.4 Youth Participatory Action Research

Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) define youth participatory action research as "the practice of mentoring young people to become social scientists by engaging them in all aspects of the research cycle, from developing research questions and examining
relevant literature to collecting and analyzing data and offering findings about social issues that they find meaningful and relevant" (p. 2). Rather than utilizing the traditional research model of researchers and participants, YPAR relies on a team of both youth and adult researchers in a model of shared expertise (Bettencourt, 2020). This framework recognizes that youth have specialized knowledge based on their lived experiences as the people most affected by the problem, while adult researchers offer expertise in the research process and the societal processes that shape the research (Cannella, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Grace & Langhout, 2014).

YPAR differs from traditional research methodologies in a number of ways. First, YPAR is "explicitly pedagogical" (Cammorota & Fine, p. 6) in nature, and its pedagogical goals are anchored in cultivating "transformational resistance" (Cammorota & Fine, p. 1). In other words, YPAR diverges from traditional research because it prioritizes the teaching and learning of youth as an essential step of the research process. Relatedly, a key function of YPAR is its role as "tool for critical youth development" (Cammorota & Fine, p. 1). Youth who participate in YPAR should benefit directly from participation through both pedagogy and social change.

Finally, YPAR is "explicitly political" in nature (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). The outcome of this process of teaching, learning, and youth development is not only research products, but social justice action as well. The inquiry process of YPAR is meant to pursue knowledge that disrupts the status quo in order to create change. Rodriguez & Brown (2009) identify three key principles of youth participatory action research. First, YPAR is inquiry-based. This means that the research questions under study should be anchored in what matters and impacts youth. Consequently, it should include training in research and advocacy for youth (Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Anyon et al., 2018). Second, YPAR is participatory. Power-sharing among adults and youth is a foundational feature of YPAR (Cammorota & Fine; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Ozer & Douglas, 2015). Finally, YPAR is transformative. The purpose
of YPAR is to create social change by generating new knowledge and practices and building alliances with key stakeholders. The outcome should directly improve the lives of young people (Ozer & Douglas, 2015; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Radian & Schwartz (2018) insist that "the main goal is to take action against issues of injustice and inequity" (p. 9).

2.4.1 Critical Youth Studies

Youth participatory action research emerges not only from PAR, but also critical youth studies. This subfield of critical theory investigates how cultural and social processes have impacted our collective perception of adolescence and youth (Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2013; Teixeira & Kennedy, 2022). In particular, critical youth studies investigates the way our societal structures encourage and reify deficit-based views toward youth (Teixeira & Kennedy, 2022). Our systems of policy and scholarship portray youth as both dangerous and vulnerable, in need of protection and control (Kirshner, 2015). Dominant narratives of youth as "risky" or "hormonal," for example, are residual messages from early 20th century adolescent psychology (see Hall, 1916; cited in Teixeira & Kennedy, 2022).

Similarly, the idea of youth as vulnerable can be traced back to the efforts of at the start of the 20th century. When Jane Addams and other reformers spearheaded the child protection movement in an effort to outlaw child maltreatment and support mandatory education, they used the concept of dependency to argue for the protection of children (Margolin, 1978). Although many people’s lives were significantly enhanced by the moral and legal frameworks that emerged as a result of the social workers’ and social reformers’ efforts to reshape society, this change also limited the autonomy of young people by framing them as fragile (Margolin, 1978; Kim, 2016; Teixeira & Kennedy, 2022).

Critical youth theorists have identified the systemic oppression of youth, who have limited access to resources and limited agency in decision-making, as a social justice
issue called adultism (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Dejong & Love, 2015). Childhood and adolescence are developmental stages that are commonly associated with smallness, physical weakness, and continual physical development (Wyness, 2011). This fixed "biological inferiority" leads us to consider children and youth less than full members of society (Wyness, 2011). Critical youth studies is a growing body of literature that seeks to fill this theoretical space. Critical youth studies privilege the perspectives of children and youth, and the processes by which they impact their own development, socialization, and environment (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). Critical youth studies ask, "How do youth imagine themselves?" as it also unpacks how children and youth are imagined by society (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Critical race theorists argue that critical youth study is particularly needed in the study of Black student’s experiences through the education system. Dumas and Nelson (2016) have argued that Black childhood "has been rendered both unimagined and unimaginable" (p. 28). Black youth are understood only ever as Black adults and future problems. This adultification of Black children situates problems of education within the youth themselves. They themselves are the thing to be solved, rather than socioeconomic circumstances, systemic racism, and other larger social problems. Education policy, then, becomes a practice of cultural-political anxiety about Black adult males, and leaves little room for research on Black childhood and youth in its own right (Dumas & Nelson, 2016).

Critical youth theorists are attentive to the ways that youth are systematically and structurally disempowered within the institutions and systems that impact them (Sibley, 1995). Youth face many age-related social constraints, including: financial dependence on parents, isolation from older peers, lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and limited social interaction with adults (Brooks & Riele, 2013). Youth also face restrictions on their freedom of movement and ability to access resources such as food and shelter. They frequently have limited autonomy
and influence in the environments they are expected to spend most of their time in and the policies that shape those environments (Brooks & Riele, 2013).

Critical youth theorists assert that human growth and learning is not linear – instead, it is socially and culturally constituted and happens throughout the lifespan (Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005). With this assertion, they reject the idea that youth are striving toward future personhood. Instead, the critical youth perspective affirms the humanity and personhood of youth as they are in the present, recognizing the powerful agency children and adolescents already have in their lives and societies (Kirshner, 2015; Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005).

Critical youth studies recognizes the agency youth already possess to "to analyze their social context, to engage critical research collectively, and to challenge and resist the forces impeding their possibilities for liberation" (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 4). Kirshner (2015) offers the example of the national mobilizing efforts of immigrant high school students impacted by the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. Their efforts resulted in dramatic policy reform and bipartisan shifts in public opinion (Kirshner, 2015). In this case, success could not have been won without the collective power of the youth directly affected by these policies. Young people turned the power paradigm on its head by publicly self-identifying as undocumented, which "paradoxically reduced the risk of deportation" (Kirshner, 2015, p. 66) by broadening their support networks.

Still, critical youth studies emphasize the importance of not essentializing youth and their capacity for change. Although youth are capable of fostering their own political development, critical youth studies seeks to demystify this by highlighting the way that "resistances can be attained through formal processes in 'real' settings, through multi-generational collectives, and sometimes among youth alone" (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 4). Youth participatory action research is exactly this kind of process. Youth participatory action research offers a systematized process emerging from the
intersection between critical youth studies and participatory action research to foster and nurture youth’s existing capacity for creating social change.

2.4.2 The Pedagogy and Relationships of YPAR

YPAR stands out among other methodologies because it is both a methodology and a pedagogy. In order for YPAR projects to live up to their transformative potential, critical approaches to learning and instruction are essential. The pedagogy of YPAR differs from traditional educational experiences because it encourages participants to use their academic skills to research and address actual social issues. Rather than engaging in hypothetical or abstract academic pursuits, the pedagogy of YPAR is rooted in youth’s lived experiences and the real social problems that shape their worlds. Teaching and learning under this paradigm are geared toward fostering social change and youth development that enriches all areas of students’ lives.

2.4.3 Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Central to the pedagogy of YPAR is its commitment to fostering sociopolitical youth development through discussions of power as they relate to oppression. In particular, the YPAR draws from the key ideas of critical race theory to make issues of race and structural racism explicit. Ladson-Billings’ (1997) seminal work on best practices in the education of Black children, The Dreamkeepers, connects critical pedagogy and critical race theory, articulating a framework for "culturally sustaining" or "culturally relevant" pedagogy. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is an approach to teaching which facilitates learning by integrating and celebrating the cultural backgrounds of students and prioritizing culturally relevant curriculum. Culturally relevant teachers push back against cultural expectations that prize memorization over critical thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1997).

By problematizing knowledge, students are given the power to engage critically with dominant knowledges (Ladson-Billings, 1997). This approach allows students
the room to bring their culture into the classroom and address the ways it is and is not acknowledged by their textbooks (Ladson-Billings, 1997). Like critical pedagogues, culturally relevant teachers recognize that their students are not empty vessels to be filled; they co-create knowledge with their teachers, and their existing knowledge has value (Ladson-Billings, 1997). By making both issues of race and structural racism plain and celebrating the cultural backgrounds of youth participants, YPAR practitioners who utilize culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy ensure that the social action borne from YPAR projects is meaningful and culturally relevant as well.

2.4.4 Key Processes of YPAR

Anderson (2019) identifies three key processes of YPAR that differ from traditional educational experiences. The first is power-sharing, where "youth and adult researchers share power with one another during every phase of the research project" (Anderson, 2019, p. 243). The second is a commitment to relevance, meaning that "the focus of the research project is on the individuals most impacted by the issue." The third process is mutual learning, where adults and youth alike learn from one another through a mutual exchange of ideas, assets, and knowledge. Together, these processes offer a solid grounding for YPAR projects, which can vary dramatically in form and course.

2.4.5 The Stages of YPAR Projects

There is no singular approach to designing and executing the perfect YPAR project. YPAR’s commitment to building power-sharing and creating research designs anchored in the lived experiences of its participants necessitates a process that is flexible and always evolving. YPAR typically involves an organic and messy progression that evolves in conversation with the unique qualities and aspirations of the group involved. There are, however, several commonalities across YPAR projects that offer a useful blueprint for planning future projects. These commonalities shape the ap-
proach to the current study. Table 1 (below) outlines the way the stages of YPAR are described by two prominent YPAR institutions: the YPAR Hub at UC Berkeley (Hubbard et. al, 2015) and The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at NYU Steinhardt (Malone, Rizkalla, & Bartlett, 2021). This demonstrates the broad similarities between different conceptualizations of YPAR processes, even as specific details may differ. I used these stages as the framework for organizing the procedures of this dissertation, described more in depth in the following chapter. It is also important to note that while YPAR processes often follow the stages as outlined here, this is not intended to be a definitive representation of YPAR stages.

Table 2.1: UC Berkeley YPAR Hub Stages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of YPAR Programming</th>
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<tr>
<td>Stage 1</td>
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<td>Build Community</td>
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<td>Stage 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Education</td>
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<td>Stage 3</td>
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<td>Selecting a Problem Collaboratively</td>
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<td>Stage 4</td>
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<td>Collect and Analyze Data</td>
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<td>Stage 5</td>
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<td>Develop Policy Arguments and Share with Public Audiences</td>
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2.4.5.1 Relationship Building

The first stage for YPAR project is community and relationship building. This step is critically important because it creates the foundation for all the stages to come (Radina & Schwartz, 2019). YPAR scholars have consistently reported that mutual trust between youth and researchers has had a significant impact on the success of YPAR projects (Riele & Brooks, 2013; Kim, 2016; Winn & Winn, 2016; Lugnettia et. al, 2022; Ritterbusch, 2012). In practice, community building often looks like workshops and icebreakers designed by adult facilitators for all parties to
get to know each other. Relationship-building is crucial between not only youth and adults, but amongst adults and between youth as well. Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) have emphasized the importance of building relational trust amongst adult facilitators before youth are even introduced into the space. Approaching YPAR programming from a place of shared understanding and intention amongst adults lays the groundwork for similar relationships amongst youth and between youth and adults. The relationship building stage is an opportunity for adults and facilitators to establish that they are coming together with youth in a shared environment both to achieve a common goal and out of a place of genuine care.

There are many approaches to building relational trust. One key approach to building trusted relationships is by connecting through shared identities. For example, in a YPAR study in collaboration with Asian youth, Nygreen et. all (2006) found that the adult researchers’ shared ethnic identity with the youth made it easier for them to connect. In other studies, shared interests or perspectives were able to bridge the gap (Kim, 2016). Conversely, in YPAR projects where youth felt a lack of shared identity with adult facilitators, mutual trust often suffered. A lack of mutual trust can be critically damaging to a YPAR project. Nygreen et. all (2006) highlight the ways that a lack of trust impacts not only critical consciousness raising but also the research design process. Youth who do not feel like they can trust the research environment are more likely to stop showing up or to disengage when they do show up (Kim, 2016). Disruptions in the group dynamic can infect the entire group, leading to escalating issues.

The type of deep relational connections between adults and youth needed for effective YPAR programming requires a significant time commitment (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Kim, 2016; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrel, 2016). This significant requirement has both negative and positive effects. One drawback is the possibility that youth may struggle to keep up with the time demands required of YPAR projects. A number
of YPAR scholars have described facing issues where youth are struggling with the demands of schoolwork and faced difficulty juggling participation and school requirements. In some cases, youth dropped out of the program programming (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), while in others YPAR, meetings were canceled or postponed to accommodate youth school schedules (Bostock & Freeman, 2003). Time constraints may limit the kind of youth who can participate to only those with free time, and create significant problems for adult facilitators, who may struggle to find the resources required to commit such any time frame. For this reason, YPAR projects often take place in the summer when youth have fewer demands on their time (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). Despite the drawbacks of the time-intensive nature of YPAR projects, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that the benefits of allotting ample time far outweigh the negatives (Radina & Schwartz, 2019; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Bostock & Freeman, 2003; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Kim, 2016). Expansive timelines for YPAR projects allow for rich and nuanced relationships that build over time, and trust that is cultivated organically.

Community building was an important cornerstone of the current project. Recognizing that community building is the foundation of a successful YPAR project, much of the time spent during our sessions was invested in creating a safe and inclusive space where participants felt valued, supported, and connected to one another. Ice-breaking activities, team-building exercises, and regular check-ins were utilized to foster trust, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among the participants. We also prioritized fun wherever we could, incorporating games and field trips that did not always directly correlate to the project, but reinforced that the project was concerned with their well-being too.

2.4.5.2 Raising Critical Consciousness

The next stage in YPAR projects is critical consciousness building, which is a prerequisite to beginning any research design in a YPAR project (Radina & Schwartz,
2019; Ginwright & James, 2002). In practice, this can look like activities and workshops designed to introduce a critical perspective to the way youth understand their everyday lived experiences. In this stage, some YPAR facilitators will introduce seminal readings from critical theory, emphasizing that youth are capable of understanding these dense texts when they are introduced a developmentally appropriate way (Morrell, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Rubin, Ayala, & Zaal, 2017). Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) described their process of making critical theory seem less daunting by working through reading and note-taking techniques designed to prioritize meaning over perfect reading comprehension. In these projects, youth were not required to understand everything all on their own, which would not have been developmentally appropriate. Instead, youth were encouraged to look for ideas in the text that resonate with them. From that point on, youth and adults work through the text together using critical dialogue processes (Leirvik, 2005).

During the consciousness building stage, youth are encouraged to develop their own critical perspective. This is often the point where power-sharing processes begin to take shape. As youth grow in their comfort and confidence, both in the space and in their content knowledge, they take on more robust leadership roles in leading conversations and driving the dialogue (Ginwright & James, 2002). Consistent with critical pedagogy, this stage of YPAR projects is geared around building a sense of autonomy around the inquiry process (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). As youth engage with their peers, adult facilitators, and critical theory, they begin to reassess their everyday experiences through a new lens. It is from this new understanding that the research questions of YPAR emerge (Bertrand, Durand, & Gonzalez, 2017). Kim (2016) highlights the importance of taking this critical consciousness stage seriously. A common problem in YPAR projects is rushing through the critical consciousness building part in order to prioritize the research design and data analysis and action parts (Suleiman et al., 2006; Bostock & Freeman, 2003). Researchers have found
is that this approach leads to flaws later in the process. For example, when asked to come up with solutions to problems, youth who have not developed a critical consciousness may resort to familiar rhetoric that reifies existing social inequities (Kirshner, 2015).

The critical consciousness building stage fosters organic power-sharing processes. By using critical pedagogy, YPAR practitioners communicate to youth that both youth and adults occupy dual roles as learners and facilitators (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Walsh, 2018). As youth progress through YPAR programming, it becomes easier for them to take up this role in earnest. Conversely, when the critical consciousness stage is skipped, rushed, or done ineffectively, it can lead to power-sharing issues down the road (Reason, 2001). For example, one study described dissatisfaction with the action piece of this project because the youth participants did not have a sufficient critical understanding during the analysis stage (Nygreen et. al, 2006). In some cases, this challenge leads adult facilitators to sideline or minimize youth involvement, relegating youth to tokenized roles or limiting their participation to early stages of the research design process (Kim, 2016; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010).

Throughout both the relationship building and critical consciousness raising, youth also begin to develop their research questions. Many YPAR researchers have described this process as cyclical and iterative (Reason, 2001; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Macaulay, 2017; Anderson, 2020; Bertrand & Lozenski, 2021). As youth develop their critical consciousness, their research questions also evolve. As their research questions evolve, new avenues of inquiry are pursued. Youth and adults discuss their emerging research questions and refine and shape them collaboratively (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). Adult facilitators can offer expertise in framing actionable research questions, while youth can offer their critical perspectives of their lived experiences to direct the priorities of the research (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). In this way, the it-
erative process fosters and encourages a collaborative and participatory approach to developing research questions.

Cultivating critical consciousness through political education was a key process in our project. The primary strategy we used was Socratic seminars, a pedagogical approach designed to foster deep engagement, critical thinking, and dialogue among participants. These seminars provided a platform for participants to explore and analyze relevant social and political issues, encouraging them to question prevailing narratives, examine power dynamics, and develop a nuanced understanding of the complexities at play. Through guided discussions, participants were able to actively exchange perspectives, challenge assumptions, and refine their analytical skills. The Socratic seminars facilitated the development of a shared language and framework for addressing the selected problem collaboratively, empowering participants to become informed, thoughtful advocates for change.

2.4.5.3 Research training

The next stage of YPAR projects is research training. This stage can vary dramatically from project to project. For example, a multi-year youth participatory action program called the UCLA Youth Council typically approached this stage by teaching youth about traditional research methods such as qualitative interviews, focus groups, surveys, and statistical analysis (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). In that case, the authors argued that the use of traditional methods by youth is a critical practice in and of itself (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). Because the goal of that project was to develop policy recommendations for local policymakers, traditional methods were determined to be the most effective approach for the intended social action (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). In other projects critical, experimental, arts-based research methods are introduced (Foster-Fishman et. al, 2010; Goessling, 2020; Wright, 2020; Vaccarino-Ruiz et. al, 2022). Photovoice, where participants are given cameras to document the research topic, is an especially common method
in PAR projects (Foster-Fishman et. all, 2010). Arts based and visual methods tend to be popular because of their intuitive and participatory nature (Goessling, 2020; Wright, 2020).

It is important to note that regardless of whether traditional or critical research methods are utilized, the goal is not for youth to try and replicate the type of research project that an adult researcher would plan (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Radina & Schwartz, 2019). YPAR facilitators are aware that the many years of research training that adult researchers undergo cannot be replicated in the short span of a YPAR project (Radina & Schwartz, 2019). Nor would it be a developmentally appropriate expectation for youth to create a research study that meets the standards of traditional research (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). Instead, PAR recognizes and celebrates the way that the research process is transformed and reinvented when placed in the hands of youth researchers. For example, rather than crafting a perfect survey capable of reaching ideal statistical significance, YPAR celebrates the unique ways that youth perspectives shape the questions, phrasing, and topics of inquiry on the survey. Mirroring the aims of many traditional qualitative research projects, YPAR is interested in a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, rather than statistical generalizability (Dumas & Anderson, 2014). Unlike traditional research, YPAR is oriented toward whatever method is best equipped to create social change (Greenwood & Levin, 2007).

Reflecting the goals of YPAR projects, this dissertation project also engaged youth in research training. Nearly all of our participants had prior experience with YPAR and existing understandings of how traditional research is conducted and used. This allowed us to focus on expanding their research toolkit beyond traditional methods by emphasizing on the utility of art and storytelling as alternative research methods. This emphasis on art and storytelling research methods allowed our project to prioritize fun while also enabling participants to communicate their perspectives in
powerful and compelling ways. This approach not only enriched the research process but also empowered youth to challenge dominant research paradigms and contribute to knowledge production through their unique artistic expressions.

2.4.5.4 Research Design, Data Collection, Analysis

After research training comes the research design stage. Youth and adult facilitators work together to design a plan for inquiry. This stage will look different depending on the context, research question, and chosen methods. Depending on the size of the group, for example, youth might form teams to take on different research tasks. One group might oversee creating and disseminating a survey, while another conducts interviews with their peers (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). Adult facilitators commonly take on a mentorship role in this stage, while youth take on a more active role as the primary investigators (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016).

Following the research design and data collection stage is the data analysis stage. Although there is some variation in published results, there seems to be a consensus among YPAR scholars that data analysis in YPAR projects should be done collaboratively (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Kirshner, 2010; Marciano & Beymer, 2022). The nature of this data analysis process will vary depending on the methods chosen. For example, collaborative analysis of qualitative data might look like youth taking on the role of coders (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). Adult facilitators would then be responsible for explaining and supporting youth through their coding process. In other cases, the adult facilitators’ roles might be more substantial. For example, the adult facilitator might be responsible for running simple statistics on youth survey results and then engaging youth in a collaborative discussion of the findings (Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011). From there, youth might take charge in the interpretation of these results. In a different group or another context, youth might do the statistical analysis themselves. In this way, YPAR is continuously iterative and anchored in the specific goals, expertise, and interests of the particular group involved.
(Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Kirshner, 2010; Marciano & Beymer, 2022). This level of open-endedness can prove challenging logistically for researchers, especially in the early stages of designing proposals and seeking funding (Kim, 2016; Bettencourt, 2020). However, this flexible design allows for genuine organic participation, which in turn results in more effective social change efforts and more valid research results.

This project was especially focused on addressing the common challenge in YPAR projects of maintaining high levels of participation during the data collection and analysis stage, while ensuring it remains fun, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for the youth involved. Recognizing the tendency to default to adult-led approaches during this stage, we actively sought to empower and involve the youth as active agents in every step of the research process. We used a creative and interactive approach to data analysis, to make the process more enjoyable and accessible. By valuing the input and perspectives of the youth, we aimed to foster a sense of ownership, agency, and enthusiasm, ultimately ensuring that the research remained relevant, meaningful, and reflective of their lived experiences.

2.4.5.5 Social Action

The final stage of YPAR projects is the action stage. Again, this stage can look dramatically different from project to project. This stage will often include critical conversations about power (Leirvik, 2005; Ginwright & James, 2002). First, the group might identify what needs to change based on what they have learned through the project so far. Then, they identify where power lies related to this issue, asking questions like: "What would it take to create this change? Are there gatekeepers who the collective can appeal to? Are there stakeholders who can come together to solve this with the resources at hand?" The answers to these questions will be anchored in the immediate context of the YPAR collective (Ozer & Douglas, 2015). For example, if the group is trying to create school level change, they might prepare their data in a presentation designed to appeal to the school principal or teachers (Bertrand, 2018).
If it’s a district-level change, they might instead engage with the school board or city council (Mirrell, 2008). In a photovoice or arts-based project, social action often looks like community dissemination of research, where the goal is to raise awareness and tell community stories (Vaccarino-Ruiz, Gordon, & Langhout, 2022). In other cases, youth engage in community level social change campaigns. They might collect signatures, canvas local business owners, or even take direct action through walk-outs and sit-ins (Bettencourt, 2020; Kirshner, 2015).

The action piece of PAR projects can present a number of challenges. Although the social action is meant to be derived organically from the subsequent stages of the YPAR project, in practice it’s not always clear what action should occur (Teixeira et. all, 2021; Keddie, 2021). Published YPAR projects vary tremendously on the level of detail used to describe the action piece, or whether it is described at all. This seems to suggest that the action is either less of a priority or more difficult to represent (Teixeira et. all, 2021). University researchers are faced with their own productive tensions in that the academic system rewards publications but does not typically place any value on social action (Kirshner, 2010; Kim, 2016; Teixeira et. all, 2021). Academic publishers may prioritize results that reflect these values (Teixeira et. all, 2021).

For these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that there is a significant temptation for adult facilitators to conclude the project once data analysis has been completed (Keddie, 2021; Call-Cummings, Sheanán & Buttimer, 2020). However, without the action piece, it is difficult to argue that a project is in fact a participatory action project. Consistent with this recurring theme in the literature, the current project also faced its own challenges in completing the "social change" stage, due to time constraints and other common issues highlighted in the literature. In Chapters 3 and 4, I discuss how YPAR projects may benefit from adopting an expansive definition of "social change" that is inclusive of various forms and scales of impact, and allows for realistic expectations in projects where youth have limited time.
2.4.6 Ethical Considerations in YPAR

YPAR projects face unique ethical challenges that more traditional research methods may not experience. Because YPAR is explicitly designed to create social change and challenge existing power structures, participants run a real risk of conflict by engaging in this process (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Mitra & McCormick, 2017). For example, Ross (2011) reported that their youth participants felt uncomfortable with direct action because they intimidated by the people in power whose interests were threatened by their activism. Although many projects enjoy widespread support from their communities, still others faced significant pushback. For example, in a YPAR project where youth argued for greater condom accessibility in their community, participants faced push back from teachers and parents (Suleiman et al., 2006). For this reason, it is important that adult practitioners of YPAR engage youth in clear and direct conversations about the potential negative consequences of participation. Additionally, adults should be prepared to leverage their social capital to protect and support youth in their own environments (Ritterbusch, 2012). Kirshner (2015) highlights this as one of the reasons it is beneficial to do YPAR projects outside of school environments. Hosting YPAR programming in community settings can lead to greater autonomy and less risk of retribution (Kirshner, 2015).

For these same reasons, the issue of adult permission for youth participation, can also be fraught. Parental permission is usually a prerequisite to engaging in research projects with youth (Ritterbusch, 2012; Kim, 2016). However, when youth and their guardians have significant conflict over the goals and topics of the project, obtaining parent permission may prove difficult or even impossible (Ritterbusch, 2012; Betten-court, 2018). For example, youth and parents may have differing views of critical topics related to gender, sexualities, race, and class, and navigating those tensions can become a significant stressor on the youth (Mitra & McCormick, 2017).

The collaborative nature of YPAR can present still other challenges. Some YPAR
researchers have reported group dynamics that are characterized by conflict and hostility between group members (Wilson et al., 2007). This can occur when group members disagree over differences in perspective and have no meaningful path to remedy these disagreements (Wilson et al., 2007; Kim, 2016). The collaborative nature of YPAR also presents challenges with confidentiality. As participant researchers, youth are often in charge of handling sensitive and confidential data (Minkler, 2005; Kim 2016). Although adult facilitators can take steps to train and inform youth in the importance of discretion when handling sensitive data, there is of course no way to guarantee discretion. For example, in a study working with indigenous youth in a small community, researchers reported that their study failed to protect participant confidentiality because youth shared the stories of their peers with others in their small community, where most people knew each other well (Ford et al., 2012). Although similar issues are present in some traditional research methods (for example, focus groups), special consideration is warranted due to the many ways youth are structurally disadvantaged and limited in their autonomy due to the wide effects of adultism.

2.4.6.1 An Ethic of Care and Radical Love

Due to its dual nature as a pedagogy and methodology and its commitment to social action, YPAR necessitates new understandings of the nature of ethics. In the YPAR literature, this is often articulated as an "ethics of care" (Ritterbusch, 2012) or "radical love" (Radina & Schwartz, 2019). Building relationships, generating trust and negotiating power are the key ethical principles around which YPAR is organized. Banks et al. (2013) write, "Relationship-based ethics, including the ethics of care (which focuses on responsibilities attached to particular relationships) is as important as principle-based ethics (which focuses on individual rights and duties) in conceptualizing and understanding the ethical dimensions of the research" (p. 274). The notion of "radical love" is rooted in from activist and critical scholarship. The
phrase is derived from hooks’ (2002) articulation of love as "an action, a participatory emotion," along with Freire’s (1998) "armed love" – an expression of love anchored in the necessity of struggle, resistance, and transformative collective action. Radina and Schwartz (2019) describe radical love as an ethic that challenges complacency, writing that YPAR is anchored in "the kind of love that rises out of struggle. The kind of love that erupts out of anger. The rage that bubbles up inside that can only do one of two things: tear us into pieces of propel us to action" (p. 5). Our understanding of our connections with one another and our oppressors can be challenged and transformed by radical love. Participation in the struggle for liberation is radical love in practice (Radina & Schwartz, 2019). As an orientation, radical love leads us to naturally to centering the role of care and an ethics of caring in YPAR.

An ethics of care in research necessitates a challenge to traditional hierarchies by prioritizing connectedness, empathy, and familiarity in the research process (Banks et al. 2013; Ritterbusch, 2012). This approach to ethics emphasizes reciprocal social ties, rather than one-way dependence (Radina & Schwartz, 2019; Ritterbusch, 2012). An ethics of care challenges conventional research frames such as immersion and participant observation, instead emphasizing the cultivation of authentic and meaningful relationships among research actors that transcend the research frame. For example, Ritterbusch (2012) described the way she and her youth participants came to know each other over time, in a broad range of contexts, such as institutional spaces, on the street, and in personal or home spaces. Ritterbusch (2012) suggested that a broad range of contexts strengthened their relationships, because "the relationships that really mattered were those in which I offered pieces of myself and revealed my own vulnerabilities and everyday reality" (p. 21). A condition of these kinds of relationships is constancy. Ritterbusch (2012) poignantly argues that, "Abandonment is fatal to the reproduction of care ethics [...] Absence and failed promises are tantamount to 'you’re not worth caring about' in the minds of youth who have been abandoned
Also necessitates a rethinking of the bounded nature of traditional research projects, looking toward more expansive and sustainable structures of caring that can persist even after the research is "done."

2.5 The Current Study

Overall, the aims of this dissertation are shaped by theoretical perspectives that name and confront structural racism and challenge our taken-for-granted notions of knowledge creation and expertise. Taken together, critical race theory and youth participatory action research elucidate the ways traditional education scholarship and policy routinely fall short of offering youth of color pathways to better educational experiences. In New Orleans, the shift to a public school system composed entirely of character schools has led to the proliferation of policies that disproportionately harm Black students, such as "zero tolerance" approaches to discipline and an emphasis on high stakes testing at the expense of youth’s socioemotional wellbeing (Marsh & Walker, 2022). This dissertation was designed to serve as both a critique and a compass, pointing toward a future for New Orleans schools anchored in radical love for these students who have so often and for so long been undervalued and under-served.

Despite local community narratives of racialized suffering in New Orleans schools, traditional scholarship often uses test scores to paint a glowing narrative of the successes of New Orleans schools (Buras, Randels & Salaam, 2010). Critical race theorists have called for youth voice in counter-stories of these racialized charter school experiences in order to challenge dominant narratives that do not ring true for youth of color and their communities (Dixson, Buras, & Jeffers, 2015; Buras, Randels & Salaam, 2010). However, although CRT’s counter-storytelling tenet has its roots in the creative fiction policy narratives of Derrick Bell, in practice, most applications of the counter-storytelling tenet use traditional research methods that do not resonate beyond academic circles. Paired with counter-storytelling, youth participatory ac-
tion research presents as a promising approach to engage youth of color in knowledge creation that reshapes their school experiences in positive ways. However, there is a significant need for YPAR scholarship that keeps its participatory commitments from start to finish by using developmentally appropriate processes to generate knowledge products that are accessible to youth. To create research that is accessible, developmentally appropriate, and culturally relevant for youth that can be used in service of social change, this dissertation will employ a creative, arts-based and youth-centered research method for counter-storytelling racialized experiences in the New Orleans charter school system.

2.5.1 Contributions to Scholarship

This dissertation contributes to the scholarship on youth participatory action research methodologies, critical race theory in education, and education policy conversations in the following ways:

- Expanding the counter-story of racialized outcomes in charter systems, called for in the literature on critical race theory in education

- Expanding the definition of "scholarship" by presenting the illustrated, participatory comics as data able to stand on its own, without the "interpretation" of an expert/other

- Offering a developmentally appropriate tool, method, and process for future YPAR projects in the form of the completed graphic novel

- Chartering the course for new authorship conventions in participatory dissertation projects

2.5.2 Contributions to Youth

Consistent with the YPAR framework, this dissertation considers its direct benefits to youth participants as a key outcome that is equally important to scholarly
contributions. These benefits include:

- Publication credits - all youth participants will have their name on final product
- Leadership and social-emotional skill development through YPAR programming
- Mentorship, community-building, and access to adult support networks
- A fun, youth-centered curriculum that emphasizes joy and community

2.5.3 Contributions to the Local Community

Consistent with community engaged research practices and anti-racist, decolonizing methodologies, this dissertation also sought to directly benefit the community (please see chapter 3 for a more robust definition of how we are operationalizing the concept of community for this project). The product of this dissertation will offer the community:

- Accessible policy counter-narratives that are 1) created for and by youth 2) at a developmentally appropriate reading level for high school age youth; free of jargon and scientific language 3) anchored in real-world contexts and everyday meanings
- A graphic novel that can facilitate future YPAR projects with researchers and community organizers by offering comics creation as a process youth can use describe under-reported experiences in schools.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter presents a detailed description of the research design, describing the steps taken in this youth participatory action research (YPAR) project engaging a group of seven New Orleans public high school students in a collaborative arts-based research project that focused on storytelling racialized experiences in the New Orleans school system. This project used YPAR as its foundational methodology and collaborative graphic autoethnography as method and analytic approach. Collaborative graphic autoethnography is a critical, participatory research method developed by Meer and Müller (2021) that "blends visual ethnography, personal memoir and collaborative storytelling," (p. 2-3) as a humanizing practice of co-constructing knowledge. This method is an arts-based development of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005), drawing from emerging interdisciplinary conversations toward comics creation as visual methodology (Sousanis, 2012, 2015; Flowers, 2017; McNicol, 2019; Rainford, 2021; Forde, 2022), also called comics-based research. I used this method as a developmentally appropriate process for engaging youth in the research process. The finished work of scholarship, shared in chapters 4 and 5, is a co-created graphic anthology that traces New Orleans schools from the past into the present and presents a path for the future anchored in the stories the youth shared.

The dissertation research was conducted during spring 2023. Youth stories were then professionally illustrated by comic book artists. In this chapter, I focus on the use of youth participatory action research (YPAR) and collaborative graphic autoethnography in the context of counter-storytelling youths’ racialized experiences in New Orleans public schools for the current research project. This chapter will offer a review of the history, theoretical underpinnings, and application of these research
approaches. Then, I will describe the procedures that were utilized in this project.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The purpose of this participatory, arts-based research project was to create culturally relevant research products that are accessible, developmentally appropriate, and geared toward social change for Black youth and their communities. The research also responds to critical race theorists’ call for a counter-narrative of racialized experiences in charter school systems (Buras, Randels, Salaam, 2010; Poon & Cohen, 2012; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dixson, Buras, Jeffers, 2015; Blaisdell, 2021). Achieving these goals required critical attention to the way power operates in the creation of knowledge, the centering of youth stories, and a philosophical approach to conducting research that is anchored in radical love. These political and ethical commitments are explicit in the youth participatory action research methodology (Fals-Borda, 2001; Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018).

Additionally, arts-based research methods have been praised by participatory researchers as being uniquely well-suited to challenging the data analysis and dissemination conventions of traditional research (Leavy, 2017). By centering art as data, arts-based-methods challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions of what counts as evidence for knowledge creation (Boydell et al., 2012). Additionally, art as data lends itself well to nontraditional dissemination because it is usually free of disciplinary language and jargon (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017) and can invoke emotional responses in diverse audiences, fostering dialogue and shared storytelling (Jones, 2005). For these reasons, an arts-based, participatory action research approach was warranted in the current study because its goals share much in common with critical race theory’s tenet of counter-storytelling. This section is concerned with the paradigmatic and philosophical underpinnings of participatory action research and arts-based research, and how those assumptions shape this dissertation project.
Both participatory action research and arts-based research methods are shaped by several research paradigms, drawing at times from critical theory, constructivism, and pragmatism (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Reza, 2007). This project is closely influenced ontologically and epistemologically by constructivism. Constructivists assert that there is no single, objective reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, there are multiple realities constructed by human experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Amineh & Asl, 2015; Reza, 2007). This paradigm aligns with the fundamental ontological perspective of PAR, which is that objective reality and subjective reality "exist in a constant interaction" (Freire, 1970, p. 50). The objective world in which people live has an impact on how individuals see their own realities, and individual awareness/perception has an impact on how that reality is produced (Amineh & Asl, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Kim, 2017). For this reason, this dissertation research project focused both on comprehending how youth interpret their present conditions, and how historical and social settings influence how they see their world.

Additionally, this project took on the constructivist methodological commitment to building authentic relationships with individuals and communities through long-term engagement, trust, and cultural learning (Mertens 2007, 2008). The constructivist paradigm suggests that knowledge is created through shared dialogue and interactions between the subject and the researcher (Reza, 2007; Greene, 1990). Constructivists argue that social inquiry requires an understanding of how knowledge and meaning develop and change depending on the context (Reza, 2007; Greene, 1990). Lincoln (2001) writes, "PAR and constructivism [...] both rely heavily on subjectivity as a force in understanding human systems" (p. 129). However, the political commitments of PAR differentiate it as its own paradigm. Reza (2007) writes, "the knowledge in PAR is not contemplated as an 'objective reality,' rather an instrument for social change" (p. 29). These political commitments and social change goals are a key feature of this dissertation project, which is designed around the premise that pro-
ducing knowledge is neither objective and value-free but political and value-based (Brydon-Miller, 1997).

This project was also influenced by the "transformative paradigm," a term developed by Mertens (2007, 2008) to capture the ways PAR and other social justice research approaches veer from constructivism and other postmodern perspectives. While constructivists operate from a cultural relativist frame, attributing equal legitimacy to all views (Mertens, 2008), the transformative paradigm recognizes the way privilege and power create systemic inequities that privilege certain realities over others. The epistemology of the transformative paradigm asserts that all knowledge is socially, historically, and culturally constructed (Mertens, 2008), taking it as a matter of course that research questions and courses of action should developed through prolonged community engagement, collaboration, and consensus (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). For this reason, like most transformative studies, this dissertation project was inductive in nature, seeking to theorize collaboratively from the ground up, using data and interpretations co-created with youth.

With these basic paradigmatic assumptions in mind, this project was designed as an explicitly political project with commitments to youth well-being and social change that impacts them directly. By accepting these assumptions, this project resists neutrality and the pursuit of absolute truths and singular stories, instead prioritizing an interrogation of power and the centering of youths’ lived experiences in New Orleans charter schools. Further, this project’s unique approach to methods was an experiment in meeting the philosophical goals of transformative research by challenging the conventions of what is considered a scholarly knowledge product by translating and disseminating study findings through an arts-based medium.

3.2 Overview of Methods

This project utilized youth participatory action research as its foundational methodology. Additionally, a form of comics-based research called collaborative graphic au-
to ethnography (Müller & Meer, 2021) was used as the primary data collection and analysis method. This section revisits the key concepts from the youth participatory action research methodology (offered more in-depth in Chapter 2) as they relate to this project, along with an overview of critical arts-based research methods, collaborative graphic ethnography, and comics as method more broadly.

3.2.1 Youth Participatory Action Research

Mirra, Garcia, and Morrell (2016) define youth participatory action research as "the practice of mentoring young people to become social scientists by engaging them in all aspects of the research cycle, from developing research questions and examining relevant literature to collecting and analyzing data and offering findings about social issues that they find meaningful and relevant" (p. 2). Rather than utilizing the traditional research model of researchers and participants, YPAR relies on a team of both youth and adult researchers in a model of shared expertise (Bettencourt, 2020). This framework recognizes that youth have specialized knowledge based on their lived experiences as the people most affected by the problem, while adult researchers offer expertise in the research process and the societal processes that shape the research (Cannella, 2008; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Grace & Langhout, 2014). YPAR also stands out as being "explicitly political" in nature (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). The outcome of this process of teaching, learning, and youth development is not only research products, but social justice action as well. The inquiry process of YPAR is meant to pursue knowledge that disrupts the status quo in order to create change. This research project utilized YPAR to engage youth in the production of a counter-narratives of their experiences in charter school systems. Through 12 weeks of YPAR programming, youth cultivated critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) through dialogue and activities described later in this chapter. From there, they worked together to tell their own stories through comics narratives.
3.2.2 Critical Arts-Based Research

Although written text still predominates in scholarly works, there is growing interest in the capacity of images to convey information about research that words cannot (and vice versa), and that images are an especially crucial area for scholars to prioritize as our culture becomes increasingly visual (Bateson and Mead, 1942; Collier, 1967; Curry and Clark, 1977; Pink, 2006). Educational researcher Elliot Eisner (1981) argued for the legitimacy of artistic approaches to qualitative research, challenging the taken-for-granted preeminence of the scientific method for all social inquiry. Over time, the use of arts-based research methods as a vehicle for social change has grown in popularity across disciplines (Barone, 2006; Goessling & Wager, 2021), shaping what Finley (2005) calls a "a purposeful turn to a revolutionary, performative research aesthetic [that] facilitates critical race, indigenous, queer, feminist, and border studies" (p. 681).

Through arts-based research, visual imagery has become increasingly common as both a form of data and as the knowledge product itself. Proponents argue that images hold a unique capacity for communicating across subjectivities and social constraints (Sousanis, 2015; Flowers, 2017; Rainford, 2021). Images can often convey an idea across language or literacy barriers and may be especially useful "for the communication of traumatic, shameful or otherwise difficult to voice experiences, offering a powerful social justice rationale" (Meer & Müller, 2021, p. 3). The creation of images as method lends itself to participatory projects because it places the focus on participants as producers of knowledge (Donovan and Ustundag, 2017).

Images in visual methods take many forms, including photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997), participant photography and photo-elicitation (Rose, 2014; Allen, 2012; Mason and Davies, 2009), video (Pink, 2007), personal mapping (Gieseking, 2013), visual timelines (Kolar et al., 2015) and relational artwork (Degarrod, 2013). Photovoice, where participants are given cameras to document the research topic, has emerged
as an especially common method in arts-based projects (Wang and Burris, 1997; Foster-Fishman et. all, 2010). In photovoice, the photographs become the data and analysis is often a dialectic process shared between the participant-photographers, the researchers, and members of the public who are invited to view the photographs. A similar process of participant art creation is used in other arts-based methods, including comics based research methods.

Consistent with the youth participatory action research methodology, this dissertation project was designed as both a critical praxis and an effort to foster critical consciousness for both the youth and the researcher (Freire 1970). Freire (1970) defined critical consciousness as a process of (1) cultivating an awareness of systemic and structural oppression and the processes which reify it (2) a sense of agency to create transformative change and (3) a resulting commitment to action that dismantles oppression (Glass, 2001). With these commitments in mind, this dissertation research utilized creative research processes in an open and flexible manner to create the greatest possible space of possibility for youth to cultivate critical consciousness.

Arts-based research presented as an ideal method for this goal because it acknowledges art as both a form of knowledge in its own right and a process of knowledge creation (Leavy, 2017). Arts based researchers Goessling and Wager (2021) delineated four key tenets for engaging in critical arts-based research projects with youth aimed toward social change. These tenets are (1) that "art is a rigorous medium for analyzing, producing, and sharing knowledge"; (2) that "authentic and reciprocal relationships matter"; (3) that "change can occur on multiple levels, oftentimes simultaneously"; and (4) "it is all about praxis and the process" (Goessling & Wager, 2021, p. 749). These themes can be understood in conversation with the goals of youth participatory action research described above. Taken together, this dissertation utilized YPAR and critical arts-based research as its methodological anchors.
3.2.3 Collaborative Graphic Autoethnography

This research project utilized collaborative graphic autoethnography for data generation, collection, and analysis. Collaborative graphic autoethnography was developed by sociologists Talia Meer & Alex Müller (2021) and blends the features of collaborative ethnography, autoethnography, and comics-based research. This participatory, arts-based method was designed to "collaps[e] the binary between researcher/author and researched/subject" (Meer & Müller, 2021, p. 15) by engaging participants in the process of creating autobiographical comics about a social issue in order to create social change. In this method, the stories participants tell are constructed collaboratively, in conversation with one another, around a unifying theme. The comics themselves become the data to be analyzed collaboratively and disseminated broadly toward a specific political goal. Collaborative graphic autoethnography is anchored in the same theoretical and philosophical commitments that underpin the goals of this dissertation project. Specifically, it is predicated on the idea that knowledge is subjective and mutually constructed and mediated; that the construction and dissemination of knowledge is an exercise of power; and that the production of art can and should be considered an act of knowledge creation.

These epistemic convictions are also present in autoethnography, one of the key foundational components of the collaborative graphic autoethnography method. Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines autobiography and ethnography, pairing personal experience with scholarly analysis (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2016). Within this method, the researcher’s own experiences become the subject of analysis. Proponents of this method argue that it offers unique possibilities for the social sciences due to its narrative acuity, and its capacity to make visible the way researchers’ personal experiences shape the theory that they create. Autoethnography’s emphasis on personal narratives and emotions fosters empathy and understanding, making it a powerful tool for to counter-storytelling racialized
experiences.

When developing collaborative graphic autoethnography, Meer and Müller (2021) highlighted the similarities in imperatives between autoethnography and autobiographical comics, arguing that both forms afford individuals "'representational control over experience' and 'a way to reconstruct the world' and 'the damaged body' within it" (Williams, 2015, p. 119, cited in Meer & Müller, p. 15). Collaborative graphic autoethnography expands on the existing strengths of autoethnography by transcending the limitations of traditional textual narratives through art. This multimodal approach allows for a more nuanced and embodied exploration of personal experiences, emotions, and lived realities. The inclusion of illustrations, panels, and visual metaphors enhances the depth of expression, capturing the nuances of lived experiences that words alone may struggle to convey.

Collaboration is another key piece of collaborative graphic autoethnography. In this method, participants decide collaboratively what experiences should be included and which should be excluded from the final knowledge product through an iterative process of dialogue and exchange. From there, they construct personal graphic narratives which serve the research and social change goals of the collective. By combining aspects of both collaborative ethnography and autoethnography, CGA reaps the benefits of collaboration while also allowing individuals to maintain authority over their stories. Meer & Müller (2021) argue that collaborative graphic autoethnography affords participants "the opportunity to assert representational control over their experiences, and reconstruct their bodies against political, social and academic discourses that render them deviant, diseased or violated" (Meer & Müller, p. 15). Under this method, both the process of creating the comics and the final comics are considered data open for analysis.
3.2.4 Comics-Based Research

Collaborative graphic ethnography draws not only from autoethnography, but also comics-based research, an emerging set of visual methods gaining traction across the disciplines. The use of comic books and graphic novels as visual approach to participatory research and a way to analyze or communicate data has been gaining popularity in recent years (Dell’Angelo and DeGenova, 2018; Priego, 2016). Comics are defined as a series of sequential panels with images and text organized together in a narrative (Eisner, 1985). Typically, neither the text nor the visuals take center stage; instead, they work together to convey complex ideas that neither images nor text can convey alone (Sousanis, 2015). Comics are increasingly being recognized as a uniquely potent tool for social inquiry, capable of defying the conventions of both conventional scholarship and traditional art. Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, and Sousanis (2021) define comics-based research (CBR) as "research that integrates the comics form into one or more steps of the inquiry process" (p. 2) and "an emerging field of practice that attracts researchers with diverse disciplinary and epistemological commitments."

Comics-based research has been used across academic disciplines in a variety of ways, with examples in anthropology (Atkins, n.d.; Bartoszko et al., 2011; Boudreault-Fournier, 2015; Hajská et al., 2010; Hamdy et al., 2017; Wadle, 2012), health fields (Al-Jawad, 2015; Czerwiec et al., 2015; Green and Rieck, 2013), history, (Lewis et al., 2013; Mizuki and Davisson, 2013), and the field of education (Ayers and Alexander-Tanner, 2010; Flowers, 2017; Galman, 2009; Jones and Woglom, 2013a, 2013b; Sousanis, 2015; Wallner, 2017; Weaver-Hightower, 2017). The growing interest in the scholarly applications of comics is evidenced by an academic book series recently launched by the University of Toronto Press, titled ethnoGRAPHIC: Ethnography in Graphic Form, created specifically to publish ethnographic research in graphic novel form. Among their publications are *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friend-
ship, and Revolution (Hamdy & Nye, 2017) and Gringo Love: Stories of Sex Tourism in Brazil (Carrier-Moisan, 2020). Even mainstream comics that emerge from outside university contexts have used the form to engage with a myriad of issues relevant to scholarship, including political upheaval, activism, and social critique. For example, one of the bestselling graphic novels of all time, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1986, 1992), offers an oral history of life as a Polish Jew during World War 2; similarly, *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (1993) depicts the struggle of Palestinian oppression the 1990s. More recently, *Our Stories Carried Us Here* (Rozman et. al, 2021), a graphic anthology storytelling the experiences of immigrants and refugees across the United States gained critical acclaim for its aptitude in telling deeply personal narratives from a wide range of experiences under the cohesive umbrella of illustration.

Comics-based researcher Sally Galman (2009) argues that comics creators are in effect already generating social theory, because the creation of comics often requires the same kind of analysis that traditional methods such as ethnography employ to create representations of social life. As a method of data collection, comics offer a powerful narrative tool for capturing the stories of participants. Proponents argue that comics’ capacity to change perspectives, time periods, and settings makes them particularly well-suited for bridging the personal and sociopolitical (Hamdy & Nye, 2016). Galman (2009) writes:

“The strengths of the graphic novel as a research tool lie in its richly textured snapshot of participant experience, its possibilities for collaboration and its acknowledgement that participant stories go beyond the margins of the text and that stories themselves are more than the single dimension of monologue can adequately reproduce.” – (p. 213)

Nick Sousanis’ work *Unflattening* (2015) was the first dissertation created entirely as a graphic novel, which serves as a treatise on the validity and importance of comics as a method, a mode of data analysis, and a format for the dissemination of scholarly
concepts all in one. Of particular relevance to my dissertation is Sousanis’ argument that comics presented as scholarship challenge notions of what is and is not scholarly research, and who can and cannot access it. It is this argument which undergirds the decision to use comics as both method and mode of data analysis and dissemination in this dissertation. While youth participatory action research dissertation projects still routinely struggle with issues of authorship and the necessity of translation for and by adults, comics-based research may offer a unique opportunity for the adult researcher to take a backseat and allow youth participants to own their stories in ways that previously seemed impossible. While writing lengthy peer-reviewed academic articles and dissertation chapters is not a developmentally appropriate path to authorship for high school age youth, creating comics is a mode of data analysis that they can participate in from start to finish.

Existing scholarship suggests that comics-based research methods may be especially valuable as a developmentally appropriate tool for participatory projects with youth (Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, & Sousanis, 2021). The widespread popularity of comics in mainstream culture makes comics immediately familiar and accessible to youth in ways that more formal methods like inferential statistics may not (Forde, 2022). Creating comics does not require youth to hold any specialized skills or familiarity with academic jargon the way that traditional methods often require. Instead, the creation of autobiographical comics draws from and cultivates skills commonly used in both their academic and personal lives – the creation of art and narrative.

Creating and reading comics has been used as a pedagogical strategy in K-12 classrooms for decades as a pedagogical tool to cultivate literacy in reluctant readers and writers (Bits, 2004; Schwarz, 2002, 2010; Jacobs, 2017; Issa, 2018; Wallner, 2019). The visual language of comics has been praised in educational scholarship for its intuitive decipherability, allowing meaning to emerge even for struggling readers (Bitz, 2004; Wallner, 2019). All of these pedagogical strengths suggest that comics-
based research methods have much to offer the youth participatory action research methodology. For these reasons, the current study followed Nick Sousanis’ imperative to unflatten our modes of generating and interpreting knowledge by using comics as the primary mode of data collection, analysis, and as the final knowledge product.

3.3 Research Design

This dissertation project aimed to employ collaborative comics creation as developmentally appropriate and radically participatory mode of data generation, analysis, and as a knowledge product in and of itself. This project challenges traditional dissertation conventions of authorship and knowledge generation by presenting all steps of research process in a fully illustrated format, without the traditional role of the doctoral student translating findings into formats more readily embraced by academic spaces. This project explores the potential of this comics-creation as a method that decenteres the researcher while prioritizing and nurturing the transformative agency of Black youth. Over a period of twelve Saturdays beginning in March 2023, this project enlisted seven Black youth from New Orleans as participant-researchers to explore their own stories as they relate to their educational experiences.

3.3.1 Research Questions

The following guiding research questions guided the participatory research design of the current study. Within the frame of youth participatory action research, youth are considered collaborators in the methodological process who should have a say in the development of research questions. With this in mind, adult facilitators "have a crucially important role to play in facilitating the research process [...] in setting up the conditions and community within which YPAR can be most successful" (Mirra et al., p. 39, 41). For this reason, I offered these research questions as a beginning frame for the project:

**Research Question 1.** What counter-stories do youth have to tell about their
schools and their own wellbeing?

**Research Question 2.** Based on these stories, what do they consider important for New Orleans policymakers to know?

3.3.2 Recruitment and Selection Criteria

To be eligible to participate in this project, youth had to meet the following inclusion criteria. First, they had to have been enrolled in Orleans parish schooling or have been enrolled within the last year, including recent graduates and students enrolled in homeschooling with previous public school experience. They were also required to be between 14 and 19 years, in order to ensure developmental appropriateness of the YPAR programming and limit the scope of the project to the experiences of youth either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from high school. There were no selection criteria related to gender. The criteria also required participants to be Black, Indigenous, or other person of color. Because this project was concerned with meeting the call in the literature for counter-stories of charter school systems (Buras, Randels, Salaam, 2010; Poon & Cohen, 2012; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dixson, Buras, Jeffers, 2015; Blaisdell, 2021) recruitment prioritized students of color that have attended public schools within the charter-only system in New Orleans. Additionally, because this project is concerned with the role of anti-Blackness in these racialized experiences in New Orleans charter schools, priority was given to Black youth who attended non-selective admissions charters. This choice is supported by Afro-pessimist theory (Wilderson, 2010), which centers "racial blackness" as a condition of oppression. In other words, racial identity for any person in the United States is contingent upon a relationship to blackness and anti-Blackness (Sexton, 2016). However, it is also expected that non-Black students of color can identify with the results of this work because anti-Blackness is not limited to categorically Black individuals.

Due to the emphasis placed on relationships in the youth participatory action research methodology, priority was given to youth who have a relationship
with the researcher from previous experiences in youth participatory action research projects. Prioritizing these youth also meet the YPAR commitment to building long-standing relationships with youth anchored in their positive development, rather than relationships that exist for the sole sake of data collection. The size of the sample was dictated by the availability of youth stipends, as well as a commitment to small-scale, relational connections with youth. Recruitment took place in February 2023. Because the sampling method prioritizes youth with existing relationships with the researcher, recruitment took place primarily through personal invitations through email and text to participate in the project.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

The works of Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa and other women of color who blended creative writing and art with scholarship invited me into this space of higher education. This research project seeks to make good on the promise their scholarship made – that my ways of being and knowing are worthwhile in this space, too. Relatedly, my commitment to arts-based research is informed by my desire to create scholarship that is accessible and meaningful to my loved ones. My father loves comics, and I want him to read my dissertation.

This study is informed by my standpoint as a queer woman of color who is Black and Puerto Rican. As a multiracial Black adult, I am mindful of the ways I am both insider and outsider to my research participants. The effects of colorism in particular have afforded me privileges and educational experiences that differ from many of the youth I work with. Additionally, most of my educational experiences have taken place in predominantly white spaces, which shapes my ways of knowing and being. My practice of reflexivity in this project will require me to cultivate a continuous awareness of the ways my paths diverge and converge with those of the youth I partner with.

This study is also informed by many years of experience as an educator in a pre-
dominantly white arts-based K-12 school in Portland, OR, where I was introduced to constructivist pedagogy, play-based learning, and democratic education models. My earnest desire to see and create that kind of power-sharing and pedagogical "softness" in educational spaces that serve students of color – not just white children – has been the guiding force of my work. Finally, this research is guided by the imperative to avoid "drive-by research" – that all-too-common phenomenon where researchers swoop in to collect data and then disappear from the lives of the people researched "upon." Although I cannot determine where my career takes me in the years post-dissertation, the graphic novel as research product is meant to be a shared creation that is owned by all of us involved in this project. It will be something that the university cannot take away and that stays in the community even if I have to leave.

3.4.1 Community-Engaged Research and Definitions of Community

This research project falls within the parameters of "community-based participatory research (CBPR)", an umbrella term that describes a broad array of research approaches anchored in a common goal of social change through processes of participation and action (Hacker, 2013). This umbrella is inclusive of a wide range of schools of thought that borrow from and inform one another, including: participatory action research, participatory evaluation, community-engaged scholarship, and other articulations of research characterized by an effort to include the people effected by research in the research process.

Within the network of CBPR scholars, an ongoing discussion has emerged about the nature of community (Curry-Stevens, 2012; Janes, 2016). This discussion is concerned with where we draw the lines around "community", who we choose as representatives of that community, and how these questions are inseparable from the questions of power, hierarchy, and political change that are the impetus of all participatory research (Janes, 2016). One of the key concerns is around the dangers of privileging any given community members as representatives of a unified community
Similarly, critical race theorists are also concerned with the dangers of essentializing racial groups. One of the key tenets of critical race theory is anti-essentialism. This tenet emphasizes the dehumanizing impact of turning racial groups into monoliths, all sharing a unified perspective on a given issue. For example, within the Black "community", there range as dramatic a range of opinions on any given political issue as there are between Black and white "communities."

The New Orleans "community" is no different. Even within the New Orleans Black community, there is a range of opinions about the state of our schools, whether they need fixing, and whose fault it is. Black people in New Orleans are just as likely as their white counterparts to blame youth themselves for our school conditions - or to blame systemic and historic processes. There are Black people within our community who believe that the charters were at worst necessarily evil after Hurricane Katrina; there are others who believe that the charter takeover after Katrina was deeply racially motivated.

Within these troubled waters of "community," it becomes important for us to specify the definition of community used for this dissertation. To begin that task, I look to Merriam-Webster’s first definition of community: "a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition feels consistent with how the word "community" is operationalized both in the literature and in everyday conversation. Working from this definition I have defined community for this study with as small-scale and simple a definition I can. Through the process of working together for this dissertation, my youth participant-researchers and I formed a community. We have shared a meaningful amount of time working together to create something we all care about, with the hope of bettering the lives of people we care about. I also include that wide network under the umbrella of "people we care about" in our definition of community,
because this work is created within their sphere of influence and with them in mind.

3.4.2 Participant Co-Researchers

As both participants and co-researchers, traditional approaches to anonymity do not neatly apply to this project. Because this research is an effort to reimagine authorship conventions in participatory research, all students were given the opportunity to choose whether they would like to use a pseudonym or their real names for this project. However, the limitations of standard IRB procedures have unfortunately required us to limit research-related discussion of youth to pseudonyms. I have selected pseudonyms for them here based on some of my favorite Black superheroes. Outside the scope of this dissertation and peer-reviewed publications, the students will be able to use their names based on their publication preferences. Further discussion of anonymity is explored in the following section.

Shuri. Shuri is a 19 years old. She is the student in this project who I have known the longest. At the time of this study, Shuri was a freshman at a local HBCU. Prior to beginning college, Shuri attended and graduated from public schools in New Orleans. I first met Shuri while teaching a summer pre-college class at one of our city universities. I knew her to be a quiet, creative student with an interest in research for social change and eye for art and design. When I first ventured into YPAR programming in summer 2022, Shuri was one of the first to apply to join. When I again sent out a call for participants for the present study, Shuri was the very first person to sign up. Over the course of participating in YPAR programming, I have watched her cultivate her passion for art and redirect her college studies to reflect an interest in social change work. The story that Shuri wrote for this project, shared in Chapter 4, draws from her personal experience as a student who longed to pursue the arts, but was pushed into STEM by the adults in her life.

Blade. Blade is a 16 year old home school student. Before being enrolled in homeschooling, Blade attended New Orleans public schools. He describes this switch
to homeschooling as a choice his mother made in response to poor school environment and his need for differentiated instruction. He feels strongly that this change was for the better, and that homeschooling has allowed him to grow and flourish in ways the public school system did not allow. I first met Blade when he signed up for YPAR programming in summer 2022. Blade is a comics enthusiast with his own popular social media platforms dedicated to discussing comics. He was also working on writing his own comic before the project began. He was a little disappointed that our programming focused more on schools and systemic equality than debates about Marvel, DC, and whether Static Shock or Miles Morales would win in a fight (as a fellow comics enthusiast, I believe he may have a point). He is a skilled writer with a sharp eye for narrative. He also prides himself on his strong, if sometimes polarizing, opinions, which make for passionate discussions. Being already familiar with the format of writing comic book scripts, Blade was the first to finish his story for this project. He elected to reach out to his illustrator on his own accord through Instagram, and where he was able to approve earlier drafts than even I was sent.

**Misty.** Misty is a 17-year-old, recently graduated high school senior with plans to begin college in the fall. During the course of this study, Misty was finishing her senior year at a New Orleans public school. Misty is another student I met while facilitating YPAR programming in summer 2022. Misty signed up to participate in the current study late, after first checking in with me and asking if she could participate even if she had to miss some of the sessions because she had another job. Although she was not always able to attend every session, she was always communicative when work conflicted with our programming and often worked from home to get drafts of her story in on time. Misty is an extremely hard-working and motivated individual who cares deeply for her loved ones. She is interested in poetry and her interest shows in the way she frames her experiences and the topics she brought to our discussions. The story that Misty wrote for this project is rooted in her own experiences of grief
Lunella. Lunella is a 15-year-old current high school student. During the course of this study, Lunella was finishing her sophomore year at a New Orleans public school. Lunella is another student I met while facilitating YPAR programming in summer 2022. She had to miss a few sessions for standardized testing, which she was pursuing on the weekends in the effort to get into a prestigious, selective admissions charter school. She was a point short of the needed score and did not get in. It is their loss, because Lunella is an incredibly sweet, deeply good-natured, and thoughtful student. Her story represents a version of something that really happened to her, but with a fictional twist that conveys how she wishes the story ended.

Riri. Riri is a 16-year-old high school student. During the course of this study, Riri was finishing her sophomore year at a New Orleans public school. Riri is another student I met while facilitating YPAR programming in summer 2022. Before attending New Orleans schools, Riri says she attended a predominantly white school, where she struggled with bullying and feeling out of place. Her mother placed her in New Orleans schools to be better connected with her culture, but she sometimes feels out of place here too. Riri is a brilliant writer, and the depth of description she provided in her script is a great example of her skill set. Her story reflects many of the themes that arose during our discussions, along with personal experience.

Miles. Miles is a 17-year-old recently graduated high school senior with plans to begin college in the fall. During the course of this study, Miles was finishing his senior year at a New Orleans public school. Miles’ story idea came to him on the very first day of programming, and although it went through several iterations, the end result still reflected the original idea from Day 1. Miles describes himself as a smart student who is well-liked by teachers, and his story for this project represents both a composite of experiences we discussed during the 12 weeks of programming, and an attempt to represent what he has witnessed in his own school.
Storm Storm is also a 17-year-old Black teenage girl and a recently graduated high school senior with plans to begin college in the fall. Like Miles, during the course of this study, Storm was finishing her senior year at a New Orleans public school. Storm was the latest student to join our project. Her first visit was as Miles’ guest to one of our sessions. Although Storm was one of the only students who did not know everyone from the previous summer, she immediately jumped in and enriched our conversations. She was a natural leader in Socratic Seminars, and often made connections that generated strong talking points for the group. Storm’s story is the most fantastical of the seven, using a fictional magical school setting and a main character with magic powers she uses to defend herself against sexism in school. This departure may be partially attributed to the fact Storm missed the first session where we set a tone and goals for the project, but nonetheless the high fantasy element of her story enriches the anthology, and we cannot imagine it without her story.

3.4.3 Co-Researchers, Anonymity, and Pseudonyms

As stated earlier, enlisting youth as co-researchers presents a unique problem around anonymity. Everything in my traditional research training suggests that confidentiality is one of the most crucial pieces of the research process - yet I am also trying here to center and uplift the expertise of youth as my co-researchers. Although I personally would feel significantly more comfortable if the youth chose anonymity, it is an epistemic priority for this project to honor the agency and choices of my co-researchers.

During our sessions, we discussed the pros and cons of using pseudonyms many times. I tried to stress to the youth the value that anonymity could offer them when dealing with a divisive topic and challenging dominant narratives. New Orleans, like many small cities, is notoriously insular, and small political ripples here create big waves. We also watched a documentary on youth organizing in Oakland, called Homeroom, where they were able to see the very real pushback that high school
students received from adults. Although my co-researchers seemed to understand the risks, they overwhelmingly chose to use their own names in this project. They are proud of their work and want credit for it.

Unfortunately, IRB conventions added another level of difficulty to the use of real names for this project. For the sake of this dissertation and other peer-reviewed publications related to this project, we are required to use pseudonyms, even if youth have acted as co-researchers and have requested to waive their anonymity. However, any publications of this comic book outside of these parameters will use the names students have chosen to be represented by. This is an unhappy compromise at best, and one that I hope to continue to address in my scholarship and through continued dialogue with our university’s IRB. In this way, this project also highlights a common tension in participatory action research, which is the role of IRB in drawing lines between who is "the researcher" and who is "researched". There is no easy way to fulfill our transformative authorship goals when complying with a consent process that is oriented toward box-ticking and legal compliance.

Beyond initial consent processes, this project has also built in another opportunity for youth to change their mind before publication of results. All of the youth have been invited the defense of this dissertation. At that point, youth have a chance to hear back how their stories sound when contextualized for an academic audience. This adds an opportunity for youth to change authorship preferences to a pseudonym if any new concerns arise about how their findings may be received. This checkpoint also serves as another opportunity to make visible the labor and contributions the youth have put in as co-researchers, while also offering another opportunity for youth to correct any errors or offer missing context if they feel it is needed.

3.5 Procedures

The study procedures involved students participating in a series of 12 workshop sessions held on consecutive Saturdays. The curriculum of these sessions was de-
signed to align with the stages of YPAR projects developed by researchers at the UC Berkeley YPAR Hub (Ozer et al., 2016). While the overall framework followed their model, some modifications were made, as outlined in the table provided below. The workshops were geared toward building critical consciousness, especially as it relates to schools. In addition to consciousness raising, the workshops also incorporated instruction on writing comic book scripts and collaborating with illustrators, with the aim of developing participants’ knowledge of visual analysis and comics-based storytelling.

Table 3.1: Our Revised Application of YPAR Stages.

<table>
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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Build Community</td>
<td>Political Education</td>
<td>Selecting a Problem Collaboratively</td>
<td>Collect and Analyze Data</td>
<td>Professional Illustration</td>
<td>Develop Policy Arguments</td>
<td>Share with Public Audiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although I structured the 12 sessions to reflect the YPAR Hub stages in chronological order, almost every stage overlapped with each other in constant iteration. I use the terms "stages," "steps," and "processes" interchangeably throughout to emphasize the iterative nature of the project, highlighting how each phase influenced and shaped the others. The unit plan included in the following pages provides a general outline of the activities. However, we did often veer from this outline to the specific needs of the group, and in response to the number of students able to attend on any given day. This flexible approach allowed for responsiveness to the evolving dynamics and interests of the participants, ensuring their ongoing engagement and
sense of ownership of the research process.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session 1</th>
<th>Session 2</th>
<th>Session 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slow Start / Welcome</td>
<td>Drawing Exercise - Index Card Self-Portraits (Lynda Barry)</td>
<td>Drawing Exercise - Index Card Self-Portraits (Lynda Barry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
<td>LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Check - In / Orientation</td>
<td>Grids and Gestures activity (Sousanis)</td>
<td>Discuss the process of Collaborating with an Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 - 12:45</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>UNSTRUCTURED COMMUNITY TIME</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 - 2:00</td>
<td>FIELD TRIP</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>DOCUMENTARY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field trip to Newcomb Museum</td>
<td>Exploring the comics section in library</td>
<td>REBIRTH: New Orleans (NOPS Documentary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 - 3:15</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Unstructured community time - youth shared poetry etc</td>
<td>SOCRATIC SEMINAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brainstorming policy narratives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15 - 3:30</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Session 4</th>
<th>Session 5</th>
<th>Session 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>FIELD TRIP - BLERDFEST</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing Exercise - Index Card Self-Portraits (Lynda Barry)</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Drawing Exercise - Index Card Self-Portraits (Lynda Barry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Panel</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing Activity - Monster Jam</td>
<td>Multi-Verses: CREATING WORLDS WITH WORDS</td>
<td>Drawing Activity - Character Jam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00 - 12:45</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td></td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00 - 2:00</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Video Gaming (Free Play + Tournaments + VR) + Table Gaming Tournaments + Cosplay Demos + Cosplay Throwdown + Film Screenings + Writing Workshops + Free Photo Booth</td>
<td>Writing Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sel Activity</td>
<td>Panel</td>
<td>UNSTRUCTURED COMMUNITY TIME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 - 3:15</td>
<td>Freeze! Improv Storytelling Workshop</td>
<td>CREATING WORLDS IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA</td>
<td>Freeze! Improv Storytelling Workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Black Panther, Queen Sugar, Suicide Squad, Treme, Vampire Diaries – these are just a few of the projects our Guests have appeared in. What inspires them? How did they get their start? What’s it like filming in NOLA?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15 - 3:30</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1: Unit Plan: Sessions 1-6
### Figure 3.2: Unit Plan: Sessions 7-12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Session 7</th>
<th>Session 8</th>
<th>Session 9</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saturday 4/15</td>
<td>Saturday 4/22</td>
<td>Saturday 4/29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>FIELD TRIP - PUBLIC LIBRARY</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
<td>Lynda Barry Drawing Exercise</td>
<td>BRAIN BRUNCH - DESIGN THINKING WORKSHOP</td>
<td>Lynda Barry Drawing Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-12:45</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:45 - 1:00</td>
<td>ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>ICEBREAKER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>SKILLS DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 - 2:15</td>
<td>SNACK/BREAK</td>
<td>SNACK/BREAK</td>
<td>SNACK/BREAK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 - 3:15</td>
<td>UNSTRUCTURED COMMUNITY TIME</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15-3:30</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>Session 10</th>
<th>Session 11</th>
<th>Session 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saturday 5/6</td>
<td>Saturday 5/13</td>
<td>Saturday 5/20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 - 11:15</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>WELCOME/ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>- Naming the Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 - 12:00</td>
<td>Lynda Barry Drawing Exercise</td>
<td>Lynda Barry Drawing Exercise</td>
<td>- Reflecting &amp; Looking to the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00-12:45</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>LUNCH</td>
<td>Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:45 - 1:00</td>
<td>ICEBREAKER</td>
<td>ICEBREAKER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00-2:00</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td>STORYTELLING ACTIVITY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00 - 2:15</td>
<td>SNACK/BREAK</td>
<td>Data Analysis - SHOWeD Method</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:15 - 3:15</td>
<td>LEADERSHIP ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Finalizing Drafts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15-3:30</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
<td>SNACK/CLOSE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5.1 Developmental Appropriateness

Each stage of this project was designed with developmental appropriateness in mind. "Developmental appropriateness" here refers to tailoring the research process to match the specific needs, abilities, and interests of high school students (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Adolescents (aged 10 to 19) undergo significant cognitive, social, emotional, and creative changes. This study recognizes that in order to cultivate healthy development and well-being for youth, it is critically important to design the research project in a way that aligns with their developmental stage.

Adolescence in particular is a unique stage of human development because of its many contradictions. During this stage, youth are developing complex abstract thinking skills, enabling them to consider hypothetical situations, challenge existing beliefs, and explore diverse perspectives (Adams, 2005). However, they are not yet adults, and so they still require guidance and support as they navigate these new cognitive abilities (Christie & Viner, 2005). This is often challenging for adults who may struggle to strike the delicate balance between fostering independence and providing structure. This project aspired to tread this fine line with care and foresight by utilizing lesson plans that encourage youth to explore their identities and make decisions, while also offering guidance and setting reasonable limits.

The comics creation aspect of this project gave youth the freedom to select topics, themes, and characters for their comics, fostering a sense of empowerment and ownership over their work. This project was also designed to provide scaffolded support. I created the guiding frame for the project, including lesson plans designed to cultivate the skills they would need to be successful in the project. Throughout the project, I was available to provide mentorship and guidance on their stories while making clear the extent to which they are in charge of their own narratives.

Another characteristic of this developmental stage is the contradicting need for both acceptance and individuality. During adolescence, young people are often ea-
ger to fit in and be accepted by their peers; at the same time, they are also exploring their own unique identities and striving to express their individuality (Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Adams, 2005; Christie & Viner, 2005). One way this project supports these developmental needs is by building a safe community space. Through continued meetings where students are encouraged to speak their minds and share their opinions with one another, the project offered them both an opportunity to distinguish themselves and their unique perspectives, while also finding a sense of connection in the larger group and their shared project purpose.

Finally, a key characteristic of this developmental stage is the need for active engagement. This age group benefits from hands-on learning and a high level of involvement, where students are able to explore their interests, express their ideas, and take ownership of their learning (Adams, 2005; Christie & Viner, 2005). Project-based learning has been praised for its capacity to engage students in reflection and self-assessment, allowing students to develop a deeper understanding of their own learning and growth (Rice & Dolgin, 2005). In this way, a youth participatory action research approach supports positive youth development by anchoring the activities in goals with real-world application. The need for active engagement also calls for fun. For this reason, the project regularly took time to play games, go on field trips, play music students liked, and do creative drawing activities. While these activities didn’t always necessarily have a direct line to our projects’ most literal goals, they ensured that the environment always felt geared toward students’ interests, which in turn ensured the success of the rest of the project.

3.5.2 Building Community

Building community was a key process in this project. By prioritizing youth who already know the researcher and already know each other, community building felt organic and natural. Although I had concerns that the relationships between youth would not be as close because of the time that had passed since they last saw each
other, I was pleased to learn that many of them had stayed in touch since the previous summer (2022). Because of this, community-building did not feel like a formal "Stage 1" in this project; instead, in some ways we were able to build on the sense of trust, safety, and joy that youth described in previous programming. Community-building was woven throughout the 12 sessions through developmentally appropriate icebreakers, games, and activities designed to build trust and a sense of safety in the space, that were also fun and pleasant to participate in.

Many of these activities were not directly or obviously related to the research questions. For example, we opened most of our sessions with drawing exercises from Lynda Barry’s creative workbooks, "Syllabus" (2014) and "Making Comics" (2019). In particular, we spent a lot of time on "character jams" and "monster jams" (see figure below) where youth worked together to create silly creatures and narratives around them, usually set to music selected by the youth. Similarly, we closed out many sessions playing the improv game "Freeze!", which involves acting out silly scenes theatrically. Although I framed these as storytelling exercises - and to some extent they certainly were - the primary goal of these activities was just fun opportunities to laugh and create things together. As we moved into more intense conversations about the education system and their school experiences, these silly activities were often a welcome break from the heaviness.
During this stage, youth were also encouraged to share media that resonated with them with the group for discussion. For example, students shared slam poetry that felt relevant to our discussions about schools, such as "Adrenaline Rush" by Rudy Francisco, "Simon Says" by Ashley Davis and Oompa, and "Letter To Your Flag" from the 2018 Youth Speaks Teen Poetry Slam. All three of these poems highlight the reality of racial inequality, the tensions inherent in American society and our education system, and the speaker’s personal feelings - ranging from anguish to rage - about the experience of being ensnared by these systemic issues. The conversations about the poetry and media youth shared fostered a sense of connection between themselves, each other, and the social issues at the focus of the project. As a facilitator, my ap-
proach to these discussions was guided by strategies from Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy (1968) and Gloria Ladson-Billings’ (1995; 2014) culturally relevant pedagogy. In practice, this often looked like open-ended "Socratic Seminars". Consistent with Freirean critical pedagogy, Socratic Seminars are question-focused and student-led class sessions. We began Socratic seminars by watching a piece of media, either selected by students or me. Then, students have a few minutes to write questions for the group that arise in response to a piece of media. Rather than lecturing, my role was to help facilitate flow of conversation, sometimes offering historical or structural context to the points raised by students. I have found Socratic seminars to be an effective way to keep the conversation lively and encourage students to speak and take ownership over the course of the discussion. During longer lulls in conversation, I remind them with humor that I will not be jumping in to save them - they are responsible for keeping things interesting. Inevitably, the conversation usually jolts back to life!

Figure 3.4: Whiteboard Notes from a Socratic Seminar
3.5.3 Political Education

The next process of the project was political education. Critical consciousness is a key part of data collection and analysis in YPAR projects because it facilitates youths’ ability to connect their own personal experiences with large-scale, structural problems. The goal for this stage of the project was to cultivate the analytical skills needed to parse the social context of their school experiences for the data collection and analysis stage. Kirshner (2015) argues that rushing or skipping this stage of the YPAR process can result in a problem where, when asked to come up with solutions to problems, youth who have not developed a critical consciousness may resort to familiar rhetoric that reifies existing social inequities. Additionally, YPAR is concerned not only with research goals but also sociopolitical youth development (Kirshner, 2015). Beyond data collection and analysis goals, political education is a crucial developmental process to foster positive racial identities for Black youth (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Diemer, 2009; Watts & Guessous, 2006).

Following the framework laid out by researchers at the UC Berkeley YPAR Hub (Ozer et al., 2015 - 2023), this stage prioritized culturally relevant curriculum that brought critical attention to issues of racism, classism, sexism, and other structural problems. Like previous stages, this stage also employed a critical pedagogy approach to teaching these materials, meaning that all conversations left room for debate, discussion, and shared power between the facilitator and youth. Youth were invited and encouraged to find personal meaning in these discussions. This stage was inseparable from the community building stage. Much of the discussions about racism, classism, sexism, and other structural problems came up in our Socratic Seminars.

Although my original research plan included assigned articles and other readings in the political education stage, I scrapped this idea in practice. It became clear pretty quickly that the youth were already stretched thin by school and extra-curricular obligations, and sometimes felt that our sessions competed with their schoolwork
time. Coming to Saturday sessions to sit and read was not an appealing proposition given this context. Instead, we relied on multimedia like documentaries and slam poetry to inform us and shape our discussions, along with field trips.

The first day of programming set the tone for our media-based political education. We went on a short field trip to the Newcomb Art Museum on the Tulane University campus where we were meeting. The museum was featuring an exhibit called "Unthinkable Imagination: A Creative Response to the Juvenile Justice Crisis."

The walk from our classroom to the library itself was a political education. Despite being in a majority Black city, Tulane University’s student body is almost entirely white, and has been since its inception. Our group of seven Black teenagers was not a usual sight on campus. After our museum visit, I asked the youth if they’d be interested in a campus tour because the weather was so wonderful. They were ambivalent about this option, and several requested if we could go back to the classroom instead. There, we unpacked the strangeness and discomfort of being in such dense white space.

In addition to the field trip, we utilized documentaries to provide social, cultural, and historical context to our critique of New Orleans schools. The two key documentaries we used were Rebirth: New Orleans, directed by long-time education journalist John Merrow and Homeroom, directed by Emmy Award-winning director Peter Nicks, known for his immersive and intimate approach to film-making. Rebirth: New Orleans was selected because it offers a detailed history of when and how the changes to the New Orleans school system came to be after Hurricane Katrina, highlighting key turning points and decision-making processes alongside differing community perspectives from those early years of the change. The documentary stood out to me amongst charter school documentaries as intentionally even-handed, without strongly endorsing or condemning the charter school system. The documentary lays out both the commonly cited flaws and strengths of the model without overstating either. This
format allowed the youth to compare their experiences against the history of their schools and form their own conclusions discursively.

*Homeroom*, the second documentary selected, follows Oakland High School students in the year 2020 who were organizing to eliminate school police against the context of nationwide George Floyd protests and later, the Covid-19 pandemic. I selected this documentary because it centers youth throughout, and gives a rich picture of the organizing processes they use and the pushback they receive from adults. The recency of the documentary made the youth in the documentary feel relatable to the youth in this project, and the Oakland context of the film invited them to make comparisons to their own experiences. We stopped periodically throughout the film to discuss different scenes in the Socratic Seminar format. About two thirds of the way through this film, the power in our building went out due to a classic New Orleans thunderstorm, and we were unable to finish the film. Instead, we played hide and seek in the library. Although the critical consciousness raising process would have been strengthened by a more thorough discussion, there simply is no competing with the possibility of playing hide and seek in a dark university library.
Figure 3.5: Discussing "Rebirth: New Orleans"

Power outages aside, the political education stage proved to be incredibly challenging within the constraints of the study. Due to absences, our conversations often suffered for a lack of continuity. It felt difficult to build up to the robust understanding of critical social theory that would be needed for data analysis. We had many in-depth conversations about concepts like systemic racism, and how historical processes like redlining and pushback against desegregation has shaped New Orleans schools. These conversations often felt dynamic and impactful, with youth making new connections that helped to contextualize their life experiences. However, students also came into the program with differing perspectives that were in conflict with one another. For example, while most of the students came into the program espousing feminist ideas, at least one student struggled with the idea of feminism and frequently derailed conversations about gendered inequality. As a facilitator, I often struggled to
find an even balance between honoring the lived experiences of some students while making room for the growth of others.

Another challenge was balancing the line between centering joy and centering political education. Both goals sometimes felt at odds with each other. For example, in one activity that was supposed to center hopeful solutions to the problems we identified, one student offered that we just make schools completely race neutral, without anybody mentioning race, so he could just be a person and not always seen first as a Black person. As I tried to explain how this approach usually results in new problems shaped by colorblind racism, he seemed to shrink with disappointment. I paused and offered care, affirming that looking at history and the present for what they are can be painful. At that point, the conversation felt too heavy, the problems felt too great, and we decided instead to transition into something that felt more fun.

Although measurement of critical consciousness was not part of this study design - and I suspect it would be difficult to measure - the stories that the students ultimately wrote and the data analysis process we engaged in suggest that the group was nonetheless working from a critical social theory framework. Their stories demonstrate attention to race, class, and gender and the ways they have shaped their education experiences (described further in Chapter 5). Despite the uneven execution of the political education process, this outcome suggests to me that the effort had an impact.

3.5.4 Selecting A Problem Collaboratively

Youth worked collaboratively to select research problems within the frame of "Storytelling New Orleans Schools." Mirra, Garcia and Morrell (2015) discuss the utility of the adult facilitator choosing a guiding frame for YPAR projects to ensure that they reach successful ends. Augmented by the curriculum, I discussed with youth the reasons why I chose this subject and encouraged them to think expansively about what social change issues fit within this frame. Youth were asked what stories they feel
are missing from school decision-makers' perspectives. We also discussed who those
decision-makers might be, and what stories need to be told to create change. Like
many other YPAR projects, selecting a social problem happened simultaneously with
other stages of the YPAR process (Mirra et al., 2015; Rubin et al., 2017; Cammarota,
2017). As youth cultivated their awareness of the social and historical processes that
shaped their experiences, research problems began to emerge organically from the
workshop conversations. The use of critical pedagogy means that each new learning
experience was also an opportunity to discuss one’s own experiences and how new
knowledge fits into those experiences. Guided by these priority-setting conversations,
the students then crafted comic narratives that highlighted the issues they felt most
important.

3.5.5 Collecting and Creating Data

Concurrent with curriculum that cultivates critical consciousness, the fourth stage
of programming also focused on developing storytelling and narrative skills, which
were needed for autoethnographic data collection and analysis (Jones, 2005; Cahnmann-
Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017). Youth learned about the many uses of political art and
began discussing the ways their graphic narratives in this project could act as politi-
cal art. Discussions also compared and contrasted arts-based research methods with
the traditional research methods youth learned in their previous studies.

Based on the conversations we engaged in during the political education process,
youth collaboratively discussed themes that emerged in order to guide their personal
narratives. Working from the themes that emerged from their discussions, they be-
gan to loosely storyboard narratives that reflected those themes, using drawings or
written outlines. Then, they workshopped their storyboards with the group and re-
vised. Finally, youth used the library computer lab to write their comics scripts in
MS Word. These narratives became the autoethnographic data used to answer this
study’s research questions.
3.5.6 Analyzing Data Collaboratively

The completed comic narratives became the primary data of the project. After each youth produced a short comic book story, we engaged in collaborative analysis of their works to offer additional context, themes, and frames for understanding their comic narratives. This study employed two youth-friendly approaches to data analysis: the SHOWED method of analysis, a Freirean-based approach to analyzing visual data commonly used in participatory photovoice projects (Wang & Burris, 1997) and the YouthGo method, developed by Stacy, Acevedo-Polakovich, and Rosewood (2018). Used together, the two data analysis approaches facilitated a data analysis process that was deeply youth-centered and even fun for them to participate in.
3.5.6.1 The Youth Go Analysis Method

This study utilized a variation of the Youth Go method, a collaborative process developed by participatory action researchers Stacy, Acevedo-Polakovich, and Rosewood (2018) with the goal of facilitating developmentally appropriate youth input processes when time-constraints are in place. The youth go method proved to be exceptionally youthful given its attention to the time limited nature of youth engagement. Given that this project was limited to 12 sessions due to the availability of students and student stipends, a collaborative analysis process that could happen within one of our sessions was warranted. The Youth Go method was developed in conversation with youth participatory action research processes, which is reflected in the way that it mirrors many of the common processes of YPAR.

The Youth Go method as it is articulated by Stacy, Acevedo-Polakovich, and Rosewood (2018) uses a series of 5 stages (see figure below) within the scope of a single group session. The first stage is climate setting, where the purpose of the process is described, either introduced to one another, and ground rules are set. The second stage is generating, where question prompts on the topic topic are given to youth to facilitate conversation. Students write their responses to these prompts on sticky notes, and the adult facilitator collects those notes and shares them with the group on flip chart paper. The facilitator leads a discussion about the themes, where youth have an opportunity to discuss this their answers with one another and clarify meanings. The third stage is organizing, where youth work together to organize the sticky note responses by themes. In Step 4, youth discuss the themes that they identified and place them into overarching categories. In this step, youth also have the opportunity to verify the validity of these themes and categories discursively amongst themselves. In the final stage, Stage 5, the adult facilitator revisits the original social change goals of the exercise, debriefing the process, offering opportunities for any remaining additions or reflections, and thanking youth for their time.
3.5.6.2 The SHOWED Analysis Method

Although Youth Go was the primary mode of data analysis we utilized for this project, we also drew from some of the strategies of the SHOWED method of participatory data analysis developed for photovoice projects by Wang and Burris (1997). The acronym SHOWED stands for: See, Happening, Our, Why, Empowerment/Evaluation, and Do. The acronyms is used to facilitate dialogue amongst participants about the following questions as they pertain to their visual data: What do you See here? What’s really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation/strength exist? What can/should we Do about it? (see Table 2).

Although SHOWED was originally developed for photovoice projects, it was selected as a useful guiding analytical framework for this project for several reasons. First, SHOWED is a straightforward and easily understandable analytical process that has been successfully used with school age youth in a number of projects (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004; Hergenrather et. al, 2009; Ohmer & Owens, 2013), making it a developmentally appropriate approach to data analysis. SHOWED was developed with a participatory, arts-based, visual method in mind, making it uniquely well-suited to analysis of our collaborative graphic autoethnographies. SHOWED allows youth to interpret their own images, ensuring a high level of participation and youth voice in the data analysis stage. Finally, SHOWED is designed to be flexible;
it is common practice for the method to be modified to meet the needs of a given group of participants and project goals, making it an excellent fit for this project. For the purposes of this project, we utilized SHOWED within Youth Go Step 2, when generating themes.

Table 3.2: SHOWED Data Analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SHOWED Analysis Mnemonic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>What do you SEE here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>What is really HAPPENING here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>How does this relate to OUR lives?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>WHY does this problem exist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>How can we be EMPOWERED by this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>What can we DO about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5.6.3 Our Application of Youth Go and SHOWED

Data analysis began in one of the final sessions of our project. On this particular session only three out of seven participants were present. This was due to a variety of conflicts including prom, an out-of-state birthday trip, and graduation. Despite the low attendance, we still ultimately decided to follow the procedures described here in order to ensure that collaborative data analysis would occur before the end of the project. Despite the limitations of a smaller than usual group size, we were able to move through the steps of data analysis as planned and our small team was able to produce themes and codes from the data analysis process. Here, I describe how we implemented the steps of the Youth Go process and the changes we made to fit our project.

Step 1 - Climate Setting. I began the session by revisiting our social change goals for this project and the ways that research can be used to create policy narratives that influence changes in policy. I reminded them that within the context of this
research project their stories are both stories and data, and that our collaborative
analysis of this data would make it easier for stakeholders in education policy like
education researchers and educators to understand the meaning behind their stories.
I tried to frame this process as a way for youth to ensure that any of the meaning
that they intended was not missed, while also making sure that they’re stories were
not misinterpreted. This goal became the guiding framework of our data analysis
process.

Step 2 - Generating. For the generating stage, we used strategies from Youth Go
and the SHOWED approach. I began this stage by sharing the SHOWED acronym
with the youth on a powerpoint slide. I explained that we would be looking at our
stories as data, using this acronym to help bring our attention to different aspects of
the stories. Then, I passed out printed copies of everyone’s story to each student.

Rather than using question prompts, like in the original Youth Go method, the
narratives became the prompts to respond to. Each student read their narrative
out loud while everyone else listened carefully. Students were instructed to reference
SHOWED during this process, listening for clues that might help us answer the
questions from the acronym. As we listened, we also read along on our copies of
the narrative, taking notes and highlighting as we went. Then, we each wrote down
the words and phrases that stood out to us on sticky notes. We filled our classroom
whiteboard with these sticky notes. For those students who were not able to attend,
I read their stories out loud on their behalf and the group also took notes on their
stories. After each story was read, we discussed what we wrote down and talked
about why those themes stood out to us.

Step 3 - Organizing. Once we had generated sticky notes from each story, we
moved on to the organizing them. With seven stories and four us taking notes, we
generated somewhere between 60 and 90 sticky notes, which we stuck onto several
large, rolling whiteboards at random. Comparing different sticky notes to each other,
students then organized the notes into clusters of ideas that felt related to one another. As the clusters of notes grew, students would sometimes reorganize notes they had already grouped in response to a clarifying picture of what the data was showing. When one sticky note felt like it should fit into multiple clusters, we either made a note with white board markers indicating the different places it could go. This was a lengthy process, and one where all four of us were mostly quiet. I did check in about whether they were bored, but they assured me that they actually found the process fun - which I hoped for!

**Step 4 - Selecting.** When at last we felt each sticky note had been properly organized, I facilitated a conversation about the clusters. I read aloud some of the notes from each cluster, asking students what overarching categories they believed would best represent the clusters. The subsequent conversation allowed students to collaboratively identify and propose overarching categories that would best represent the clusters of sticky notes. By engaging in this collective sense-making process, students actively participated in the knowledge construction and categorization of their own experiences. This facilitated dialogue not only fostered critical thinking and analytical skills but also empowered students to take ownership of their narratives and contribute to the research process.
The resulting categories and the conversations about them inform the key findings of the project (illustrated and discussed in Chapter 5). The final themes generated were: Grief and Death; Adults who act like adversaries (instead of advocates); a harsh, punitive school environment; and the high cost of change. I later reviewed the stickies that had not been categorized collaboratively, and added "Navigating Dehumanizing Perceptions, Policies, and Environments" as a theme to capture the varied experiences that fell within that cluster.

We also revisited the selection process themes on the last session of the project, when all the students were present. Students who were not present were able to review these themes for validity and offer feedback or additions. Storm and Miles, whose stories had not been complete at the time of data analysis, wanted to make sure that the gendered experiences in their stories were represented in the themes. We worked...
together to add the theme "School experiences shaped by gender, race, and class" to capture the way intersectionality shapes all of the stories in the anthology. At this point, they were also able to confirm that the theme that I added, "Navigating Dehumanizing Perceptions, Policies, and Environments" felt appropriate to capture all remaining uncategorized ideas.

**Step 5 - Debrief and Discussion.** During the debrief and discussions stage of data analysis, the SHOWED method was employed to facilitate meaningful dialogue among participants as they reflected on the identified themes. The process began by collectively examining categories we created and asking the question, "What do you See here?" This step allowed participants to share their initial observations and interpretations, fostering a shared understanding of the data.

Next, youth delved deeper into the data by engaging with the questions, "What’s really Happening here?" and "How does this relate to Our lives?" These questions encouraged critical analysis of the underlying dynamics and circumstances depicted in the visuals, prompting participants to consider the broader context and systemic influences. In an animated and emotional conversation, youth drew connections between the identified themes and their personal experiences, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the relevance and impact of the data on their lives and communities.

Because we had spent much of the project sessions talking about the root causes and underlying factors contributing to the identified theme, the next question, "Why does this problem exist?" was not covered as in-depth in our debrief. However, when participants engaged with the question, "What can/should we Do about it?", it revealed what I consider a strong emotional shift and development of critical consciousness for the youth who were present. They shared about how this process made them want to become the adults that were missing in their own lives. Although the purpose of this part of SHOWED is about brainstorming actionable interventions, I chose to allow the conversation to linger with the feeling of efficacy and empowerment that
was coming up for the individual students. As I will describe later, the social transformation step of the process felt a little overwhelming to students in this project, but the feeling of being seen and seeing others more clearly was a clear positive and empowering outcome for the students.

Using the SHOWED method for the debrief and discussions stage of data analysis facilitated a comprehensive and participatory exploration of the themes, encouraging critical thinking, collective insight, and internal reflection. The SHOWED method proved effective in enabling both individual analysis and group discussions, allowing participants to critically examine the structural and systemic processes influencing their data. By linking data analysis to their own personal empowerment, the SHOWED method aligned with the objectives of this project, which aimed to leverage data analysis as a tool for fostering transformative social action.

3.5.7 The Illustration Process

After this period of comics creation and collaborative analysis through discussion, the comic book narratives were submitted to professional comic book artists, to be illustrated and published online and in print. The process of professional illustration offered a number of benefits to the project. First, the collaborative process encouraged youth to write the stories and they can imagine, rather than just the stories they believe they are capable of drawing. Second, collaboration with artists offered youth a unique opportunity to connect with creative professionals who are invested in the social change efforts of their work. This fulfilled the dual goals of YPAR not only to generate data but to nurture youth’s socioemotional and socio-political development. Finally, working with professionally trained artists helped youth create a knowledge product that is accessible and widely distributable, a pragmatic choice that allows the impact of youth’s stories to reach a wider audience. Youth retain authorship and ownership over these completed, professionally illustrated comics.
3.5.8 Developing Policy Arguments & Sharing with Public Audiences

Towards the conclusion of the project, the initial plan was to collaboratively develop policy arguments based on the findings. Fatigue ultimately prevented us from proceeding with this process. However, I want to suggest that this outcome is not necessarily a shortcoming; instead, it embodies a deliberate and purposeful aspect of the project. The flexibility to adapt our study goals to meet the needs of the students and align with their demanding school schedules was a crucial element in ensuring their active participation.

I want to also consider the possibility that the students' disinterest in crafting policy recommendations may be an indirect way of asking for fair distribution of responsibility when it comes to addressing the problems adults have collectively created for them. It makes sense that adults should take on the burden of enacting meaningful change based on the youth's collective wisdom, given the disproportionate power, time, access to resources, and understanding of policy we hold. With that consideration in mind, it is worth noting that this project also extends beyond the completion of the dissertation as we aim to share the comics with the community. Community-engaged distribution strategies to be explored might include organizing community events, partnering with local libraries, schools, and community centers, as well as collaborating with youth organizations and advocacy groups. This forthcoming advocacy step presents an additional opportunity to fulfill the "social action" piece of YPAR, ensuring that the comics youth have written reach a wide audience and have a meaningful impact.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1 Reading "Twisted Garden"

In this section, we draw from the precedents set by Sousanis (YEAR) and Flowers (YEAR), by presenting the results of our research process in a fully illustrated form. The beauty of comics, as I’ve touched on in earlier chapters, is their strong narrative form and their intuitive readability. They invite the reader in, and invite the reader to co-create a reality from the juxtaposition of text and pictures.

These stories aren’t strictly memoir or autobiography, and are not an attempt to capture an objective reality. Instead, they are works of art, anchored in true experiences, true feelings, real hopes and genuine anguish. In chapter 5, I will share the themes from our collaborative data analysis of these stories. However, I want to invite you to first sit with these stories for a moment, not only as data, but as an earnest effort from our young scholars to communicate their experiences in a way that might encourage others to listen. The students crafted these stories because they wanted you (yes, you, the reader) to read them and interpret them and take away some meaning that could

The students have titled this collection of stories "Twisted Garden." The process of naming it was perhaps the most difficult point in the process, featuring the most heated debates we’d had in all 12 sessions. Some titles were starker and bleaker; others sweeter and sadder. But the students arrived at "Twisted Garden" because they felt it represented both the twisted nature of their school environment, and their capacity to grow despite it. Decision makers, educators, and researchers might ask ourselves what efforts we can take to enrich the soil.
ABOUT

7 NEW ORLEANS STUDENTS. 7 ARTISTS. 7 STORIES.

The stories in this collection aren't strictly memoir or autobiography, and are not an attempt to capture an objective reality. Instead, they are works of art, anchored in true experiences, true feelings, real hopes and genuine anguish. We invite you to sit with these stories for a moment, understanding them as an earnest effort from our young scholars to communicate their experiences in a way that might encourage others to listen. The students crafted these stories because they wanted you (yes, you, the reader) to read them and interpret them and take away some meaning that could create change.

The students have titled this collection of stories "Twisted Garden." They felt this title represented both the twisted nature of their school environment, and their capacity to grow despite it. Decision makers, educators, and researchers might ask ourselves what efforts we can take to enrich the soil.
STORY 1

SENTENCED TO SCHOOL

By "Blade"
Art by Abimbola Oladeji
SHANE HOLMES, I HEREBY SENTENCE YOU TO...

12 YEARS OF SCHOOL! WITH NO CHANCE OF PAROLE!
MIGHT WANNA SMILE KID. YOU WOHN'T GET ANOTHER PHOTO.

IT'S LIKE MY ENTIRE LIFE CHANGED...

FLASH

IN A FLASH.......

I'VE BEEN HERE FOR 11 YEARS.

ONE YEAR LEFT.

OUR TEACHERS ARE RUTHLESS, AND CRUEL.
But in a weird and twisted way, I think they are just as much of prisoners as we are.

You need school to prepare you for the real world! Think of it as an intervention, to ensure that you have a bright future!

Everyday, they remind us that school shouldn't be looked at as prison, or punishment. But somehow, I find that very hard to believe.
EVEVERYDAY, WE LOSE SOMEONE ELSE.

NO! TASHA WHY DID YOU HAVE TO LEAVE ME!

THE TWO LOVES OF MY LIFE... GONE! WE WERE SO CLOSE!

I WOULD BE LYING IF I SAID I HADN'T THOUGHT ABOUT DOING WHAT TASHA DID.

BECAUSE I KNOW THAT ONCE I FINALLY GET OUT OF HERE, THERE WILL BE NO MORE SUICIDES. NO MORE BEATDOWNS. NO MORE GANG VIOLENCE.

I'M WILLING TO GET THAT WE ALL HAVE.

BUT I KEEP MY SANITY. I REMEMBER WHO I AM.
I'LL FINALLY BE FREE.
STORY TWO

BULLYING FOR WHAT?

WRITTEN BY “LUNELLA”
ILLUSTRATED BY WAYNE SPENCER
THE CLASS IS DISMISSED.

TIANA!

WHAT KEVIN?

YOU LOOK DIRTY AS HELL.
Yeah.

With those dirty ass shoes on.

You guys have been messing with A for two years now. I've gotten you suspended.

Had a meeting with y'all and your parents.

Like what else will it take!?
WHAT'S WRONG HUNNY?

MOM!

I'M JUST READY TO GIVE UP.

IT'S SO HARD AT SCHOOL. THE SAME BOYS KEEP MESSING WITH ME FOR NO REASON.

DON'T CRY TIANA, I WILL GO TO THE SCHOOL TO SEE WHAT I CAN DO.

BUT FOR NOW, CALL YOUR SIBLINGS IN HERE SO WE CAN EAT.
SO, WHAT'S GOING ON WITH TIANA?

TIANA TOLD YOU GUYS BEFORE THAT SHE WAS GETTING BULLIED

AND YOU GUYS DID NOTHING ABOUT IT.

I WANT TO FIX THINGS

NOT JUST FOR MY CHILD

BUT FOR THE KIDS WHO DON'T HAVE PARENTS TO SPEAK UP FOR THEM.

EXACTLY! THINGS NEED TO CHANGE!

OK SO HERE'S WHAT WE'RE GOING TO DO. THE SCHOOL BOARD AND I...

YOU SAID THAT ONCE BEFORE. NOW YOU GUYS ARE GOING TO LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO SAY.
People bully others because they’re either going through things or feel bad about themselves.

We need to get them help.

It’s not going to be that easy.

It actually will be that easy.

From now on, if a kid bullies someone then they have to talk to the social worker. We will also hire better social workers.

So kids feel comfortable talking to them.

But what about kids who get bullied and don’t speak up for themselves?

We can raise awareness about mental health and bullying.

I hope this works because our kids can not continue to live like this while they are in school.

We will also reach out to parents to make sure kids get the help they need.

Come on Tiana, let’s get you some new shoes.
CHANGE IS INEVITABLE

By "Riri"
Art by Alisha Monnin
RA'MAYA, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU.
WE WERE BEGINNING TO GET WORRIED WITH YOUR ABSENCES.

IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU IN THE BUILDING AGAIN.

ACTUALLY, THAT'S WHAT I CAME HERE TO DISCUSS.
MOST OF MY 'UNEXCUSED' ABSENCES HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF A RECENT DEATH IN MY FAMILY.

I APOLOGIZE FOR YOUR LOSS BUT THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO.

MY MOTHER CALLED TO MAKE THAT AWARE AND YET THEY COUNTED AGAINST ME.

WHY?

UNLESS YOU'VE GIVEN ME A DOCTOR'S NOTE OR SHOW SIGNS OF PHYSICAL INJURY, THERE'S NOTHING THAT CAN BE CHANGED ABOUT THOSE ABSENCES.
With all due respect, that makes no sense whatsoever!

I understand you're upset but I would appreciate it if you watched your tone.

There's nothing I can do.

My mental health matters just as much as my physical health.

And if it were you, you wouldn't even be sitting in this office today!

Your attendance is very important for you to graduate and there's nothing left to be said.

Do you understand?

That's bullshit!
It's like she didn't even hear me.

I don't think there's much you can do.

It's your judgment against hers and obviously hers is gonna outweigh yours.

You're right.

But maybe if it was the school's judgment against hers!

That look means you've got an idea and that means it's either gonna be really really good or really really bad.

That's why I've got you, you're loud. No offense of course, but you're going to be useful to start something, not a riot of course, more like a protest.

Think about it, we live in New Orleans, people die everyday. We have over 900 kids in this school and there's bound to be at least 10 of them who had the same issue as me. I'm not enough to spark up a change, but I can sure as hell encourage one.

Okay, good idea, but you've gotta make the message stick or else it's not gonna change anything.

None taken, I knew my impeccable communication skills were useful for something.
A FEW DAYS LATER...

WE AREN'T HARMING ANYONE, ALL WE WANT IS TO BE HEARD, EVERY STUDENT IN FRONT OF YOU RIGHT NOW HAS LOST LOVED ONES WHO WERE TRULY IMPORTANT TO THEM.

THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO REASON FOR ANY OF YOU TO BE OUT HERE LIKE THIS!

I'M CALLING SECURITY TO HAVE YOU ALL DISPERSED IMMEDIATELY, THERE WILL BE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES!

ALL WE'RE ASKING IS THAT THE ADULTS IN THE BUILDING STOP TREATING OUR MENTAL HEALTH AS IF IT WAS ONLY SOMETHING WE MADE UP!

BECAUSE OF A FEW MISSED ABSENCES, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND IT'S—

I UNDERSTAND ENOUGH, YOU DISRESPECTED A WONDERFUL ESTABLISHMENT AND EARNED NOTHING IN RETURN BUT A PERMANENT MARK ON YOUR RECORD!

I CAN'T EVEN EXPLAIN HOW UPSET I AM. YOU WON'T BE BACK IN THIS BUILDING FOR ANOTHER 10 DAYS, AND I'VE SPOKEN TO BOTH YOUR PARENTS ABOUT IT.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

END
STORY FOUR

MAGIC CROSSROADS

WRITTEN BY “STORM”
ILLUSTRATED BY Y SANDERS
NEW ORLEANS, LA

A GIRL WALKED HOME FROM SCHOOL.

AND SOMEONE ELSE FOLLOWED.

A CHILL RAN DOWN HER SPINE.

BUT HER FEAR AWAKENED A POWER WITHIN:

A UNIQUE AND SPECIAL ABILITY -

- THAT PROTECTED HER.
DEERWOOD SCHOOL FOR “GIFTED” CHILDREN.

YOU’RE BEING EXPelled.

WE HAVE A ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY FOR VIOLENCE.
EVEN MAGICAL SCHOOLS HAD SEXIST BOYS.

THE POWERS WERE NEW...

...BUT THE HARASSMENT WAS THE SAME.

BUT THIS TIME SHE COULD PROTECT HERSELF -

- OR SO SHE THOUGHT -
*SMIRK*

VIOLENCE IS NEVER -
MY FATHER WILL HEAR -

IT WILL BE OKAY..

I'M GONNA PACK UP MY LOCKER.

TIME FOR PLAN B.
However we dress - wherever we go -

Safety for all

Equality now!

Yes means yes and no means no!!

My body, my choice!

I may have jumped to a hasty conclusion.

Let's make this school safer for everyone.
STORY 5

THE NEVER-ENDING CYCLE

By "Misty"
Art by Wren Rios
We need to get this situation to calm down.
If you make any sudden moves we'll shoot!
The school expected us to be there the next day.

Waking up like nothing happened.

To continue our classes...

As if we didn't just lose a friend in the night.

They wanted us to just "get back to work"...

But we couldn't.
Quran was having complications at home...

We wanted him to stop.

But that was his only way to feed his siblings.

He was shot and left to bleed out.

I was so hurt... he was like a brother to me...

He promised he would stop.

He just didn't have enough time...
The Next Day

My baby, my baby, why Lord? Just bring him back one more time.

Here lies Qur'an Williams. He was loved by many, but just a young boy down the wrong path due to this bad environment.

Babies are dying because of this broken system, we need to change.

This was the environment we grew up in.

We knew it would never change.

Qur'an Williams' Mother Speaks.
STORY 6

MORE THAN A MOMENT

By "Miles"
Art by Tintin Pantoja
MORE THAN A MOMENT

STORY: DERRELL JEFFERSON
ART: TINTIN PANTOJA
DON'T BUMP INTO ME.
The way you acted was completely unacceptable.

I know, but I recently lost someone close to me and I'm sort of on edge.

That's no excuse for the way you acted. I'm suspending you for a week.

Jason is already aware that his actions were wrong but the school isn't focused on that. They are focused on punishment and not the cause.
The girls were punished for being emotional and speaking up about something that is wrong in order to make sure the teachers get "respect". Is that okay?
THE ART OF LIFE

By "Shuri"
Art by Jordyn Flood
One day, a woman and a man gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

They named her Phoenix.
Phoenix’s parents wanted her in school immediately, so they enrolled her into the best school they could find.

And instantly, Phoenix’s teachers began to notice that she had a hard time paying attention in class.

She was taking a liking to drawing instead.

And soon, her grades began to fail because of it.
To take her mind off of struggling in school, she drew and painted any time she could.

But, her parents were not too fond of her talents.

Until you get your grades up, you will not be doing any of these ridiculous drawings anymore.
Not wanting to disappoint her parents, Phoenix put all of her focus into her schoolwork, idly earning B's and C's.

She went through all of her years of school focusing on grades, seemingly losing her passion in art.

...And she went on to college, repeating the same cycle.

...And after college, she went off to work in her hometown.
Each day on her way home from work, she passed by this art shop that displayed beautiful pieces of art. But she never went in.

Until one day she did.

That one visit encouraged her to pursue her passion and what she really loved.

...but it was too late.
CHAPTER 5: THEMES AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I revisit the original research questions and discuss the answers we found in these stories through our collaborative data analysis, followed by recommendations at the school level and local policy level to create meaningful change around these issues. In an effort to not privilege this section over the illustrated one that came before it, the research questions and answers are presented in illustrated format, crafted by Polish designer Hanna Siata with some art curation and design notes from me.

My authorial voice in this chapter is intentionally limited. One of the primary goals of this project to avoid the act of "translation" and prioritize the voices of the participants themselves. By limiting my own voice in the discussion of their findings, the project seeks to uphold and privilege the authentic perspectives and experiences of the youth involved. The use of illustration to convey the themes helps to maintain the integrity of the participants’ voices. The themes as they are presented provide a direct representation of the participants’ thoughts, emotions, and experiences. Through this visual medium, the youth voice remains unfiltered, unaltered, and true to their own lived realities.

Engaging in this intentional subversion of authorship conventions challenges the traditional notion of expertise and emphasizes the importance of collaborative and inclusive research practices. It acknowledges that expertise is not solely held by the researcher, but is distributed among the participants, who possess unique insights and knowledge derived from their lived experiences. In this way, the illustrated discussion chapter represents a conscious effort to actively engage in reshaping research practices, center the voices of marginalized communities, and foster a more inclusive
and equitable approach to knowledge production.

5.0.1 Research Questions

This illustrated discussion will address the following research questions, which guided the study.

**Research Question 1.** What counter-stories do youth have to tell about their schools and their own wellbeing?

**Research Question 2.** Based on these stories, what do they consider important for New Orleans policymakers to know?
5.1 Grief and Death

5.2 Navigating Dehumanizing Perceptions, Policies, And Environments
5.3 Adults Who Act Like Adversaries (Instead Of Advocates)
5.4 School Experiences Shapes by Gender, Race, and Class

5.5 A Harsh, Punitive School Environment
5.6 The High Cost of Change
5.7 Student Goals for Policy

Research question 2 asks, "Based on these stories, what do they consider important for New Orleans policymakers to know?" This research question is partially answered within the answer to question one. By answering, "What counter-stories do youth have to tell about their schools and their own wellbeing?", we do get a sense of what youth want people in positions of power to know. Each story was carefully crafted to highlight an aspect of their school experiences that they felt was not fully understood by adults, and that needed to change. The arts-based aspect of this project invites us as readers to participate in a level of data analysis as we engage with their stories. Although they have not offered specific policy recommendations, they have shared what they consider important.

However, this project did have other aspirations for answering Question 2 more clearly and directly, which we did not meet due to study constraints. Relatedly, the "social action" piece of the participatory action project has not yet been carried out in its entirety. We want our book to be a tool for change at the city level, with clear policy recommendations, but we did not achieve that goal. This is largely because of logistics and time. The Center for Youth Equity at Tulane University generously paid my participant-researchers for their time and expertise, but the availability of stipends is not limitless. I have already asked this group of teenagers for 12 precious Saturdays of their high school experience, and although they have enjoyed the process, I am mindful of the ways this work competes for their free time.

Still, we have achieved community level change within our own small YPAR community. We created a space where youth felt safe for a time. They were able to share stories they hadn’t shared with anyone else before. They were able to contextualize their experiences and learn that they are not alone. They will be published authors, and they are proud of their work. This is meaningful, small-scale change with immeasurable ripple effects.
Additionally, there are answers to this research question yet to come, that expand beyond the scope of this project. We want to produce this book at a large scale, with the help of a publisher for distribution. I envision events where youth can speak about their experiences, including local town-halls and travel to conferences. Additionally, many of the youth will take on leadership roles with the Center for Youth Equity at Tulane, positioning them to continue their work and cultivate their skills as advocates and leaders. Of course, others will go off to college in other states. Still others will probably may other jobs and join new extracurricular programming. The benefit of the collaborative graphic autoethnography is that the book can travel with them to their new contexts. The end of programming offers closure on this step of the process, but the book persists as a testament to their experience and skill in storytelling for advocacy.
CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS

6.1 "The Truth is Never Despairing"

When "Shuri" shared her story with the group, she nervously asked if it was too depressing for the book. In her story, a girl with a passion for art is pushed through the motions of school and into college, continuously being forced to deny her artistic inclinations. By the time she finally returns to art, it’s too late - she is struck by a car and dies before she has the chance to rekindle her passion. I asked her if her story felt true to her experience, and she said absolutely. She said that (minus the car), this was her lived experience. All her life, the most life-affirming passion she had was deemed the least important, most trivial use of her time. She was shuffled into college prep programming that emphasized STEM and other "smart" choices, while warning about the dire consequences of a misstep on the path there. The undercurrent of this story is that Shuri is a young Black woman, and the adults who care for her were giving advice based on the world as they knew it to be - one that is hostile to Black girls and artists alike, and one that would not treat her kindly if she made the mistake of leaning too far into what brought her joy.

We told her that the story was not too depressing. In fact - we needed it in the book. Her decision to end the story with the main character’s death seemed to give others permission to explore different depths, and seemed to shape the direction of the rest of the stories. By the end of the project almost everyone had a story about death or emotional pain that was deeply influenced by their own personal lives. Every now and then during the 12 sessions, someone self-consciously chuckled about how depressing the book was - but no one wanted to change it. It was bleak, but it was also true.
Derrick Bell once shared that during the writing process of his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, his publisher described the book as "unremittingly despairing" (Greenhouse, 2000). After all, the book argues that racism in America is irreparably permanent; that no effort to change course will be successful. To his publisher, Bell responded: "No, you don’t understand. For a black person in this society, the truth is never despairing" (Bell, cited in Greenhouse, 2000). Higgins (1992) beautifully summarized his position, writing "one is transformed not by the hope for victory, but by the possibility of transcendence through struggle" (p. 689). This also rings true. We tell stories not because they will necessarily change things, but because the effort of trying to change things is in itself personally transformative. The act of testifying fortifies the witness. That has been my hope for this project, and for my co-researchers: that they would share their truth, and the truth would hold them.

6.2 Discussion

In this dissertation, I have presented a youth participatory action research project that involved using comics-based research methods with New Orleans youth as a way of uncovering and sharing their counter-stories about the education system. In this section, I will discuss how this project contributed to the study of critical race theory (CRT) in education, youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a methodology, and our understanding of youth experience in New Orleans schools.

6.2.1 Contributions to Critical Race Theory in Education

One of the main contributions of this project is to offer a new perspective on the use of fiction within the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT in education. While the roots of CRT lie in the evocative fictional narratives of Derrick Bell, use of the counter-storytelling tenet in the social sciences has often been limited to using qualitative interviews, personal narratives or testimonies as the main source of data and evidence. However, as I have argued in this dissertation, fiction offers us an extremely powerful
analytic tool that can overcome some of the challenges and limitations of personal narratives and enhance the potential of CRT in education.

First, fiction offers us a way of practicing counter-storytelling that is not only a method of exposing and challenging the dominant narratives that oppress and marginalize people of color, but also a form of resistance and empowerment that allows the storyteller to reclaim their agency and identity. By co-creating fictional stories with youth, we were able to engage them in a creative and collaborative process that honored their voices, perspectives, and experiences. We were also able to explore themes and issues that were relevant and meaningful to them, such as racism, violence, trauma, resilience, hope, and justice. Through fiction, we were able to amplify their counter-stories and make them visible to a wider audience.

Second, fiction offers us a way of practicing counter-storytelling that provides safety and protection for the storytellers and the researchers. Youth in the study had every reason to believe that a new adult in their life would not treat their stories with care, or that people who interacted with their stories would not engage with them in good faith. And even now, there is no guarantee that once these stories make it into the world, people will engage with them in good faith. But what these youth have as protection is fiction. They do not have to claim that these are their own personal stories. They do not have to corroborate every single fact in their memory. All they have to do is share the emotional truth. And so I think that fiction gave them some safety, which, for me, is one of the most critical things that critical race methodologists can do.

Third, fiction offers us a way of practicing counter-storytelling that has a high level of validity and resonance. Traditionally, social scientists avoid using fiction for fear of being called unrigorous or being critiqued for bias. However, what I think we have demonstrated in this project is that despite these concerns, fiction allows us to convey truth and describe reality in a way that is more nuanced, complex, and diverse than
personal narratives. Fiction allows us to represent not just one singular story but to suggest a more generalized experience that other people can see themselves in. Fiction also allows us to use literary devices such as metaphors, symbols, imagery, dialogue, and humor to capture the attention and imagination of the readers and listeners. By using fiction as a form of counter-storytelling, we were able to create stories that ring true and have a high level of validity.

6.2.2 Contributions to the YPAR Methodology

This project also contributes to the YPAR methodology by showing how comics-based research can be used as an innovative and engaging method for involving youth in social justice research. Comics-based research (CBR), as implemented in this project, offers YPAR a new avenue for achieving its goals of allowing youth to participate actively and meaningfully in all stages of the research process, from defining the research question, to collecting and analyzing data, to disseminating and using the findings. One of the main advantages of comics-based research for YPAR that I have demonstrated here is its developmental appropriateness for youth. It allows youth to use their creative skills and talents to express themselves and communicate their messages effectively and creatively, which aligns well with their developmental stage. Another advantage of comics-based research is that it makes the process of data analysis more fun and accessible for youth, creating a pathway for more youth involvement in the data analysis stage of YPAR more broadly. As I have argued in this dissertation, the creation of comics themselves is an act of social critique and analysis that involves selecting, interpreting, and representing data in a creative and meaningful way. This process mirrors the process of traditional qualitative analysis, but in a way that is more enjoyable for youth. The comic book product also served as a tangible and attractive way to disseminate and share the research findings with various audiences, especially other youth and community members who may relate to or learn from the counter stories. Therefore, this dissertation offers researchers a novel
and powerful approach to YPAR that can empower youth as researchers, creatives, and agents of change.

6.2.3 Contributions to the study of New Orleans Schools

Finally, this project contributes to our understanding of youth in New Orleans schools by revealing their counter-stories that challenge the dominant narratives of the education system. The stories that New Orleans youth have to tell about their schools and their well-being reveal a complex and troubling picture of how they experience and cope with the effects of racism, violence, and trauma in their educational environments. These counter-stories also show how New Orleans youth are not hopeless or helpless, but hopeful and resourceful people who have dreams and potentials for themselves and their futures. These counter-stories also show how New Orleans youth are not problems or threats, but assets and allies who have solutions and contributions for their schools and society. These stories also show how they resist and challenge the oppressive and dehumanizing conditions that they face, and how they envision and demand change.

6.2.3.1 Anti-Blackness, School Malaise, and Melancholia

In this section, I discuss how these stories relate to the existing literature on anti-Blackness and grief. Meaningfully engaging with this city’s enduring legacy of racial trauma and its corrosive effect on student well-being requires us to question and resist the neoliberal logic of schooling that prioritizes efficiency, accountability, and competition over equity, democracy, and collaboration.

Education scholar Michael J Dumas (2014) studies the enduring grief and suffering of Black people in the face of anti-Black racism and violence within the education system. He has offered the intersection of school malaise and racial melancholia as a powerful frame for understanding this suffering. Racial melancholia is defined as the weariness borne from the permanence of racism. For black students, this melancholia
leads to a developing consciousness that the promise of educational opportunity is routinely untrue for them (Dumas, 2014). This disconnect leads to school malaise, where students understandably disengage from the education system (Dumas, 2014). The stories in this dissertation illustrate how school malaise and racial melancholia intersect in their educational experiences. They describe an environment where they have very little agency or autonomy over their learning or their lives. They feel that they are constantly surveilled and harshly judged by the adults in their schools, who see them as threats or problems rather than as human beings. They also feel that they are subjected to harsh and punitive school policies and practices that often feel disproportionate or unfair. They experience a sense of alienation from their schools and from themselves, as they struggle to find purpose or meaning in their education.

The grief the youth in our study have described is inseparable from anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness shapes a culture which treats Black death as normal or inevitable (Wilderson 2010, 2020; Sexton 2016). The youth in our study tell stories of grief that is often ignored, dismissed, or punished by the adults in their schools, who prioritize academics and performance over their emotional needs. They feel that they are not given the space or the support to process their grief in healthy ways. In the city of New Orleans, where our the story of our education system is a story of white violence, divestment, and historical amnesia, it is unsurprising that our schools are both unequipped and uninterested in meeting our students with compassion and care appropriate to the scale of Black death in our city.

6.2.3.2 Returning to Radical Love

The stories of New Orleans youth call for a radical shift in how we understand and address the issues of anti-blackness and grief in education. They challenge us to move beyond deficit-based, trauma-informed approaches that focus on individual pathology or victimization, and instead adopt asset-based, healing-centered approaches that recognize the strengths, assets, and resilience of Black youth and communities (Gin-
wright, 2018). Asset-based approaches acknowledge the cultural wealth and resources that Black youth possess, such as their linguistic diversity, familial ties, social capital, navigational skills, resistance strategies, and aspirational goals (Yosso, 2005). Healing-centered approaches emphasize the holistic well-being of Black youth, not only in terms of their physical and mental health, but also their emotional, spiritual, social, and political health (Ginwright, 2018). Healing-centered approaches also foster a sense of collective healing and liberation by addressing the root causes of racial trauma and violence, such as systemic racism, oppression, and inequality.

These asset-based, healing-centered approaches have implications for how we enact racial justice in education. They require us to rethink our educational policies, practices, curricula, pedagogies, assessments, and relationships in ways that honor the lives, identities, passions, and aspirations of Black youth. They also require us to create safe spaces for Black youth to express and process their grief in culturally relevant and responsive ways. Moreover, they require us to support Black youth in their efforts to resist and transform the oppressive structures and practices that harm them. Finally, they require us to collaborate with Black youth as partners and co-creators of educational change.

In conclusion, this dissertation has illustrated how fiction and comic book creation can be used as effective methods for counter storytelling in CRT in education and YPAR. I hope that this work will inspire more researchers, educators, practitioners, and youth to adopt these methods or similar ones in their own contexts and fields, as well as to listen to and learn from the counter stories of youth who have been silenced or ignored for too long.

6.3 On Method

There were many points during this process that the traditional qualitative researcher in me was dying to whip out the tape recorder. I was haunted by the feeling that I was losing valuable, publishable data. At one point, I did ask if we could record
a conversation, if only for my field notes. My participant co-researchers agreed and I started recording. Then something strange, albeit predictable, happened: everyone stopped talking. A vibrant, flowing conversation trickled to a halt. The kids eventually continued the conversation in whispers, holding their hands over their mouths, and only speaking into the recorder when encouraged, or when they felt they had something important to say. I turned the tape recorder off, and the feeling of relief in the room was palpable.

The interaction brought to mind an account from Audra Simpson (2007), an indigenous anthropologist researching within her own community. She describes speaking to an informant who pointedly but indirectly refuses to answer certain questions:

"[...] it was very interesting to me that he would tell me that "he did not know" and "no one seems to know" - to me these utterances meant, "I know you know, and you know that I know I know...so let’s just not get into this." Or, "let’s just not say." So I did not say, and so I did not "get into it" with him, and I won’t get into it with my readers [...] it was enough that he said what he said. "Enough" is certainly enough. "Enough," I realized, was when I reached the limit of my own return and our collective arrival. Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why? And "enough" was when they shut down (or told me to turn off the recorder), or told me outright funny things like "nobody seems to know" - when everybody does know and talks about it all the time. Dominion then had to be exercised over these representations, and that was determined when enough was said. The ethnographic limit then, was reached not just when it would cause harm (or extreme discomfort) - the limit was arrived at when the representation would bite all of us and compromise the representational territory that we have gained for ourselves in the past 100 years [...] (Simpson, 2007; p. 77)."

Simpson argues compellingly that these refusals are theoretically generative, and
I agree. If we are serious about the imperative of social research - to cultivate new knowledge and accurately characterize human life - these kinds of refusals are some of the most important sites of theorizing we have to work with. Why does a bubbling conversation die when the tape recorder turns on? Within the context of working with New Orleans youth, it led me to wonder - in what ways is research like surveillance?

In many ways, this project is about refusals. For example - although youth had the option to tell either a true story or fiction, every single one chose fiction. I did not expect this. Sometimes, during our animated discussions about school experiences, I would say exasperatedly, "That is a really important story! What if you told that story?" Yet most of these personal accounts were left on the cutting room floor, or camouflaged into fictional narratives.

I believe this is a strength of the study design. The tools of storytelling, art, and fiction allowed my youth participant-researchers to share their experiences with a comfortable level of distance. To tell one’s own story of loss and grief is to be excessively vulnerable. For kids who have experienced gaslighting, minimizing, and a heartbreaking lack of care from adults in their lives, there is nothing appealing about opening one’s own true story up to further criticism. But fiction gave them the tools to tell a story that could represent not only their experience, but the stories and experiences of others. Metaphor, allegory, and poetry were not only a compelling mode of data collection and dissemination - they were safe. The distance between their stories and their personal lives afforded by fiction also encouraged them to claim authorship of their work in a way that felt empowering and not embarrassing or vulnerable. In this way, collaborative graphic autoethnography has proven itself to be an extremely useful tool for maintaining the dignity and agency of students who have many good reasons not to want to share their stories.

This method has also offered youth a sense of pride in their work that may not be readily offered by more traditional qualitative methods. After 12 sessions of de-
bates, learning, dialogue and self-reflection, the stories that students wrote felt like a triumph. They could see and recognize the impact of their work. In one session, Earsell remarked with wonder that she would be a published author forever now - this is something that would go in her obituary. When Tia turned in her final draft, she quietly shared that she’d never written anything like this before. She was proud of herself; the task of writing this story had been difficult in more ways than one. In this way, the method has risen to the goal set forth in the beginning of this dissertation of re-imagining authorship conventions in research. There is no way to render invisible their creative and intellectual efforts in this project; nor can we sever them from their insights.

6.4 Challenges and Limitations

The limitations of this study widely reflect the limitations common in youth participatory action research. For example, a key limitation of this project was continuity and absences. As I described before, the flexibility of this project also meant that we had an ebb and flow of youth and varying numbers on any given Saturday. Some conversations suffered for the absence of voices in the room - especially the data analysis process, which happened with only 3 of the 7 students in the room. In a final dialogue where I sought feedback for the program, students voiced that their absences were not because they were not engaged, but because many of them were seniors who had prom, graduation, and other events that conflicted with the Saturday schedule. When I asked the youth-participants whether and how we might address the problem of absences in the future, they suggested hosting it in the summer or fall, rather than the spring. Time and absences are a common issue in YPAR projects, and I suspect they are unavoidable during the school year. I would still encourage YPAR researchers to prioritize flexibility and understanding over stringent attendance policies.

A lack of continuity meant that the throughline of many of the conversations was disrupted, making it difficult to pick up an idea from the week before. We had to
backtrack often. Youth routinely missed critical information, and I did not have an easy way to catch them up. This also affected the stories themselves. In our feedback conversation, youth described a desire for more scaffolding in the process of writing their scripts and learning the comics format. Although my original unit plan broke things down into smaller steps, absences caused a lot of youth to miss these steps.

When comparing this project to a 4-week, daily summer YPAR program with a large group, I noticed new challenges around the relational dynamics in a smaller group. In the small group, individual tensions and anxieties were on more prominent display. There were more disagreements in the small group than I encountered in the large group the previous summer. One of the unforeseen changes to the group dynamic was when we introduced a new student several weeks late who was not familiar with YPAR and only new one other person in the group. She had missed many of the tone-setting discussions and group rules at the beginning of the sessions. This sometimes meant that she was more likely than others to engage in what she thought was friendly teasing, which wasn’t always well-received by other members. This demonstrates the importance of intentional onboarding processes at with newcomers, and reiterates the importance of continuous trust-building even when a group knows each other well. We also had interpersonal issues around giving and receiving feedback, where students were not always gracious with one another. Although these points of tension were uncomfortable, they also presented valuable opportunities for social-emotional development that I believe ultimately were useful to students.

Another limitation of the study is that it may overlook the inherent variations and diversity within charter schools. Charter can differ significantly in their expectations, foci, missions, and overall approaches to education. The completed anthology presents a narrative that may inadvertently flatten the nuanced realities and experiences within the charter school landscape. Although students did express positive experiences during conversations and discussions, they ultimately chose not to include them in the
final book. This decision, while within their creative autonomy, may have contributed to a potential imbalance in the representation of charter schools and their varied realities. The final narrative may incorrectly give the impression that all experiences within charter schools are uniformly negative or problematic, failing to capture the complexity and diversity of student experiences.

6.5 Future Directions

There are a number of directions I would love to see branch out from the work of this dissertation, both in my own work and in the world of critical youth studies more broadly. One direction for future research is to expand the counter-story by inviting a broader coalition of youth to participate. One of the key limitations of this project is its sample size. The project has an under-representation of boys and gender diverse students, with five out of seven participants identifying as female. Additionally, the story of New Orleans schools is also a story of immigrants and indigenous students, whose voices would enrich our counter-narrative. Replicating this project with a larger sample of participant-researchers would offer a more complete representation of student experiences in New Orleans schools. Additionally, many of the themes that the students discussed during the community building and political education stages of the project did not make it into the final product. Increasing the number of stories in the book would allow for a broader representation of the themes the students felt were important. If I had more time with the youth in this project, I also would have liked to include their reflections on the experience of making the book and how it affected their sense of agency and identity.

Another direction for future research is to explore other themes that this study has demonstrated are relevant and important to New Orleans youth, such as mental health and grief. The scope of this project was limited to a critique of the education system, but as I have shown in this dissertation, New Orleans youth have also experienced multiple traumas and losses in their lives outside of the classroom, which affect their
well-being and learning. Therefore, I think that this method is promising for creating more counter-stories that address these issues and offer insights into how to care for New Orleans youth on their own terms.

A third direction for future research is to examine the impact and implications of this method for other disciplines and contexts. I believe that this method has a lot to offer not only for the study of education, but also for social work, public health, and any other field that is in need of youth voice and humanizing research. This method could be adapted to different topics, questions, and populations, as long as it respects the principles of YPAR, the expansive epistemology of comics-based research, and honors the lived experiences of the participant-researchers. This method could also contribute to the development of theory and practice that are grounded in the realities and aspirations of marginalized communities.

However, as described in the previous section, this research approach also has some limitations and challenges that need to be addressed in future research. Future researchers should be mindful of the time and cost involved in conducting such a project. This method requires a significant commitment of time from both the researcher and the participants, which can create barriers and trade-offs for both parties. For example, some youth had to choose between participating in this project and engaging in other activities that they enjoyed or needed. I strongly urge future researchers to explore ways to make this method more accessible and convenient for youth, such as meeting during summer months when school is out, or finding partnerships with schools to meet during study periods, after school, and on closure days. With the cost of student stipends and artist compensation, the budget of this project may also be prohibitively expensive for future projects. I would urge funding communities to broaden their criteria for social science research to be more inclusive of arts-based research methods and rigorous compensation models for youth. The comics portion of this project benefited from open-ended funding sources that encouraged innovative
research methods, such as the Taylor Center for Innovation and Design Thinking, and funding sources that prioritized community and youth engagement, such as the Newcomb-Tulane Institute.

Another limitation of this method that future researchers will need to navigate is the tension between researching and teaching. As a researcher-teacher, I had to balance my dual roles and responsibilities in this project, which sometimes conflicted with each other. For instance, I had to decide how much guidance and feedback to provide to the youth without compromising their autonomy and creativity. This particular tension is one that qualitative researchers will face again and again when doing participatory research with youth. While we are trained to minimize our influence on our participants, the political education piece of YPAR requires us to actively shape dialogue with youth in a way that influences the findings and direction of the research. While I have argued in this dissertation that the insights and benefits of this method outweigh the problems of bias, and that bias is understood to be embedded in the process, it is a very real tension of this research method. The extent to which I have created the outcomes I wanted to find as a researcher is not easily discredited, and I can only return our attention back to the high levels of validity this method has afforded us. Already we have heard from community members who grew up in New Orleans schools and current New Orleans students who say that this book resonates with them and captures an experience they have rarely seen presented elsewhere.

Another tension between the dual roles of teacher and researcher is that the research outcomes and learning outcomes were sometimes in tension. I have described instances where the desire to simply play outweighed the desire to work on research, and where changes to my research design had to be made in order to prioritize the well-being of the students. Researchers who are interested in replicating this method in the future should be aware that it is impossible to do with concessions to the research design. Although veering from the research design is perhaps a universal
experience in social science research, and especially qualitative research, I believe it especially true for arts-based, participatory research with youth. Future researchers should only pursue these approaches with a commitment to prioritizing youth well-being even at the expense of "rigor," and remain accountable to evaluating the impact of these tensions on both the research outcomes and youth well-being.

In conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated the potential of using YPAR and comics-based research as a way of uncovering and sharing the counter stories of New Orleans youth. I hope that this work will inspire more researchers, educators, and practitioners to adopt this method or similar ones in their own contexts and fields, as well as to listen to and learn from the voices of youth who have been silenced or ignored for too long.

6.6 Conclusions

The New Orleans educational landscape is unique in our nation. No other city has a school system compromised entirely of charter schools. In almost 20 years since the decision to convert our school system to this experimental model, education scholarship continues to offer a troublingly anemic picture of how this policy decision is lived, felt, and experienced by the students who attend these schools every day. These omissions create a blind spot to the very real every day suffering and dehumanization that youth experience in a "zero tolerance" school system. This dissertation project was an effort to correct this blind spot, by making space for youth to tell the stories they feel have been missing from the conversation. Using comics based research and youth participatory action research, I attempted to create a research process that centered them in every way, highlighting and celebrating their insights and expertise while engaging them in a developmentally appropriate and creative experience, with a tangible and accessible research product that they are proud of.

This dissertation project has underscored the critical importance of culturally relevant research that amplifies the voices and experiences of Black youth in the field
of education. When working with a population like New Orleans youth, who have experienced consistent dehumanization from people in authority, it is critically important for education researchers to explore new ways to avoid perpetuating power imbalances in the research process. By embracing the methodology of comics-based research as a collaborative and participatory approach, this project has demonstrated its potential to challenge these dynamics, empower youth co-researchers, and create impactful research products that resonate with diverse audiences.

The seven illustrated narratives presented in this dissertation offer a picture of New Orleans schools that is marked by a profound sense of grief. Despite living in a city where violent death is commonplace, there seems to be no mechanism to acknowledge their trauma and support them. Instead they are dismissed, punished, and subject to a level of surveillance, control, and antagonism that we simply would not permit if this were a predominantly white school system. These insights highlight the urgent need for further research at the intersection of anti-Blackness and grief within educational settings. Our results also present a clear call for researchers to explore arts-based research as a transformative method for engaging Black youth in the research process. By leveraging participatory arts-based methods, critical autoethnography, and counter-storytelling, researchers can foster cooperative inquiry, empower youth co-researchers, and create humanizing research outputs.

Finally, the stories youth have shared here underscore the urgent need for the creation of educational environments that recognize and celebrate the full humanity and worth of each student. Education policy must be rooted in love for all students, with a deep commitment to nurturing their holistic development, dismantling oppressive structures, and fostering equitable opportunities. By centering their voices and lived realities, we can foster inclusive and empowering spaces that address the unique challenges they face while nurturing their intellectual and emotional growth.
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