HER VOICE MATTERS:
LIFE HISTORIES OF BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS' WORKING CONDITIONS

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by

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This dissertation, by G. Funmilayo Tyson-Devoe, has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of Graduate School in Leadership & Change Antioch University in partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

HER VOICE MATTERS:
LIFE HISTORIES OF BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS' WORKING CONDITIONS

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This study explored Black women's lived experiences as teachers in urban schools during the era of 21st-century education reform. It centers around the relationships between Black women teachers (micro), their working conditions in low-performing urban schools (mesa), and neoliberal education policies (macro) that affect their work. The theoretical frames were Black feminist thought and critical race theory. The research questions were as follows: first, what are the working experiences of Black women teachers of tested subjects in low-performing urban public schools and, second, how do socio-political factors affect their working conditions? The research design was qualitative and included narrative inquiry and life history. Key findings were leadership, teacher autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration, and student behavior. The Black women of this study want better leadership, autonomy, a pathway that does not lead to principalship but out of the classroom, self-care, and wellness. The implication for social change is educational leadership that uses adaptive leadership and social justice leadership that requires leaders to have emotional intelligence, social-political awareness, and activism. Educational leadership must stop taking its cues from big corporations, politicians, and businesspeople. The practice of standardized testing as ruler of all things public education must cease because it negates the human experience. The implication for practice is to honor the experiences and voices of Black women teachers, retain current Black women teachers, and recruit new Black

women teachers otherwise Black women teachers are on the verge of extinction. Innovation in public education must include new ways for students, teachers, and leaders to thrive in an ever-changing world. Future research needs to include more qualitative data from Black women teachers' working conditions and experiences through the lenses of critical race theory and Black feminist thought. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: Black women teachers; Black feminist thought, critical race theory, leadership, neoliberalism, working conditions, life history, narrative inquiry, education leadership

Dedication

In memory of Sidnye Lynn Fells Suttle.

While her personal life stories in urban education may be lost, we shared collective Black woman teacher narratives that inspired this work and will never be forgotten.

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Table of Contents

Abstract iv
Dedication vi
Acknowledgements vii
List of Tables xiv
List of Figures xv
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY 1
Purpose of the Study 4
Significance of the Study 4
Statement of Problem 5
Researcher's Lens 6
Methodological Approach 9
Terminology 11
Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions 14
Overview of How This Dissertation Is Structured 14
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE 15
Black Feminist Thought in Education 18
Black Women's Labor 18
Black Feminist Thinking Educators 19
"Teaching to Transgress": Contemporary Black Feminist Thought and Education 21
K-12 Working Conditions for Black Women Teachers 24
Displacement of Black Teachers 25
Neoliberalism and Education Policy 28
Housing and Public Schools 30
Summary of Conditions in the Working Environment of Black Women Teachers 31
Critical Race Theory and Education 31
Summary on Race and Rights 34
Leadership Matters 34
Turnaround Leadership 34
Adaptive Leadership 40
Social Justice Leadership 41
Summary of Key Leadership Qualities and Issues 44

Conclusion 45

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN 46
Rationale for This Study 46
Research Problem 48
Research Questions 49
Narrative Inquiry 49
Life History 53
Participants 55
Settings and Procedures for Study 56
Data Collection 56
Analysis 57
Ethical Considerations 58
Conclusion 59

CHAPTER IV: SELECTED GRIOT NARRATIVES 60
Griot 1: Giving Back to Her Community 62
Plotting Griot 1's Stories/Narratives 62
Profile of Griot 1's Roots 63
Summary of Griot 1's Roots 65
Profile 2: Griot 1's Working Conditions 66
Summary for Griot 1's Working Conditions 68
Griot 2: Know Their Situation 69
Griot 2: Plotting Her Stories/Narratives 69
Profile of Griot 2's Roots 70
Summary of Griot 2's Roots 72
Profile 2: Griot 2's Working Conditions 72
Summary of Griot 2's Working Conditions 75
Griot 3: Doing Too Much 75
Plotting Her Stories/Narratives 76
Profile of Griot 3: Her Roots 77
Summary of Griot 3's Roots 79
Profile of Griot 3's Working Conditions 79

Summary of Griot 3's Working Conditions 82
Griot 4: Teach by Any Means Necessary 82
Plotting Griot 4's Stories/Narratives 82
Profile of Griot 4's Roots 85
Summary of Griot 4's Roots 87
Profile of Griot 4's Working Conditions 87
Summary of Griot 4's Working Conditions 89
Griot 5: Southern Respectability 90
Plotting Griot 5's Stories/Narratives 90
Profile of Griot 5's Roots 92
Summary of Griot 5's Roots 93
Profile of Griot 5's Working Conditions 94
Summary of Griot 5's Working Conditions 96
Griot 6: Tunnel Vision to Retirement 97
Plotting Griot 6's Stories/Narratives 97
Profile of Griot 6's Roots 99
Summary of Griot 6's Roots 101
Profile of Griot 6's Working Conditions 101
Summary of Griot 6's Working Conditions 104
Griot 7: I'll Stay But Not Like This 104
Plotting Griot 7's Stories/Narratives 104
Profile of Griot 7's Roots 106
Summary of Griot 7's Roots 109
Profile of Griot 7's Working Conditions 109
Summary of Griot 7's Working Conditions 111
Griot Collective Plot 112
Summary of the Griots' Experiences 115
Emergent Themes 115
Leadership 118
Themes of Teacher Autonomy, Camaraderie, and Collaboration 121
District Directives (Curriculum and Pedagogy) 124

Career Crossroads/Pushout ... 126
Student Behaviors ... 127
Parents and Families ... 128
ESOL Students ... 130
Testing ... 130
Black Feminist Thought ... 131
COVID ... 132
Other Stories ... 132
CHAPTER V: I AM GRIOT 8—REFLECTIONS AS A SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER ... 134
Vignette 1: My Return to Teaching—An Example of Unrealistic Expectations ... 136
Vignette 2: Homophobic Slurs—Working Conditions and Student Behavior ... 136
Vignette 3: I Can't Do It All—Emotional Labor and Burnout ... 138
My Reflexive Reflections ... 139
CHAPTER VI: SUMMARIES, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS ... 143
Summary of Study Findings ... 143
Working Conditions ... 143
Black Feminist Thought in Education ... 147
Critical Race Theory in Education ... 147
Implications for Leadership and Change ... 148
Recommendations ... 149
Recommendations for the Practice ... 149
Recommendations for Policy ... 150
Recommendations on Educational Leadership ... 150
Recommendations on Professional Development ... 150
Recommendations for Future Research ... 151
Conclusions ... 152
References ... 154
Appendix A: Diagram of Micro, Mesa, Macro Dimensions for Black Women Teachers ... 164
Appendix B: Personal Journal Entries ... 165
Appendix C: U.S. Socio-Political Context Timeline 1998–2023 ... 182

List of Tables

Table 1.1. Acronyms Used in This Study 13
Table 4.1. A Plot of Griot 1's Stories 62
Table 4.2. A Plot of Griot 2's Stories 69
Table 4.3. A Plot of Griot 3's Stories 76
Table 4.4. A Plot of Griot 4's Stories 83
Table 4.5. A Plot of Griot 5's Stories 90
Table 4.6. A Plot of Griot 6's Stories 97
Table 4.7. A Plot of Griot 7's Stories 105
Table 4.8. Plot Elements and Collective Griot Characteristics 114
Table 4.9. Emergent Themes and Their Frequency 116
Table 4.10. Themes and Sub-Themes for Each Griot 116
Table 4.11. Examples of Griots' Leadership Stories 118
Table 4.12. Stories of Teacher Autonomy, Camaraderie, and Collaboration 121
Table 4.13. Sample Stories About District Directives 124
Table 4.14. Sample Story of Crossroads 127
Table 4.15. Sample Stories of Student Behaviors 127
Table 4.16. Sample Stories of Parents and Families 129
Table 4.17. Sample Story About Testing 130
Table 4.18. Stories Pertaining to Black Feminist Thought 131
Table 4.19. Samples of Other Stories 132
Table 5.1. My Educator Life History Timeline 141
Table B.1. Plot of My Stories 169
Table B.2. My Workload 177
Table B.3. My Educator Life History Timeline 180

List of Figures

Figure A.1. Macro, Mesa, and Micro Levels Situating Black Women Teachers 163

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise
–Maya Angelou

Angelou's words are the hope of this research. Institutional racism and other systems of oppression have plagued Black people in the U.S. for centuries. The perpetuated ideology of White supremacy and Black inferiority has been codified in the Constitution and encapsulated throughout U.S. history from slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction to separate-but-equal, desegregation, and de facto-segregation. More than six decades after Brown, many students still have segregated elementary and secondary education experiences. Schools with predominately Black populations are still outperformed by schools with predominately White populations according to state and national school report cards. The media perpetuates the misleading narrative that if student achievement is low, then it stands to reason that teachers are to blame.

Spiegelman (2020) reported that 79% of the teacher workforce is White whereas 7% are Black. She also found that schools with a majority Black student population had 36% Black teachers and 54% White teachers. Comparatively, schools with a majority White student population had 90% White teachers and 2% Black teachers. However, Farinde-Wu and Fitchett (2018) found that Black female teachers (reconceptualizing the narrative of "urban" or Black schools) find urban schools as desirable workplaces.

Many researchers have documented the working conditions of Black teachers such as teacher training, resources, building, salaries, retention, lack of administrative support, and

school (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Farinde et al., 2016; Guarino et al., 2006; Perkins, 1989; Siddle-Walker, 2005; Tillman, 2004). Studies have shown that teacher working conditions are the major reason for pre-retirement attrition (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Gabbadon, 2022; Sutcher et al., 2016). Black teachers are leaving the profession at higher rates. "At 21.1%, the Black teacher turnover rate is nearly 60% greater than the non-Black teacher turnover rate (13.4%)" (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 170). Furthermore, they found turnover rate of Black women is 21.8% higher than non-Black women at 13.4%. These rates are particularly higher in the South, where Black women tend to teach. "While overall turnover rates in the South are higher than other regions of the country at 16% annually, the rate among Black women is still higher, at 26%" (p. 170).

Black teacher working conditions have been described in the past as,

> abbreviated school years, starvation salaries, inadequate curricula, and inferior buildings and equipment were the norm for the black schoolteacher of the South. As education there developed into a 'system' in the late nineteenth century, black teachers organized to express concern about educational inequities, and to monitor educational progress. (Perkins, 1989, p. 350)

Attrition research points to "working conditions" as a determinant for teachers. These variables are diverse.

> Specific workplace conditions associated with teacher attrition are instructional leadership, school culture, collegial relationships, time for collaboration and planning, teachers' decision-making power, experiences with professional development, facilities, lack of parental support or involvement, and resources. (Balow, 2021, p. 7)

In the shadows of the Black patriarchy, Black women also thought "how to educate" Black people. Lucy Craft Laney and Anna Julia Cooper incorporated both vocation and classical education in their school curriculum and well as womanhood training (Alridge, 2009; McClusky, 2014). Being contemporaries and friends of the Black public thinkers of the day, the intellectual thought and activism of Laney and Cooper are examples of Black feminism and Black feminist

thought. Collins (2002) wrote, “The relationship between African-American women’s activism and Black feminist thought as an intellectual and political integral to that endeavor for me are inextricably linked” (p. xii). While fighting codified systemic racism in education, these women also fought sexism within the race.

Uplifting the race is just as important as uplifting the voices of Black women. There is so much that is unknown about the work and working conditions of Black women teachers. There is scholarship around teacher experiences during desegregation and integration; much of that work included displacement (Fairclough, 2004; Foster, 1997; Fultz, 2004; Morris, 2001; Perkins, 1989). Black women teachers work an “invisible labor” (Dillard, 2021, p. 3) that must be explored. Not only do they teach the curriculum, but they also shield Black students from inequities of race and gender in education. Dillard (2021) wrote,

> Black teachers who are often by default also those teachers called to teach and provide safe havens from the often detrimental impacts of race, gender, and inequities in education for Black and Brown children. This is made even more insulting because this labor of protecting our children in schools comes in addition to teaching our subject matter or the topics of our syllabi. This is part of the invisible labor and burden that Black women teachers bare every day. (p. 3)

Imagine being a student in a so-called failing school. Imagine being a teacher working in such a failing school. What motivates the teacher to teach? What inspires the student to learn? Teaching and learning are the basics of schooling, yet the pressures to produce passing test scores and increase graduation rates create complex working environments. For generations, Black teachers, particularly in the U.S. South have lived with the stigma of incompetence. “The stigmatizing of Black teachers as incompetent and the subsequent stigmatizing of all-Black schools as ‘inferior’ institutions” (Morris, 2001, p. 9) is a master narrative that continues to be fueled with the neoliberal language of meritocracy and colorblindness.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored Black women's lived experiences as teachers in urban schools during the era of 21st century education reform. The codification of scientific research as legitimate education research mutes and devalues research around voice and lived experiences. This is problematic because there is no literature that shows the impact of neoliberal education policy and practices about Black women classroom teachers and their work. Furthermore, the sociopolitical contexts that drive education reform is rooted in racism. This research expands the conversation about neoliberal education reform by privileging the voices and lived experiences of Black women teachers. Their narratives, both individual and collective, are counternarratives that decolonize education research and reform. The purpose of this study is to hear, in their own words, the voices of Black women teachers about their working conditions. Teaching Black children, students who have been systemically left behind, is a revolutionary act and often these teachers are doing the work of Black feminists by choosing to teach students in communities with the most need. These teachers are grassroots activists for social justice and change. Their work is political and requires an intellect that changes with the times. For centuries, Black women teachers have worked under the veil of organized racism, genderism, and classism. Their voices have been systemically muted, excluded, and/or silenced. Yet, their voice will add diversity to the discourse around education reform. The more that is known about the everyday experiences and perspectives of Black women teachers, the greater the understanding of the manifestations of oppression in public education and education reform.

Significance of the Study

This study is relevant to the field of education as there is a limited amount of current research on African American women teachers in high-poverty urban schools that shares the

lived experiences in a first-person narrative. “The work of teachers is politically and socially constructed” (Goodson, 2008, p. 3). It was important to create a research design that honored the voices and lived experiences of Black Women teachers and analyzes these data through a decolonizing and transformative lens. This study explored the working conditions of eight Black women teachers with varying tenure within a K-12 urban school district in a southeastern city of the United States. These teachers have taught (currently or within their career) subjects that are tied to state standardized tests. This qualitative design employed narrative inquiry with life history through the lens of critical race theory (CRT) and Black feminist thought. It examined how Black women teachers make meaning of their work and analyze their experiences within the context of race and neoliberal policies. The results of this will enable aspiring teachers to develop strategies, pedagogies, and ways of being to be better prepared for the challenges that they will face in the classroom. The results will also shed light on the working conditions of Black women teachers in low-performing urban school settings and offer solutions for retaining them.

Statement of Problem

There is no research about the life histories of Black women teachers’ working conditions in an era of high stakes accountability, privatization of public schools, gentrification, and COVID-19. Black teacher voices have neither been included in the discourse of urban education reform nor curriculum and instruction development. Their lived work experiences are essential to understanding the problems and challenges of public education and necessary for creating practical solutions that lead to an equitable education. The overarching question was, how do neoliberal education policies and practices impact the working conditions of Black women teachers in low-performing urban public schools?

Researcher's Lens

> For Black folks teaching- educating- was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. Indeed, my all-black grade schools became the location where I experienced learning as revolution. (hooks, 1994, p. 2)

It has only been in the last decade, that I realized the privileges of my schooling. I am a Black woman born a single child living with a single parent two years after the 1968 District of Columbia (D.C.) riots. A graduate of D.C. Public Schools, all but five of my teachers within my K-12 experience, were Black. My strong Black identity was formed at home, school, and within my community. We sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing" every morning after the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary school. I wrote my first poem in sixth grade titled; *Black is Beautiful*. The first Black male teacher I had, taught sixth grade math. In junior high school, my eighth grade English teacher threatened to fail me if I did not enter an essay contest. There was no way I was going to bring a failing grade home, so I entered the contest and won second place. I graduated in the top 10 of my class from a science magnet high school. By no means was I an anomaly. I am, however, the product of teachers and a community that balanced high expectations, discipline, and strong support. They modeled a sense of racial pride and self-worth. They believed I could be whatever I wanted. These educational experiences have shaped my belief in public schools and the necessity of Black teachers. My community instilled in me the importance of collective work and responsibility.

This dissertation will focus on the multi-dimensions of identity as both Black and woman while teaching. Kimberlé Crenshaw and other scholars have written extensively about the intersections of being both Black and woman. Their unique experiences are silenced and/or erased because they are neither privileged in race or gender. "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular way Black women are

subordinated" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 58). In an earlier career in public service, I was fired from the Dallas Police Department after seven years for my locks. Publicly humiliated and in the news for six months, it was 15 years before I truly began to understand that experience. My intersectionality denied me the privilege of justice because I was fired by a Black man in a male-dominated profession about my hair. Black people are still challenged publicly about their natural hair not being normative.

My entry point into teaching was nontraditional. I always knew I would one day be a teacher; however, I chose policing first to bring a different experience to the classroom. When I started my career, the state of Texas had a major teacher shortage. They created an emergency teaching certificate to recruit people with bachelor's degrees. Dallas Independent Schools had their own alternative certification program. It included several college courses, on-the-job-training, and a strong mentoring program. I taught in Dallas for four years before moving to Georgia. I have taught secondary reading and English, Grades 6–12, for almost two decades.

I enjoyed teaching. However, like many teachers, I left the classroom because of horrible administrative practices (Campoli & Conrad-Popova, 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). In 2015, I quit. That was the official year that the Georgia Department of Education implemented a teacher evaluation system that was uploaded directly to their state server. Administrators began to weaponize evaluations. Although it was designed to support continuous growth and development of teachers, it had been used punitively to get rid of teachers that administrators did not like. This is 21st century "displacement" (Fultz, 2004; Tillman, 2004).

This state evaluation system was designed so teacher evaluations would follow them from district to district throughout the state. It is like a teacher blackball system.

Being very optimistic and missing my students, however, I did return to the classroom in 2017 only to find the threats of write-ups and negative evaluations not only continued but had intensified. It was used as a fear tactic for teacher conformity. Those four years of classroom teaching became the foundation of my research of Black women teachers' working conditions. I wondered if this was only my experience or if other Black women teachers had the same or similar experiences.

Somewhere between a calling and responsibility to the next generation, I have consciously chosen to work in schools with the most need: schools that were predominantly Black and low performing, according to state data. That particular year, I realized that my students had difficulty reading high school texts. After giving them a diagnostic test, I found that more than 80% of them were reading below the expected level for their grade. Many of them were reading on an elementary level. I presented this data to the administrators to explain why students were struggling in my class. They cannot pass a Grade 11 test when they were on elementary or middle school reading levels. Instead of supporting me as I prepared a reading plan for each student, I was targeted. I was expected to teach on-level material and my students were expected to learn. I was held accountable for students' inability to pass grade-level assignments instead of measuring student growth.

There are no rewards for student growth when teaching in an era of accountability. Either the student can pass the test or not. Consequently, teachers teach to the test and not mastery. Students become test takers not learners; teachers have no time or autonomy to truly support student improvement. In my case, my position was abolished. When I asked about the reasoning,

I was told it was my low evaluations. As a life-long-learner, I am always open to professional development but not targeting and blaming for something I do not have control over. In a public school, you get the students that come and do the best with who you have. It is difficult work but had always been rewarding until these new oppressive systems came about. They hurt students and teachers. I did get my job back a week later, but it was on a technicality; the deadline for abolishment had passed.

My lived experiences as a Black woman teacher made me curious about other Black women who teach. How do they think about their work? How do they make meaning of it? How do they cope with the complexity and constant changes that come with the profession? Why do they stay?

Methodological Approach

This study was centered around the relationships between Black women teachers (micro), their working conditions in low performing urban schools (mesa), and the neoliberal policies (macro) that affect and effect their work (See Appendix A). Life history allows the researcher to examine the work of teachers over a period. Narrative inquiry recognizes the power of voice by minimizing the interview questions and leaving space for the participants' stories. Critical race theory demands transparency about race and racism as the root of U.S. oppression. This study seeks to add muted and unconsidered voices to the discourse of public education and education reform.

"The work of teachers is politically and socially constructed" (Goodson, 2008, p. 3). It is important to create a research design that honors the voices and lived experiences of Black Women teachers and analyzes these data through a decolonizing and transformative lens. This study will explore the working conditions of nine Black women teachers who have taught at least

seven years within a K-12 urban school district in a southeastern city of the United States. These teachers will teach classes that are connected to state standardized tests.

Staying in the teaching profession is political. Therefore, by centering Black women teacher's experiences, I will examine and illuminate their intellectual strategy for teaching and examine how the make sense of the work they do within the context of accountability. Black women struggle against their racial and gendered oppression and adapt to the challenges of teaching to educate Black children. Regardless of various systems of oppression, they stay in the profession because "they embrace broader, self-imposed mandate shared by [earlier] generation[s]" of racial uplift through educational access (McCluskey, 2014). I wonder about their individual journeys to the profession. How did they get here? What was their entry point into teaching? When was the moment they realized their "why"? How do they stay amid it all? These are the overarching questions of this study.

This qualitative design will employ narrative inquiry with life history and CRT to examine how Black women teachers make meaning of their work and analyze their experiences within the context of race and neoliberal policies. Narrative inquiry has a long intellectual history in and out of education, however, it has increasingly been used in educational studies (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). They contend that "education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). According to Atkinson (2007), "The life story provides a practical and holistic methodological approach for the sensitive collection of personal narratives that reveal how a specific human life is constructed and reconstructed in representing that life as a story" (p. 224).

Storytelling traditionally focuses on community building and a culture of shared understanding whereas counter-storytelling can challenge received wisdom that provides new understanding and possibilities for life other than one's own. Delgado (1989) explained stories as "how we construct social reality by devising and passing on stories—interpretive structures by which we impose order on experience and it on us" (p. 2415). Life history acknowledges personal, social, temporal, and contextual influences that facilitate the understanding of the lives and phenomena being explored, however, life history and narrative honor individuality and the complexity of individuals' experiences. Cole and Knowles (2001) also asserted that "lives are never lived in complete isolation from social contexts" (p. 22).

Terminology

Black/Black American/Negro/African American will be used interchangeably. These terms challenge the complexity of identity construction and stratification. Normalized as tools of division and forms of human hierarchy that have denied rights and the full citizenship of descendants of the enslaved African in the U.S. While some may use any of these terms as identity makers others use them with racial pride. There are two challenges with the term "African American": First, Africa is not a country but a continent and second, there are three Americas (North, Central, and South). "Negro," my birth certificate identity in 1970, is not socially or culturally accepted as it once was. Black, for me, is the most accurate identity. It is inclusive of all Black peoples throughout the diaspora. In the same breath, Black American speaks specifically to the experiences of the descendants of enslaved African people of the United States. Therefore, for this paper, these terms will be used interchangeably with an understanding that the term "Black" is an identity of personal pride and that any term the participants may use to identify is honored here.

Black feminism: The philosophy that "Black women are inherently valuable and that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy" (Combahee River Collective, 1986, p. 1).

Black feminist thought is a Black woman's way of knowing and how it can empower and liberate herself and others. "When an individual Black woman's consciousness concerning how she understands her everyday life undergoes change, she can become empowered" (Collins, 2009, p. xi).

Displacement became the phase which subsumed the many policies and practices of southern school boards, school superintendents, and politicians which sought to undermine the employment and authority of African American school staff: dismissals, demotions, forced resignations, non-hiring, token promotions, reduced salaries, diminished responsibility, coercion to teach subjects or grade levels other than those for which individuals were certified or had experience. (Fultz, 2004, p. 14) Additionally, *displacement* will be used to describe the effects of gentrification on working-class families that are priced out of their communities.

Gentrification: Based on Glass's (1963) early conceptualization of gentrification, Lyons (1996) described it as "Invasion of working-class areas by upper and lower middle classes, who upgrade shabby, modest housing to an elegant residence, resulting in displacement of all or most of the original working-class occupiers" (p. 40). Lipman (2013) said,

> This wave of gentrification is characterized by gentrification complexes of housing, recreation, and consumption financed by consortia of local, national, and global investors and facilitated by the state. It serves as a key opportunity for profitable investment, a key source of revenue for cities, and a principal tool for marketing the city to the upper middle class. (pp. 24–25)

Neoliberalism is an "ideological project to reconstruct values, social relations, and social identities—to produce a new social imaginary" (Lipman, 2013, p. 10). Harvey (2005) defined neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being

can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Additionally, Harvey contended, the state is responsible for creating and preserving this framework. Furthermore, if no market exists (in this case, education) then the state must create and protect one. For this paper, neoliberalism in the form of neoliberal education and housing policies is contextually situated in as macro level influences on the working conditions of Black women teachers.

Race. Fields and Fields (2014) argued that

> Race stands for the conception or the doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank. (p. 16)

Racism, according to Fields and Fields (2014) is "the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard" (p. 17).

Urban means city or town. Offensively it is a euphemism for Black people, community, schools, and/or culture. "co-opted for use as racial code words" (Anderson & Cross, 2013).

Table 1.1 displays common acronyms and their meaning as used in this dissertation.

Table 1.1

Acronyms Used in This Study

Acronym	Meaning
AMDM	Advanced Mathematics and Decision Making
COVID/COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ELA	English Language Arts
ESOL	English to Speakers of Other Languages
FBLA	Future Business Leaders Association
IEP	Individualized Education Program
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Support

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

This study is limited to a specific number of high-poverty urban schools in a single school area or district. Participants are African American women teachers in high-poverty urban schools who agree to participate in the study.

All our organizations are operating with policies that are not necessarily inclusive. In education, I am assuming that the teachers' narratives are situated within the context of neoliberal education policies and practices.

Overview of How This Dissertation Is Structured

This dissertation is organized in six chapters. Chapter I introduces my scholarship, how I landed on this work, and my positionality. Chapter II is an overview of relevant literature: the intersectionality of Black women as Teachers; K-12 working conditions for Black women teachers; and leadership. Chapter III explains methods, rationale, and ethical considerations. Chapter IV details findings and themes from the Black women teachers lived experiences. Chapter V includes my most recent classroom experiences as vignettes. It is part of a larger narrative about 20 years in education (See Appendix B: Personal Journal Entries). Finally, Chapter VI reveals the summaries, implications, recommendations, and conclusions.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

But the educated Negro woman must teach the "Black Babies."

—Lucy Craft Laney

Laney's 1899 call-to-action was a plan for racial uplift. Black women responded to that call and became teachers as a strategy to advance themselves and their communities despite of the retrenchment of Black rights. From the Compromise of 1876 that removed federal troops from the South leaving freed people vulnerable to White terrorisms to *Plessy v. Ferguson's* (1896) legalized racism, the *Cumming et al. v. Richmond County Board of Education* (1899), which explicitly said, "States have the power to regulate the Negro in the enjoyment of his civil and social rights in accordance with tradition and custom" (as cited in McCluskey, 2014, p. 28). For centuries it has been customary to oppress Black people in the United States—and they have persistently resisted. Teaching was a political stance and form of resistance against the caste of being Black in this country and the hope to fully realize freedom.

The path to citizenship for the newly freed people of U.S. South was education. Black women taught long before the abolishment of slavery however, with the Reconstruction Amendments they were able to teach legally. Many supported efforts to educate Southern Blacks; the Freedman's Bureau, the American Mission Association, White Northern and Southern philanthropists, and educated Blacks from the North and South. One of the few occupations available to Black women, teaching was as honorable a profession in the Black community as Black men in the ministry. Legalized segregation, Jim Crow law, afforded many this opportunity. Tillman (2004) found that there were approximately 82,000 Black teachers who taught mostly in segregated schools before the passing of legislation following *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Nonetheless, there was an immediate decline of Black teachers between

1954 and 1965. More than 38,000 Black educators in 17 southern and border states were dismissed (Tillman, 2004). The populace of Black teachers has never recovered after Brown. Today, approximately 5% of the teacher workforce is Black women, and many are leaving the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2020; Taie & Lewis, 2022).

The challenges of what is referred to as “how to educate Black people” came after the Civil War. There was an amplified debate between two Black male thinkers, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington believed that Black people needed vocational education and to own land while Dubois believed Black people needed a classical cultured education and political freedom. Geographically, the two spoke from different Black experiences. The lynching in the South, with no protections, influenced Washington’s thinking. In contrast, Du Bois enjoyed the privileges of being educated in the North. The realities of racism stung differently.

White supremacist ideology is woven in the fabric of this country and public education. The achievement gap is a flawed reality on what teachers do: particularly as it relates to so called failing schools, the assumption is that teachers are to blame. Teachers are not the sole source for educating nor influence in a student’s life. However, they do play a major role. What they say or do can have a strong impact and life-long implications. The purpose of this project is to amplify a voice that has been often excluded, muted, ignored, or devalued. Black women teachers historically have played a major role in educating Black students. The idea that Black children need to see themselves represented in the classroom and curriculum is not new. However, there has been a rise and fall of Black women educators from Reconstruction to now. To understand the role of Black women in education, it is important to understand the context, historical and

socio-political, Black women teacher work in education. There are many factors to be considered. These factors are both external and internal. Teaching has traditionally been considered women's work and responsibility: taking care of and rearing the children. That said the politics of gender, the handling, treatment of women and women's work—the role of women—responsibility more than valued profession is open for discussion.

A Nation at Risk (Gardner, 1983), the foundational document and ideology that led to a generation of educational reform, sets the stage for the neoliberal policies and practices that have made public education more complex. Instead of respecting education as a profession, allowing educators and scholars to collaborate on ways to make public education more accessible and "good" for the public, politicians and businesspeople found a way to create and socialize the narrative that public education is bad therefore, money must be shifted to private education and charter schools which are good. To critically unpack this, one finds that the intent and rhetoric of public education, *A Nation at Risk*, is a direct attack on public good. Public in an oversimplified way, highlights the inequities that continue to oppression specific groups . . . race, gender, and class. Those that have been traditionally overlooked, ignored, and exploited are those of the "public." To demonize "public" as bad and valorize "private" as good means to create systems and structures that benefit private more than public (de Saxe Zerden et al., 2018). The unsustainable and flawed U.S. capitalism, the unfillable void of individualism, greed, and competition at the expense of the 'have nots', presents neoliberalism as the "only way" (religious overtones) and "resistance is futile" (the motto of Star Trek's the Borg) feeds the insatiable desire to have it all: to be the most powerful in the world. The narcissism.

Black Feminist Thought in Education

> Because of White women's racism and Black men's sexism, there is no room in either area for a serious consideration of the lives of Black women. (Hull et al., 1982/2015, p. xxi)

The positionality of Black women as valuable humans is indeed a strong political stance (Collins, 2009; Combahee River Collective, 1986; Hull et al., 1982/2015). It counters the socially constructed perception of Black woman as mules, promiscuous, ignorant, and welfare-queens who somehow emasculate Black men. The title of Akasha Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith's 1982 classic, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave*, speaks to this political stance referring to "identity politics" (Combahee River Collective, 1986) and "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989). Collins (2002) claimed this "both-and conceptual stance" of both Blacks and women, "allowed [her] to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and feminist consciousness, and to be both a respectable scholar and an acceptable mother" (p. x). For this study, no matter the individual identities of these teachers, there is a collective position and experience they share as both Black and woman within their work as teacher.

Black Women's Labor

> One core theme of U.S. Black feminist thought consists of analyzing Black women's work, especially Black women's labor market victimization as "mules." (Collins, 2002, p. 52)

Black American women have been objectified and victimized as mules since slavery. From the plantation to the classroom, Black women continue to work in unbearable conditions. These conditions often are both a labor for work (their jobs) and labor for love (their families). More research examines Black women in the workforce and less examines the unpaid labor for families. There have been three major labor transformations in Black women's waged labor (Brewer, 1993): the movement from domestic to industrial and clerical [in this case education];

low-paid service work not feasible as a family wage; and increased impoverishment and fragmentation of Black women, children, and families.

"Work as alienated labor can be economically exploitative, physically demanding, and intellectually deadening—the type of work long associated with Black women's status as 'mule'"(Collins, 2002, p. 65). She referred to paid labor as domestic service, cooks, or healthcare assistants as well as some "professional Black women engaged in corporate mammy work; or it can be unpaid, as with the seemingly never-ending chores of many Black grandmothers and Black single mothers" (p. 65). Exploitive wages, demeaning, or physically challenging work can also be empowering and creative especially when done as a labor of love for one's family. She continued that this work can also be paid or unpaid.

Black women teachers work can too, be a form of alienated labor as they close the doors to their classrooms to teach. It is both physically demanding and intellectually deadening as many are required to teach scripted curriculum with limited autonomy over lessons. "The incessant and omnipresent images, language, and culture of inferiority toward Black women teachers is endemic in schools" (Hancock et al., 2020, p. 412). Many Black women teachers also have family responsibilities, children, partners, parents, grandparents, or extended family. Balancing work and family are difficult. Their paid work as teacher and unpaid work as caregivers can lead to health issues.

Black Feminist Thinking Educators

DuBois's and Washington's education discourse dominated Black education in their time because of sexism. Black women's identity was an intersectional challenge. In White America they were both Black and women. Within the race, they were women. Fighting these oppressive

realities while making space to “uplift the race,” Black women used their own intellectual capital to teach and create institutions of learning for Black people.

McCluskey (2014) documented a sisterhood of Black women educators and activists, who individually founded schools in their communities and collectively responded to the call of racial uplift. Lucy Craft Laney, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins, and Nannie Helen Burroughs were the main subjects of that work; however, she acknowledged many others who were doing similar work during the period. These women were both Black women teachers and founders of Black schools. “Being among the first of their race and sex to receive formal education, the school founders were collectively committed to education as a counteroffensive to racial degradation and an instrument of uplift for themselves and their race” (McCluskey, 2014, p. 1).

Higgenbotham (1993) presented another perspective: “Their assimilationist leanings led to their insistence upon blacks’ conformity to the dominant society’s norms of manners and morals. Thus, the discourse of respectability disclosed class and status differentiation” (p. 187). Post-Civil War Black people theorized ways of being accepted into U.S. society as citizens. The idea of the “new Negro” was an effort to detach from the enslaved identity. The transactional reality of doing to receive. If the newly freed people were civilized, clean, and righteous then they could prove their worth to White Americans and be respected, hence respectability politics. “Manners and morals” became the driving ideology to gain respect. Victorian principles of manners and Civilizationist moral values determined goodness or worthiness (Alridge, 2007). The standard of manhood and womanhood was socially accepted through the concept of “manners and morals.” This standard, as pedagogy, was used and believed to attain racial uplift and upward mobility. Black women, particularly educated ones, took up the mantle of racial

uplift by spreading the message and educating other Black people in schools and in churches. "College-educated Black women, a group I call the Female Talented Tenth, disseminated middle-class morals and values among the masses and, at the same time, generated financial support for the Black church and its educational and numerous social service programs" (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 20). The role of the Baptist church was prominent for Black women. It was there that they found a "safe space" for self-definition. It was during the Woman's Convention that Black Baptist women strategized racial uplift.

> The politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations. . . . [it] assumed a fluid and shifting position along a continuum of African American resistance. (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 187)

"Teaching to Transgress": Contemporary Black Feminist Thought and Education

The realization that respectability politics, whether consciously or unconsciously, was if fact accommodation and assimilation to white social norms, led to a deeper understanding that freedom from racial, sexual, and class boundaries calls for education to be a practice of freedom.

> Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions- a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is a movement which makes education the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

Woodson (1933) asserted:

> The "educated Negroes" have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin, and the Teuton and to despise the African . . . to handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his conditions is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one's aspirations. (pp. 3–4)

Similarly, the socially constructed identity of Black women compounds their experience and since of self.

> Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable. In this context, certain assumed qualities that are attached to Black women are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (Collins, 2002, p. 7)

Black women continue to redefine themselves, their womanhood, their roles, and identity as teachers. The time between Reconstruction and Brown, almost a century, many Black people were taught in all-Black schools by all-Black teachers who were mostly women. It was believed that Black children learned better from Black teachers. Jim Crow laws allowed it, with separate but equal, and Black people demanded it once they realized the often racists attitudes and behaviors of White teachers did not benefit Black students. Numerous scholars documented how Black teachers were able to educate Black students with a sense of racial pride and academic excellence. (Today, it is called culturally responsive pedagogy.) bell hooks recalled her education experience post-Brown.

> School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority. When we entered racist, desegregated, white schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate black children rightly would require a political commitment. (hooks, 1994, p. 3)

The question that has plagued many Black education scholars is the academic gap; why are Black children not performing as well as White children? Sizemore (2008) asserted, "any approach which fails to address white supremacy and its counterpart, the imputation of Black inferiority, will force you to walk in circles as I have done" (p. xxiv). Ladson-Billings (2006) argued, "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that

characterize our society have created an education debt" (p. 5). Both Sizemore and Ladson-Billings require us to consider the totality of the situation. The failure of quality education for the masses of Black students is the combination of curriculum and pedagogy within U.S. White supremacy culture and its systems.

Black feminist thinkers and educators, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Zarretta Hammond, and Bettina Love, have laid a foundation for more effective teaching and learning. They are an example of how contemporary Black women educators have studied and practiced ways to address the achievement gap/ education debt for BIPOC students. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described culturally relevant pedagogy as "a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate" (p. 469). `

Hammond (2014) defined culturally responsive teaching as,

> An educator's ability to recognize students' cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the student knows to new concepts and content to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student to create a safe space for learning. (p. 15)

Such a teacher has created a way of building teacher capacity to help students move from dependent learners to self-directed, independent learners.

Love (2019) wrote, "The ultimate goal of abolitionist teaching is freedom. Freedom to create your reality, where uplifting humanity is at the center of all decisions" (p. 89). She argued that survival is not enough for our students. The "educational-survival complex" as Love called it, is when "students are left learning to merely survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, thus making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion" (p. 27). This is not the

education Black students deserve. When pursuing educational freedom, "the goal must be pursuing freedom at all costs as a collective group of abolitionism-minded people who welcome struggle" (p. 161).

Collins (2002) laid a foundational approach for analyzing the working conditions of Black women as teachers. She outlined four dimensions of Afrocentric Feminist epistemology:

- Lived experiences as a criterion of meaning
- Use of dialogue to assess knowledge claims
- An ethic of care
- The ethic of personal accountability.

These dimensions provide a lens to collect and consider Black women's work generally and Black women as teachers specifically. Their lived experiences must be amplified and valued as a means of consideration to understand and improve public education for all students, particularly Black students.

Lived experiences and dialogue are the heart of this work. The inquiry of the stories, as insider-outsider opens a conversation about their life histories as teachers and builds on Collins' Black feminist epistemology. The ethics of care and personal accountability are my wonderings of how and why they have stayed in the classroom despite their working conditions.

> The ethics of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process . . . Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style proving their concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims. (Collins, 2002, pp. 282, 284)

K-12 Working Conditions for Black Women Teachers

"Working conditions" refers to the space and place which teachers do their work is full of complexity. Black women who choose to teach in low performing predominantly Black schools

attempt to balance perception and data. Numbers that do not always come with the narrative and vice versa. Perception that these public schools are failing because the educators are not qualified or competent to teach.

The work of Black women teachers exists in a landscape of complexity. Historically, many educated women became teachers as part of the “racial uplift” movement. Socially, they understood teaching as women’s work. Politically, their intersectionality and identity as both Black and woman doubly constructs. Their working conditions have been subjected to underfunding, inferiority narratives, and inadequate resources. This perfect storm of unexamined circumstances that formulate the location of their work, is where this study entered.
The spaces where Black women did their work was a cauldron of racism, poverty, sexism, and racial threats. These spaces were often overcrowded with a range of age and ability. In this section, space is the political landscape whereas place is the physical location. Displacement is how teachers have been systemically and strategically removed. The conditions that Black teachers work in are created and influenced by policies that codify systems of oppression that affect the day-to-day work.

Displacement of Black Teachers

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black teachers were displaced—put out or pushed out (Arnez, 1978; Fultz, 2008; Perkins, 1989; Tillman, 2004). The implications of the legislation where Black students were denied education. “Segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race deprives children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible factors’ may be equal” (*Brown v. Board of Education,* 1954, Syllabus, para. 1). In his Opinion for the Court, Justice Warren stated, “The Supreme Court of Delaware adhered to that doctrine [separate but equal] but ordered that the

plaintiffs be admitted to the white schools because of their superiority to the Negro schools" (*Brown v. Board of Education,* 1954, Opinion, para. 3). The ideology of Black inferiority as a justification for desegregation led to thousands of Black teachers losing jobs throughout the South (Fultz, 2008; Perkins, 1989; Tillman, 2004). Many school boards did not renew teacher contracts because White parents did not want their students being taught by Black teachers (Arnez, 1966). Integration was interpreted as busing Black students to White schools. There were teachers who were assigned to teach subjects or grade levels that they were not trained in.

Another tactic of displacement was the misuse of teacher certification tests (Arnez, 1978; Bosma, 1973; Fultz, 2004). Presented as objective, the National Teacher Examination was used by many in the South as a legitimate ground for dismissal of Black educators. Bosma (1980) wrote:

> Perhaps no single device caused as much damage as the NTE in its effects on the employment and certification of Black educators in the South. Given the appearance of objectivity in the reporting of NTE scores, administrators were able to claim that dismissals were unrelated to discrimination. The use of the NTE acquired special significance because it presented the convenient means of legitimizing the Black teacher dismissals in the guise of objectivity. (p. 9)

The Georgia Board of Education codified another tactic to displace teachers.

> [The Board] unanimously adopted a resolution to revoke "forever" the license of any teacher who 'supports, encourages, condones, or agrees to teach mixed classes . . . further adding [for automatic disqualification], any teacher who was a member of the NAACP, any allied organization, or any subversive organization. (Fultz, 2004, p. 16)

This resolution was rescinded a few months later, however, it was replaced with "loyalty oaths" (Webb & Bohan, 2014). Georgia educators were required to sign loyalty oaths that demanded them to defend, support, and uphold the state's constitution which required segregated schools in 1955.

Another more recent example displacement of Black teachers was post-Hurricane Katrina (Akers, 2011; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Dixson et al., 2015), "the largest single displacement of

Black educators since desegregation" (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 1238). New Orleans Public Schools was a struggling district with many of schools taken over by the state for performance. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 led to the complete dismantling of the district, from traditional schools to multiple charter schools. More than 4,000 teachers were fired. The loss of homes and families, as well as this disbursement of residents throughout the country, resulted in a racial and political shift. The once predominately Black city, school board, and local government shifted to White. Public education reform, Teach for America (TFA), dominated the new landscape of the city. "An army of young and White transplants arrived in New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina to ostensibly 'reform' public education" (Dixson et al., 2015, p. 288).

Scholars have examined the outcomes of TFA for over 20 years (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Dixson et al. 2015; Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017; White, 2016). Lefebvre and Thomas (2017) found that since its inception, TFA had remained focused on education and social justice. The approach, however, "emphasize[d] the privatization of teacher training, funding structures, and school systems" (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017, p. 358) and is evident in its corps member "training, teacher placement, and professional development" (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017, p. 358). Corp members are recruited from universities across the country, commit to two years of teaching, and participate in a five-week summer training program before being hired to teach. These inexperienced teachers are often replacing Black experienced teachers in public and charter schools.

Charter schools have displaced many Black educators (Affolter & Donnor, 2018; Buras, 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Sanders et al., 2018). TFA and charter schools are "two of the most controversial educational reform initiatives aimed at changing the architecture of modern

schools in the United States" (Lefebvre & Thomas, 2017, p. 357). While many charter schools service Black students, the teachers are overwhelmingly White. TFA has been criticized for its displacement of Black teachers. The organization's founder created TFA for Ivy League graduates who had not decided on their career. To help the "less fortunate," they agreed to work in the inner-city to give back to the community by teaching for two years and having their student loans paid. This is problematic for several reasons: white supremacist ideology that any White graduate was qualified to teach Black students; they did not need formal or traditional education training to teach; TFA had a five-week teaching program; the most vulnerable students were being taught be teachers who did not have cultural competency; the charter schools did not outperform traditional schools; they displaced and replaced Black teachers.

Neoliberalism and Education Policy

The attack on U.S. public education began in the 1980s, the Reagan years. Reagan's goal was to dismantle the newly formed U.S. Department of Education (Johnston, 1996). The person he chose to dismantle it, Terrel Bell, had been a public-school educator who had created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to report on the quality of American education. This 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, has been a conduit for decades of discourse around public education. The "achievement gap" between Black and White children has been at the center of this education reform. The report argued that America's children are not globally competitive and Black children were even further behind. This document set the course for neoliberalism and education policies.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) of 2002 began the dangerous language and actions around standardized testing, teacher evaluation, and punitive accountability. The public shaming of low-performing schools, transforming teacher collaboration to teacher

competitiveness, bonuses and awards for high test scores and school closures, state takeovers, school choice and vouchers the art of teaching shifted to teaching to the test. Another critical aspect of NCLBA was the federal funding gained or lost according to outcomes.

Race to the Top, a $4.35 billion grant, continued to press the idea that competition would make teachers work harder and close the achievement gap. Innovation was the key to transforming education. *Testocracy* (Guinier, 2015) a justification for academic worthiness, has continued to (mis)define the quality of education. Many scholars have written about the causalities of standardized testing, including the expertise of teachers depending on the outcomes of student testing and students repeating grade if they fail the test. Additionally, parents have "school choice" by either putting their child in a better performing school within the school district, going to a charter school, or receiving a voucher to go to a private or parochial school. Student population shifts and defunding make the school more vulnerable for closure.

Charter schools have been marketed as the answer to public schools (Affolter & Donnor, 2018; Buras 201; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Sanders et al., 2018). They are tuition-free public schools that take money from the traditional schools. When a student leaves their home school, the funded per pupil leaves too. Even if the student returns to their traditional school the funding stays with the charter. The rise of charter schools, for-profit and not-for-profit, began with the creation of the federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) in 1994. This program allowed for innovative ways for teaching with less traditional restrictions. Charters are contracts that may last between three to five years then renewed. Many traditional school districts have moved to a charter model to allow more flexibility. Charter schools' budgets are less than traditional budgets because the staff typically does not have the credentialling or experience.

Housing and Public Schools

There is a long history of housing segregation between Whites and Blacks in the United States. In the 1930s, the New Deal Housing Act was established to provide guaranteed federal mortgage loans for Whites. Homeownership is a symbol of middle-class status and social mobility. It is a key component to the idea of the American Dream. Since this time, Whites have been able to build generational wealth that is about 30% more than Blacks.

The government has codified the housing segregation and valuation. The homes in Black communities are traditionally appraised for less—*redlining*. Maps were drafted designating where Blacks could live and where Whites could live (Rothstein, 2015). Blacks could not buy homes in White neighborhoods and vice versa. Whites were more concerned about middle class Blacks moving into their communities. Impoverished Blacks were housed in ghettos in the cities. Black communities did not have the same valuation as White ones.

Property taxes are used for public education (Evans et al., 2019; Kenyon et al., 2022; School of Education, American University, 2020). The value of a house or community determines how much tax revenue is derived. That affects the school budget which affects the working conditions of teachers. Either staffing or program supports. The expectation for teachers to do more with less. Filling the gaps of students.

In a 1969 interview, James Baldwin explained gentrification: “Urban renewal meant Negro removal” (as cited in Dillon, 2024, p. 9). Across the country, inner cities have transformed to gentrified spaces (Mann et al., 2020; Pearman, 2020; Pearman & Greene, 2022). Class is a driving force in who buys in gentrified spaces however, race dominates and transforms the demographic makeup. This contributes to the erasure of communities and threatens school

closures. When families are pushed out of the community the population of the school decreases and lead to closures and displacement of teachers.

Summary of Conditions in the Working Environment of Black Women Teachers

The intersections of class, race, place, and space dominate the working conditions in K-12 public education in the United States. Place, as the physical location of the school and community, has been transforming from the euphemism of "urban" to a revitalized oasis where the lower classes no longer have the "right to the city"(Lipman, 2013). The space that allows for this displacement is neoliberalism, an economic strategy of marketization that continues to take over public spaces like education. Black teachers are on a battlefield to educate students in the mist of these systemic oppressions.

Critical Race Theory and Education

> Critical race theory is grounded in the particulars of a social reality that is defined by our experiences and the collective historical experience of our communities of origin. (Lawrence et al., 1993, p. 3)

> Beyond just the critique of racial segregation in public schools, scholars have sought to uncover the ways that race manifests itself to create oppressive educational experiences for students of color (and their families) in seemingly 'race neutral' contexts relative to pedagogy, policy, and curriculum. In this way, CRT scholars in education seek to show the inextricable relationship between educational inequity and race. (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 3)

Critical race theory (CRT) began in the mid 1970s with the early work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman as they were both "deeply distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiii). Many law teachers and students "began to meet, to talk, to write, and to engage in political action in an effort to confront and oppose dominant societal and institutional forces that maintained the structures of racism while professing the goal of dismantling racial discrimination" (Lawrence et al., 1993, p. 3). These respondents to the stalled

post-civil rights movement and the rollbacks of its gains included Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.

There are six defining elements of CRT according to Lawrence et al. (1993):

1. It recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. It expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. It challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law.
4. It insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. It is interdisciplinary and eclectic, borrowing from several traditions including liberalism, feminism, Marxism, and critical legal theory.
6. It works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (p. 6).

Delgado (1995) explained the themes CRT as the acknowledgment that racism is normal, not aberrant in American society; the challenge to racial oppression and status quo sometimes takes the form of storytelling which analyzes the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race; Derrick Bell's notion of interest convergence—White elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for Blacks only when they also promote White self-interest. Further, he wrote that many critical writers "have been using biography and autobiography, stories, and counter-stories to expose the false necessity and unintentional irony of much current civil rights law and scholarship" (Delgado, 1995, p. xv).

D. Bell (2004) argued that interest convergence historically arose in this country and suggested how “basic entitlements of freedom”—in this case education for Black children—is sacrificed if not aligned with White interests.

> First, from the nation’s beginnings, policymakers have been willing to sacrifice even Blacks’ basic entitlements of freedom and justice as a kind of political catalyst that enables Whites to reach compromises that resolve differing and potentially damaging economic and political differences. Second, policymakers recognize and act to remedy racial injustices when, and only when, they perceive that such action will benefit that nation’s interests without significantly diminishing Whites’ sense of entitlement. (D. Bell, 2004, p. 9)

The seminal writings of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) used the lens of CRT to understand race and property in the U.S. public schools. CRT interrogates how racism is upheld in public schools and education reform policies (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018; Donnor et al., 2018; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Tate, 1997). It also challenges the centering of Whiteness as normative within the function and practices of public schooling. Counternarrative’s (the voice, stories, and experiences of the traditionally “othered”) a tenet of CRT amplifies the realities and impact of White supremacist systems and structures on Black people.

Ladson-Billings and Tate furthered the scholarship of Derrick Bell by arguing what roles race and property play in education, specifically the intellectual property of Whiteness as normative and the standard for measurement. The historical Western concept of African descendants as property (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) has maintained an ideological tension between property rights and Black people’s right to property. “The ability to define, possess, and own property has been a central feature of power in America” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 53). They grounded their discussion on three propositions:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States;
2. U.S. society is based on property rights, and

3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool to understand social and school inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48).

The close interrogation of "Whiteness as property" (Harris, 1993) in education by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) described these property rights; the *right of disposition* (e.g., students are rewarded only for conformity to White norms), *right to use and enjoyment* (e.g., structure of curriculum), *reputation and status property* (e.g., the idea that Black schools are not as reputable as White ones), and *the absolute right to exclude* (e.g., vouchers, school choice, gifted programs, and advanced placement courses).

Summary on Race and Rights

Race and property rights have a profound impact on the academic outcomes of Black students and the working conditions of Black teachers. The perpetuation of the systemic racism in public education through education reform and the gentrification of urban cities has shamed and pushed out Black families and teachers. Many scholars have built on the works of Ladson-Billings and Tate to deepen the understanding of and/or reiterate the inequities in urban public education (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Horsford et al., 2019; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Sanders et al, 2018).

Leadership Matters

Turnaround Leadership

> A turnaround school, which is obligated to adopt new modes of management, innovate curricula, improve student testing, and implement accountability measures, is influenced strongly by school leadership . . . [therefore] the restructuring of a turnaround school requires that the school's principal and at least one-half of the faculty be replaced. (Liu, 2020, p. 12)

The No Child Left Behind Act ushered in an era of accountability. It was the neoliberal education policies and practices that shifted public education. On the surface, closing the

achievement gap by investing in incentives and initiatives to change the course of low or underperforming schools, is a positive. Politically, conservatives and liberals agreed that the U.S. Public School System needs overhaul yet the how, is in question. More importantly, the self-serving motives for money and power are blaring. Neoliberalism, as an education ideology was birthed during the Regan era with the reporting of *A Nation at Risk*. In the report (Gardner, 1983), the low achievement of public school children became a matter of national security. School reform became the political platform for the presidents that followed. Specifically, the Bush administration with NCLB and the Obama administration with Race to the Top. The demand for accountability landed on teachers. They became the focal point of blame. To that end, education leadership became turnaround leadership for low-performing schools. Teacher evaluation systems included student achievement, passing standardized tests, as a defining point for teacher effectiveness. Teaching transformed from a profession to a technical job. Education leadership became more authoritative and transactional under the guise of transformational. In other words, the effectiveness of a principal was based on their ability to "turnaround" a failing school. This style of leadership had been detrimental to teachers and students.

Turnaround education leadership is a temporary fix for a complex situation, and it is not sustainable. In an effort to close the achievement gap, the U.S. Department of Education created the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Blueprint for Reform (2010). One of the priorities was "raise the bar and reward excellence," which meant first fostering a "Race to the Top." Second, supporting effective public school choice, and third, promoting a culture of college readiness and success. In addition to the NCLBA state-takeover of underperforming schools and student achievement attached to teacher evaluation, the Obama administration invested $3.5 billion into Race to the Top. To incentive student achievement is an attack on

public education by taking resources away from those who need it most and redirecting it charter and private schools in the name of "school choice." This neoliberal education reform ideology demanded a new turnaround education leadership.

Murphy (2008) wrote about the leadership in turnaround schools. In this article he "explored organizational turnaround in general" and "the concept of turnaround leadership outside of the Pk-12 education sector." The themes that emerged were:

- leadership as the critical variable in the turnaround equation;
- change of leadership as a generally essential element in organizational recovery; and
- type of leadership, but not style, as important in organizational reintegration work.

Murphy found the participants to be transformational leaders with "entrepreneurial instinct" and who were "leaders of change." He concluded that "while being sensitive to the warning about the appropriateness of a single, context free model of turnaround leadership, there are patterns of skills and dispositions that should be privileged in the search for agents of school recovery" (Murphy, 2008, p. 90).

Johnson (2013) explained "the neoliberal reforms, intending to 'clean the slate' and privatize school management, constituted 'shock therapy'"(p. 232). The use of corporate turnaround strategies as neoliberal education reform exploits the crisis of underperforming schools by implementing a "plethora of strategies seeking drastic and miraculous school reform in 'troubled' and 'failing' schools [with] the added element of closing schools and reopening them as institutions, often charter schools, managed by private entities" (Johnson, 2013, p. 232). School closures displaced many Black teachers and disrupted families and communities. Johnson studied the timeline to closure of one school in Austin. This school was a pillar of the community and once it received the "low-performing" school report card it was never able to improve. As a

result, teachers began to leave, and principal turnover was exacerbated. The turnover process began. Publicly, the school was synonymous with failure despite the community fighting back to attempt to change the narrative. Even after the "reconstitution of most of the teaching corps and leadership and the major restructuring the school" (Johnson, 2013, p. 238), ultimately the commissioner declared that the school be closed.

> Although students, teachers, and communities do survive, resist, and become resilient after the social death of school closure, is the trauma of shock therapy, without the kind of true social transformation that can bring educational equity, really what children deserve? (Johnson, 2013, p. 251)

Mette (2013) considered the perceptions of administrators as he explored the neoliberal agenda of turnaround school reform. How schools interpreted turnaround school policy, in his study, was a major determining factor on turnaround success.

> The schools that were not successful interpreted the policy as compulsory, felt they did not receive the support necessary to implement the program as intended, and felt they were already doing most, if not all, of what the turnaround trainers suggested. Thus . . . none of the causes of low student achievement were addressed. (Mette, 2013, p. 338)

These schools struggled with compliance to "mandated" turnaround strategies that did not allow "capacity building" within schools and a "predetermined structure" that constrained the school district. Although his study was with rural schools, he addressed the strength (or lack) of teacher unions. Teachers unable to refute their working conditions provided the opportunity for "rural school leaders to make quick and immediate change in their buildings without union representation" (Mette, 2013, p. 338). He drew three main conclusions:

1. Turnaround school policy was an example of the federal government "using funding as a dominate source of power to influence the behavior of schools to function more like a business" (Mette, 2013, p. 338).
2. Schools that used programs written by the same corporation that developed the standardized tests saw rapid student achievement;

3. That administrators that understood “the human connection and the need for people to rely on each other” were able to successfully implement school turnaround. (Mette, 2013, pp. 339–340).

Mette and Scribner (2014) did a case narrative of a Black woman principal charged with turning around a low-performing school. One of the first things that she noticed was the disconnect between her years of experience as an educational leader and the strategies that the turnaround specialists spoke about. Many “ignored relationship building with teachers in exchange for achievement on assessments, demanded unnaturally rapid improvement, and appeared to use data to remove teachers, not to build educators with individualized professional development” (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 8). When she voiced her concerns to the superintendent, his response questioned whether she was “just not up for the job . . . willing to make the change necessary” (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 8).

Ultimately, the principal implemented the rapid turnaround strategies by dismissing one-third of the teacher staff causing “irreparable damage” to the school culture. She felt constant pressure from the superintendent, a Black man, who felt similar pressure from the school board. “Her shift from a transformational style of leadership where she had inspired teachers to perform at high levels, to a transactional approach where she controlled behavior and actions with sanctions and rewards, also was a professional concern” (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 9). Doing the technical things that promoted rapid change also rapidly weakened school culture to the “point of clear dysfunction” (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 9). There were several important results from this:

- Teachers were scared of being dismissed.
- Teachers began isolating themselves.

- Shared leadership and shared accountability dropped.
- "Teachers blamed each other for not providing proper instruction in earlier grades as a reason why students were struggling to improve academically" (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 9).
- Students complained that learning was no longer fun because they were taking too many tests.

Liu (2020) completed the first comprehensive review of turnaround leadership since Murphy (2008). He found that researchers used the term *turnaround* differently: as a concept, a condition, a process, and the consequences. As a concept, turnaround is goal-directed and used to rapidly improve underperforming schools. It was an initiative to close the achievement gap between students. As a condition, schools struggled with forces out of their control such as a large percentage of students in poverty, limited resources, and huge time pressures. As a process, turnaround was the transformation of a school from low-performance to efficiency. Finally, turnaround as a consequence was the "dramatic improvement in performance created by changes within schools" (Liu, 2020, p. 11).

Leadership was found to be the key in school turnaround. "Leadership is key to school improvement because strong leaders prepare for change at the organizational level, empower the leadership of others with shared vision for local reform, and help sustain a coherent program of school-wide development" (Liu, 2020, p. 11). Liu (2020) found that the typical styles for turnaround school leadership included "transformational and heroic leadership with business models of accountability" (p. 11). However, the process and effectiveness of these models lacked clarity and cross-cultural understanding.

> Both district and building leadership provided too much emphasis on the technical improvements of turnaround policy while seemingly ignoring cultural aspects, lacking

> ethical leadership to meet the needs of the individual school building, and relying heavily on a form of transactional leadership by targeting areas of weakness and rewarding compliance to produce increased test scores. (Mette & Scribner, 2014, p. 10)

Adaptive Leadership

According to R. E. Owens (2004), "In today's fast-paced world dominated by change, the school and particularly the school leader, must be constantly sensitive to emerging changes in the external environment that call for nimble, deft, rapid responses by the organization" (p. 258). Further, "The goal of adaptive leadership is to transform the relationship between leader and followers so that participants are energized and motivated by unity of purpose and mutually shared values" (R. E. Owens, 2004, p. 280).

Heifetz (as cited in Faith & Leadership, 2008) said that there is a difference between solving technical problems and adaptive challenges. Authoritative leadership styles best solve technical problems. Solving adaptive challenges, however, need a different skillset. "In an adaptive challenge the people are part of the problem and their ownership of the problem and their responsibility taking for the problem, become part of the solution itself" (Heifetz, as cited in Faith & Leadership, 2008, 3:30). "Instead of looking for saviors, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 2).

Batagiannis (2007) used an example in her research showing the difference between a technical issue and an adaptive challenge faced in the classroom. Teaching reading to a student resolves a technical issue, whereas, motivating an unmotivated student is an adaptive challenge that is "more complex with more far-reaching implications and impact" (Batagiannis, 2007, p. 149). Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2013) said, "People must challenge their existing belief systems and behaviors as well as recognize the greater system and its dynamics that affect the leadership process" (p. 94).

Another goal of turnaround principal leadership is relevance. A principal must know the current trends not only in education but in society. For example, many leaders struggle implementing technology in their building. Teachers, particularly tenured teachers, resist fully implementing technology. They may use PowerPoint or the internet, but they do not allow students to learn using technology. Cellphones have taken over the classroom and are often more distracting then helpful. In my classroom, I allow students to use their phones with the understanding that it must be work related. I refuse to have a power struggle with students and their phones, but I also model the need for compromise. I will allow use of phones if the student is using it as a learning tool. This means that I also must be technologically savvy.

Principals using adaptive leadership in this setting also must understand that today's youth are growing up in a completely different world from when they were in school. Even teaching in 2001, when I first started, is completely different from teaching two decades later. When I was in school, mass shooting did not happen. However, the first rule of teaching is having a safe environment. Principals should not be in denial about the threat to safety in the schools and its many forms—bullying, cyber-bullying, and physical threats of violence. One solution is arming teachers with guns. There must be a discussion with all stakeholders and a solution reached for the safety of the school and all occupants. An adaptive principal leader must consider those marginalized and those normalized by the decisions that are made.

Social Justice Leadership

> Social justice leadership is a process or manner in which you live in an ethical society . . . [It] is leadership that emphasizes equity, ethical values, justice, care and respect in educating of all students. Principals make use of issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the U.S. central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision to ensure the academic success of all students. (Kemp-Graham, 2015, pp. 103–104)

There is a thin line between the ethic of care and ethnocentrism. “The ethic of care suggests that everyone has a right to be cared for and that we should be moved by needs, inequities, social ills, and problems faced by the other” (Bass, 2012, p. 49). While one may believe it to be a part of their social justice work to care, privilege often is a lens that distorts cultural realities with bias.

> This is a reflection of the privileged nature of Americans, who are primed to believe that they always have something to offer to the benefit of “less fortunate” countries. Americans are known for . . . “silver bullets” and a savior mentality. (Bass, 2012, p. 40)

Bass (2012) was examining the ethic of care in U.S. educational leadership in other counties. It is interesting, however, to see that this mentality of ethnocentrism is here in American when the privileged look through this lens while educating those that have cultural differences.

> Educational leaders must be able to discern patterns of exclusion and segregation as perpetuated through administrative policies and practices. They must analyze policies and practices with the intent of identifying those that continue to grant privilege and a sense of entitlement to one group while only offering disadvantage and limited access and opportunity to others. (Jean-Marie & Dancy, 2014, p. 55)

A principal who uses social justice leadership, embraces the realities of the society and how it affects youth in public schools. What does marginalization look like for Black youth? What makes them marginalized? How does their marginalization manifest within their individual intersectionalities? How do the principals’ privilege manifest in the decisions made on behalf of the students? It was difficult to finding a definition for social justice leadership. The simplest way to describe social justice leadership in schools is to acknowledge that

> a school merely reflects society, which includes multiple cultural identities and a range of connections to social power based on historical, political, and economic factors. When [educators] enter a school, their cultural identities follow them; how they interact may mirror interactions occurring in today’s de facto segregated society. (Khalil & Brown, 2015, p. 80)

It is imperative that the principal is a reflective leader and open to new ways of overcoming possible predisposed notions of the youth and the community in which the school serves. This further implies that the principal is not only aware of personal biases but creates space where all stakeholders can work toward making changes to that ensure a democratic educational experience for students. Therefore, the principal must provide opportunities for staff to reflect on their bias and extensive training around race, equity, and inclusion.

In a study of aspiring school leaders, Kemp-Graham (2015) found,

> respondents subscale scores indicate that they do not have a firm understanding of institutional oppression and the misuse of power that constrain human and legal rights of individuals and groups in society, but they strongly agreed that the American Dream is real for anyone willing to work hard to achieve it, totally disregarding institutional and societal racism and oppression. (p. 123)

The problem with racism in American public education is that it is a reflection of American racist culture. This type of thinking is detrimental. If aspiring educational leaders do not understand the role of institutionalized oppression in public schools, then how can they transform low-performing schools? Using social justice leadership demands the principal to reflect on individual biases. When the principal shows up on the first day of school, who shows up with him or her? How does he or she perpetuate racist ideology? The American Dream is a hopeless dream for so many. Hard work and grit do not guarantee the American Dream in a system that has codified oppression. “An educator’s ability to look beyond the day-to-day stressors of the school to the larger structural context of segregation and historical marginalization can empower the educator to see his or her societal role in educating and inspiring students” (Khalil & Brown, 2015, p. 80).

The principal must model good social justice practices. The principal must train the leadership team, teachers, and staff about the danger of micro-aggressions and low expectations. There must be open dialogue about how oppression looks and the realities and implications

thereof. There also must be implementation planning and attainable goals set within specific time periods. Change the culture of the building, by creating, nurturing, and supporting a new culture that helps students, teachers, and administration.

Summary of Key Leadership Qualities and Issues

The language in *A Nation at Risk* was the dawning of 21st century education reform. U.S. public school children were outperformed academically by other countries in the world and there were achievement differences between the races. This was considered a threat to "our very future as a Nation and a people" (Gardner, 1983, p. 13). NCLB began the era of accountability for schools, leaders, and teachers. Schools could be taken over by the state and teachers and leaders could be removed as a consequence of low-performance. Turnaround education policy required turnaround leadership and standardized testing became the catalyst. Over the past 20 years, turnaround leadership had not kept its promise to save low-performing schools, but it had opened the doors for private companies and big corporations to take federal dollars marked for school improvement.

Turnaround leadership may have been intended as a transformational style but soon became transactional and school culture has suffered for it. This also opened the door for ethical issues. Since turnaround leadership has failed to provide a return-on-investment in education it is time to invest in leadership that addresses the complexities of the 21st century. Adaptive leadership demands critical thinking. It is the understanding that complex situations cannot be solved with technical solutions. Social Justice leadership required social consciousness that is needed for the nuanced spaces of public schools. These leadership styles are not exhaustive, but they do provide context that is needed to lead education spaces.

Conclusion

The perfect storm—"a critical or disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)—is exactly what the working conditions of Black teachers is. It is a powerful concurrence of systemic racism, sexism, and classism that pre-dates the Emancipation. Black Teachers navigate this space, "the isms and schisms" while wrestling with their own identity and teaching students about theirs. The collective trauma of slavery racialized and gendered oppression, and the stresses of standardized testing. "And still I rise," a Black woman's anthem, speak to an ability to overcome oppression and stigma. This is the ability to survive, but love said, "we want to do more than survive." Many of us have on some level survived the cultural horrors of White supremacy. Yet, the struggle continues for quality education, housing, and physical and psychological safety. And Black women teachers continue to use their locus of influence to solve their problems and problems for their students.

Leadership also matters in the 21st century K-12 public school landscape. There is more than enough data to show how ineffective turnaround ideology and policy is for students. For more than 20 years, this strategy has not closed the achievement gap between the races and has shifted the school culture. More harm than healing has been done for teachers and students. Education leaders must have sociopolitical awareness so that they can use the best leadership approaches for their situation such as adaptive leadership and social justice leadership.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN

This study explored Black women's lived experiences as teachers in urban schools during the era of 21st century education reform. In this chapter, I introduce a qualitative narrative inquiry into the teacher life histories of Black women. I chose a qualitative design to privilege the working experiences of Black women in low-performing public schools who teach classes that are attached to state standardized tests. As Seidman (2006) concluded, there is little education research based on the perspective of teachers, in this case Black women teachers. Often teachers are critically evaluated by student outcomes: grades, tests, and graduation or promotion to the next grade. When state report cards are published, teachers are seemingly the only factor in a student or schools' success. What is the story behind the numbers? Quantitative data must be understood in context. What are the circumstances that shape the environment? How can the stories of these teachers' working conditions provide a broader understanding of what is going on in a low-performing urban public school? What then is a teacher experiencing while doing her work?

Rationale for This Study

Based on educational research, Luttrell (2010) discussed the role and responsibility of the qualitative researchers to privilege individual meaning-making of one's reality in the context of experiences. The interdisciplinary nature of qualitative research "leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single, umbrellalike paradigm" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. xv). There is no one size fits all methodology when exploring a person's life. To think from this perspective only contributes to narrow-mindedness, misunderstanding, and lost history. The goal of research is to evolve one's thinking not to continue with prejudices and oppression by

excluding nondominated cultures. The participants must be seen, valued, and respected as human and the researcher honors and maintains the participants' dignity.

> Qualitative research insists upon a face-to-face, heart-felt encounter between knowing subjects, a recognition that each of us is unique in our effort to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. To approach another as a knowing subject—to care about a person's integrity, joys, sufferings, and self-definition—takes intellectual and moral courage, scientific risk-taking, and artful representation of what one has learned. (Luttrell, 2010, p. 1)

The issue of validity, in qualitative research is often challenged because individual experiences may not be transferable. Resistance to qualitative research is often political. It is considered only exploratory, unscientific, and criticism not theory therefore, it is seen as an assault to real sciences, such as chemistry and economics, the "crowning achievements of Western civilization" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Comparatively, these scholars argue that qualitative research stress the socially constructed nature of reality whereas, quantitative research emphasize measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables do not process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To make education a respected academic discipline in universities, Seidman (2019) argued that education researchers were not interested in the stories as a method of understanding the culture of teaching in the voice of teachers. Instead, they patterned research models after those in the sciences. These science wars, qualitative versus quantitative designs, deflect attention from the urgent social issues that need to be investigated and curb the methodological diversity and creativity investigations demand (Luttrell, 2010). The mandate of standardization from education policy and practices in the classroom have been driven by federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002. Additionally, the federal regulation of educational research has increased governmental control over what counts as evidence and quality (Luttrell, 2010).

This project was built on the idea of participants being seen, valued, and respected (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Goodson, 2008; Lutrell, 2010; Patel, 2015). To this end, I used narrative inquiry into the life histories of Black women teachers. I undertook the interviews by asking a semi-structured open-ended question. This allowed the Griots to tell their stories with limited interruptions from me. In their own words, they will share stories of their life as a Black women teacher. Situating these stories within the sociopolitical and sociohistorical context, I framed their lived experiences as teachers as a life history. "In life history, the intention is to understand the patterns of social relations, interactions and constructions in which lives are embedded . . . the life story individualizes and personalizes, the life history contextualises and politicises" (Goodson, 1992, p. 10). I believe neoliberal education reform, gentrification, displacement, COVID, and racism impact the working conditions of Black women teachers. Additionally, using the lenses of CRT and Black feminism I sought a deeper understanding of their experiences. These stories can be more fully understood within the context and intersectionality of being both Black and woman.

Research Problem

Although there is a relationship between attrition and working conditions (Farinde et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018) there is a gap in the research about the working conditions of Black women teachers in the era of accountability. The deprofessionalization of teaching (Baltodano, 2012; Compton & Weiner, 2008; de Saxe Zerden et al., 2018; Fabricant & Fine, 2013; Goodson, 2008; Horsford et al., 2019) has a role in teacher attrition. Media and political attacks blaming teachers for the 'crisis in education' have led many to believe that teachers are lazy and choose the profession for the money. "We are left to deduce that policy attacking teachers is at best misguided and at worst a consequence of a cynical

policymaking that circumscribes the problems of public schools to simple frames of scapegoats and a politics of austerity" (Fabricant & Fine, 2013, p. 39). The school report cards posted by state boards of education use qualitative measures to determine the worth (good or bad) of a school. That implicates teachers too. There is more to a school and its teachers than passing or failing; a complex story that includes the intersectionalities of humans (race, gender, class) as well as the context which they live their lives. The dual pandemics of COVID and racism have exposed the continued inequities in public schools and the communities they serve that are predominately Black and Brown. COVID has forever changed the ways that teachers teach. It has also required new forms of student engagement while simultaneously adding new stressors to the work, including teaching.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQ) for this study were as follows:

RQ1: What are the working experiences of Black women teachers of tested subjects in low-performing urban public schools?

RQ2: How do socio-political factors affect their working conditions?

Narrative Inquiry

> One of the most neglected aspects of the taken for granted reality of schooling is the importance of teachers' lives. (Goodson, 1992, p. ix)

I chose narrative inquiry because it focuses on the participants and their individual stories. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained the differences among five qualitative approaches. This is not an ethnography because I will not focus on their stories "within the context of their culture or culture-sharing group." Neither am I studying the "essence of their experiences" which is a phenomenological approach. "In narrative research, the inquirer focuses on the stories told

from the individual and arranges these stories often in chronological order (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 103).

Humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others, they live their stories in,

> an ongoing experiential text . . . A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories . . . education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

Narrative inquiry is complex and, like other qualitative methods, does not rely on validity, reliability, and generalizability. However, the risks of dismissing criticisms of the personal and interpersonal in narrative inquiry can be narcissistic and solipsistic (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Foster (1997) was the first to write a book that was "entirely devoted to the narrative rendering of Black teacher experiences" (p. xix). Using the life history method, her work was part of a movement among social historians to record the experiences of Blacks who lived as second-class citizens until the civil rights movement. Morris (2001) extended this work by analyzing his interviews with Black teachers using the framework of CRT. He found that the larger society had a deep-seated belief pre-Brown, that Black schools employed inferior teachers who were not properly preparing Black students. He concluded, "The voices of these educators provide a more inclusive, but often neglected, voice on education policy for African American children" (Morris, 2001, p. 596).

Atkinson (2007) observed: "The life story provides a practical and holistic methodological approach for the sensitive collection of personal narratives that reveal how a specific human life is constructed and reconstructed in representing that life as a story" (p. 224).

There are two distinct ways of using a life story, ideographic and nomothetic. The ideographic life story is used for purposes of the individual or personal story whereas nomothetic is used for universal, collective, or social purposes. The individual story shows that each Griot is an individual with her own experiences. The collective story generates shared themes that may be common to Black women teachers. Both ways will be ascertained. Hence,

> A life story can be analyzed or interpreted, from either an individual or collective perspective while the life story interview helps the storyteller, listener, reader, and scholar understand the relationship between the story and our psychological, sociological, spiritual, and philosophical selves. (Atkinson, 2007, p. 224)

Delgado (1989) wrote that many stories are being written by outgroups. “Loosely described . . . outgroups [are] groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (p. 2412). In contrast, he said, the dominant group too, creates stories to remind them of their identity and shared reality as superior in relation to outgroups. It is necessary to make space for the counter stories of outgroups. Otherwise, the dominant stories will continue to erase, exclude, and silence. Delgado also argued that narrative is a powerful oppositionist tool to counter stock stories. Oppressed groups instinctively know the power of stories as an essential tool for survival and liberation. To them, stories are a means of “psychic self-preservation and as a means of lessening their own subordination” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). Storytelling reminds oppressed groups of their ancestral and community stories of resilience, resistance, and hope. By looking through the lens of others’ experiences, Delgado (1989) concluded, “Stories humanize us” (p. 2440), thus, bringing us closer together.

Using storytelling for social justice as a pedagogical and conceptual model was seen in the work of L. A. Bell (2010). By creating race-conscious counter-storytelling communities, she analyzed racism in ways that can promote dialogue and remedies to dismantle racism within

institutions and interactions. She grounded her teaching model with four story types: *stock stories* are the stories told by the dominate group, passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, laws, the arts, education and media; *concealed stories* coexist alongside the stock stories but most often remain in the shadows, hidden from mainstream view, but providing a perspective that is often very different from that of the mainstream; *resistance stories* are the warehouse of stories, too seldom taught in our schools, that demonstrate how people have resisted racism, challenged stock stories that support it, and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangements throughout our history; and *emerging/transforming stories* are deliberately constructed counter-stories that challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and create new stories to interrupt the status quo and energize change. Simply, her goal was to "consider what we lose, when stories of and by diverse groups are concealed and lost, and what we gained as a society when we listen to and learn from the multitude of stories available for our consideration as we seek to dismantle racist structures and patterns in our society" (L. A. Bell, 2010, p. 22). The stories that will be told by these Griots have been concealed and resistance narratives that explain how they have stayed in the profession despite their working conditions.

Elbaz-Luwisch (2007) examined how narrative inquiry was used in K-12 setting by studying the lives of teachers and the practice of teaching. She argued that studying what goes on with teachers in their classroom is challenging for many researchers yet a unique research journey. She found that the early research, in the 1960s and 1970s, examined the psychology of teaching by using conceptual lens of that period. The questions of the time were about the personality of a good teacher, the reasons for entering and exiting the profession, and which teachers had difficulty with classroom discipline and why. Education research still examines the

effectiveness of teachers, classroom engagement, discipline and management, and teacher retention. The complexities of teaching extend beyond content to adaptability within unprecedented times and continue within the context of institutional racism and inequities.

A teacher biography is positioned in a broader context of "the school, the school system and its mandated curricula, ideologies, pedagogical trends, and reform processes" (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007, p. 359). The nature of narrative as a personal, engaged inquiry that seeks to share the experience of life in the classroom and represent the participants respectfully is a major challenge to be confronted by inquirers (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). As an outsider-insider, I understand why privileging the personal experiences of Black women teachers is crucial to counter-storytelling. Respectfully representing them is done by providing space for them to tell their stories in their own words. Narrative inquiry accounts for that.

Life History

> Lives are never lived in complete isolation from social contexts. (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 22)

The life history researcher is a person with his or her own complex personal history which is a guiding influence in all aspects of a study (Cole & Knowles, 2001). They contend that life history, acknowledges the personal, social, temporal, and contextual influences that facilitate the understanding of the lives and phenomena being explored. From conceptualization to representation, the communication of new understandings is an expression of the researcher's life history. Life history and narrative honor individuality and the complexity of individuals' experiences. "Whereas narrative research focuses on making meaning of individuals' experiences, life history research draws on individuals' experiences to make a broader contextual meaning . . . life history research relates to the way in which history is defined" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 20). Thus, it is important to first make meaning of the individual experience

of teaching as a Black woman then find shared experiences from the collective that will broaden the meaning of teaching within the sociohistorical and sociopolitical context of being Black women teachers. Context is essential in life history inquiry. There are political, ethical, and relational complexities within the relationship between the participant and the researcher; the role of participant as interpreter and representer and the researcher's role and responsibility (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Life history research, as defined by Curtis and Curtis (2011), is "an approach that collects and analyses data sourced from semi-structured interviews with an individual about their biography. The interview material is typically subjected to triangulation, using secondary research to help contextualize the life history" (p. 55). They argued that life history had not "achieved the status of a formal method" (p. 55). Life history had been somewhat marginalized and was used to study the lives of marginalized people. Furthermore, this marginalization of the approach reflects the social and cultural life of the mainstream rather than the margins, social structure rather than with individuals. Curtis and Curtis (2011) stated that life historians use three ways to gauge or improve the validity of life history:

1. They ask the participant to read and critique the completed life history.
2. They compare the life history with other life histories.
3. They compare the interview material with secondary research. (p. 71).

Dhunpath (2000) examined the contributions of narrative research in educational research. He argued that educational research should acknowledge the essential fallibility of human beings and empower individuals to theorize their professional practice while attempting to improve the quality of learning for themselves and others. He also argued that life history is a counterculture that works against the power and/or knowledge structures held and maintained by

politicians and administrators. The archetypal image of teachers has traditionally been presented by researchers that utilize the positivistic approach that "strip research of the rich tapestry of human experience and emotion" (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 548). Much of the educational research employed in teacher education has been developed from a foundational disciplinary discourse with its philosophical, psychological, historical, and sociological components all far removed from teachers' personal knowledge and experiences. It has been produced by "scholars writing within their own contexts and resonates with their own career concerns in a publish or perish environment" (Goodson, 1994, as cited in Dhunpath, 2000, p. 550).

Another scholar who has studied life history and teacher lives extensively is Goodson (Goodson, 1992, 2008, 2014; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). He argued that personal and collective biographies have been neglected in the studies of schooling "by concentrating on the occasion or the event, most notably the school lesson" (Goodson, 2008, p. 34). To study the life history of teachers, "we gain insights into the way in which, over time, individuals come to terms with the constraints and conditions in which they work, and how these relate to the wider social structure" (Goodson, 2008, p. 34). Teachers are not machines that merely teach young people, they are human beings who have lives in and out of the profession. Their working lives have developed over time and shaped how they navigate the everchanging constraints and conditions of the job.

Participants[1]

The participants in this study were eight people self-identifying as Black or African American women and who have taught tested subjects within low performing K-12 urban public school district in the southeastern area of the United States. To participate, they had to have taught at least three years for the district with a minimum of seven years of teaching experience.

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[1] In the presentation and discussion of the interviews and results, I refer to the teachers who participated as a "Griots," the term used across West Africa for a storyteller.

These teachers currently taught tested areas or have taught within the past three years. They all taught in the same cluster, meaning the elementary schools feed into the middle school that feeds into a high school. Typically, students take state standardized tests between Grades 3 and 12; depending on the grade level the students may take any or all core subject tests at the end of a school year.

I conducted a purposeful sampling by sharing with cluster administrators and teachers (Pabon, 2013) via email my research topic. I recruited seven teachers in total: one from elementary, two from middle, and four from high school. I was the eighth teacher who had recently taught high school.

Settings and Procedures for Study

The interviews were done on Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. The audio was recorded during these sessions on Zoom and Otter.ai, a meeting notetaker. Each participant was asked to write a reflective journal response, the final data set, within their preferred setting.

Data Collection

Using a method like Pabon's (2013), all participants completed two one-hour interviews and were asked to make a journal response. During the first interview, they shared stories of their K-12 education and experiences. During the second interview, they shared stories of their working conditions as a teacher. Finally, the journal entry was intended to be both reflective and reflexive of either their best or worse school year and why. However, I did not receive journal entries as planned. The interview/journal questions were as follows:

- Interview question 1: Would you tell me about your childhood experiences in K-12 education?

- Interview question 2: Would you tell me about your working conditions and experiences as a teacher?
- Journal entry question: (Choose one) What was your most rewarding experience as a teacher and why? What was your most challenging experience as a teacher and why?

Analysis

Plot analysis was chosen to locate a chronological structure of the stories told. According to Daiute (2014), the elements of the plot in a narrative are lifelike. They include characters, setting, initiating action (problem), complicating action, high point (climax), a strategy to resolve the problem, and a resolution of the problem. They may also include a coda (reflection or moral of the story) and the narrator's stance. "These plot elements may appear with different elaboration, in different orders, and in different combinations. A narrative must, however, have some combination of elements to express a culturally relevant plot structure" (Daiute, 2014, p. 115).

Investigators confront a series of interpretive decisions when doing narrative work: how to facilitate narrative telling interviews; how to transcribe them; and how to approach them analytically (Riessman, 1993). Certain kinds of open-ended questions encourage narrativization. Transforming talk to text can be difficult because it is a representation that involves selection and reduction. She explained,

> I know of no way to avoid the painstaking work of personally transcribing the sections of text that appear to take a narrative form . . . in my experience, the task of identifying narrative segments and their representation cannot be delegated. It is not a technical operation but the stuff of analysis itself, the "unpacking" of structure that is essential to interpretation. (Riessman, 1993, p. 58)

Analysis should begin with the structure of the narrative (Riessman, 1993). Instead of reading narrative simply for content or evidence, she presented two guiding questions: how is it

organized, and why does an informant develop her tale this way in conversation with this listener?

Coding is analysis although others attest that coding and analysis are not synonymous (Saldaña, 2015). In the same vein, Saldaña (2015) said coding is heuristic. As an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas or algorithms to follow, codes initiate a rigorous and evocative analysis. Coding is what one perceives it to be, and it requires deep reflection, according to Saldaña. As a form of analysis, "Coding well requires that you read, reread and reread yet again as you code, recode, and recode yet again" (Saldaña, 2015, p. 41). A ProQuest dissertation search of life history of teachers generated 3,986 results but only two about Black teachers that used the keyword life histories. Pabon (2013) did not use life history as a keyword, but she used life history in her dissertation.

Ethical Considerations

While a researcher must be aware of her positionality as outsider-within, she is also aware that the stories of the participants are theirs. I believe that "both/and conceptual stance of Black feminist thought [will allow me to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and feminist consciousness, and to be . . . a respectable scholar" (Collins, 2002, p. x). Transferability was not intended; rather, individual and a collective narrative added counter-narratives of Black women teachers working experiences. The narrative was an entry point for future narratives and counter stories that provided context and perspective from those who do the work. Lived experiences are valid and creditable. They are the foundation of how one makes sense of the world around them.

Conclusion

What we know so far about Black women teachers in urban settings is not complete. The gap in research needs more first-person narratives about what is really happening in the 21st century classroom, particularly from the perspective of Black women. Life history not only gives us these individual and collective stories, but also does so in context. Lives are not lived outside of their context. Studying Black women teachers' lived experiences as situated in the U.S. sociopolitical and historical landscape, adds a needed counternarrative to the mainstream assumptions about low performing urban public schools. Ask a Black woman teacher!

CHAPTER IV: SELECTED GRIOT NARRATIVES

The purpose of this study was to explore Black women's lived experiences as teachers in urban schools during an era of 21st century education reform. The purpose of the interviews was to learn more about Black women teachers lived experiences first, as a K-12 student and then as an educator. My expectation was to hear only experiences that the Griots wanted to share. Each participant was asked one primary question in each interview. The participants did not know what the questions were prior to the interviews, therefore, they were reflecting, reminiscing, and verbally processing their experiences as the interviews continued. When there was a natural pause in their speaking, I used probing questions to gain more understanding. Often, I would ask the participant to "go deeper" or "tell me more" about something they shared. During the first interview, I asked about the Griots' K-12 experiences. If they were stuck, I would probe about experiences in elementary, middle/ junior high, and high school. This helped the Griot organize their thoughts around their experiences. During the second interview, I asked the women to share their experiences as teachers. Again, because the participants did not know the question prior, they were verbally processing their experiences. There was a range of emotions such as crying, laughing, reflection, empathy, regrets, and coming to a crossroads about their next steps in education. When there was a nature pause, I would probe about teachers' working conditions specifically those that were in Balow's (2021) report. For example, some women did not immediately speak about parent involvement or collegial relationships, therefore, I would probe about those experiences.

The interviews were recorded on Zoom and Otter.ai. Once completed, I reviewed the Zoom audio and edited the transcriptions from Otter.ai. This was done because the Zoom audio was clearer and Otter.ai records audio and transcribes it. I was intentional in recording both ways

during each interview in case any technical issues arose. After transcribing the interviews, I printed them and created a booklet. During the analysis phase, I read and numbered the stories. I created two profiles for each participant: first, about each Griot's K-12 education experiences as a student and second, of the Griot's working conditions as a teacher in urban school settings. Afterwards, I created a plot analysis chart to analysis the working conditions of the Griot. Finally, I summarized the emergent themes. That was the process used for the individual Griot stories. Next, I organized all stories into a collective plot analysis chart. There was a total of 160 stories between the Griots. I cut the stories in strips of paper and organized them by themes. Each plot element was on different color paper and each story was marked with the number of the Griot who told it. I was able to see whose stories were in which themes and how they were organized in the individual plot analysis chart. Throughout the process, I made handwritten notes on notecards, reflection journal writings, recorded verbal processing, and had endless conversations with various scholars and educators.

"We learn from hearing and studying what participants say . . . by crafting a profile in the participant's own words, the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person's consciousness" (Seidman, 2019, p. 128). The following profiles are intended to lend an understanding of the Griots' consciousness. They are merely snippets of who they may be and how they storied their lives as a child and as a teacher. I began each section with the plot analysis chart showing first, an overview of the stories told and second, their stories structured in a plot format, although they did not share their stories linearly. For example, the first story that they shared during the interview may have been a high point instead of an initiating action. The stories are numbered in the order they shared within the plot analysis structure.

As mentioned in Chapter III, the plot analysis structure includes characters, setting, initiating actions, complicating actions, high point, resolution/strategy, resolution/ending, coda, and narrative stance. Instead of using the plot structure language, I created phrases that represented the Griot voices: who and where; her beginnings; her struggles; her tipping point; her Black feminist thought; it is what it is; Black feminist researcher; and her stance.

Griot 1: Giving Back to Her Community

> If you're gonna be a teacher and a high school teacher . . . come home . . . come back and teach your own. (Griot 1)

Plotting Griot 1's Stories/Narratives

Table 4.1 shows how I organized Griot 1's stories in a plot analysis chart. The initiating actions of Griot 1's stories were principal turnover and the inexperience of the instructional coach. The complicating actions included teacher turnover, student resistance, limited or no parent involvement and the curriculum. The high points included students' explosive behaviors and the divided school culture of "them versus us." The resolution strategy to address the disconnect between the 9th grade building and the main building was to build a stronger culture and climate. The resolution ending was an attempt to move forward after the student uprising and staff turnover.

Table 4.1

A Plot of Griot 1's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 1
WHO	Principals, teachers, instructional coach, students, parents
WHERE	urban high school (one district)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—principal turnover Story 7—instructional coach behavior

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 1
HER STRUGGLES	Story 2—teacher turnover Story 3—student resistance Story 9—limited to no parent involvement Story 10—curriculum and instruction (pedagogy)
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 4—students explosive behavior Story 6—old school v. new school
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 8—culture & climate
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 5—aftermath (fight, fire, frustrations)
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Following in the footsteps of her teachers, Griot 1 returned to her high school as a teacher. The culture and traditions had changed over the years. While she is saddened by what it has become, she still believes that she can make a difference. She feels indebted to this community and wants the legacy to continue.
HER STANCE	*"I am a product of this particular high school and this particular community, where I still have family that live here. So I have a different type of connection to the school and to my work environment . . . the goals . . . the school vision."*

Profile of Griot 1's Roots

Griot 1 is from Georgia. She was raised in city housing and matriculated through public schools. She caught the city bus to elementary and middle schools because she was not zoned to attend them, however, she attended the high school in her community where generations of family members had graduated, her father, aunts, and cousins. Griot 1 graduated in 2002. She shared eight stories about her K-12 education experiences that extended to college, which is significant to this study. Those stories included riding the city bus to school; her favorite teachers; and being a majorette in high school. She began telling how she was kicked out of kindergarten.

Griot 1 began the interview speaking of her first educational experience. To start school, she had to be five in September; otherwise, she would have to wait until the following year. Her

birthday is in October. Somehow her mom managed to get her in school before she turned five. "I'm assuming that she must have forged my birthday to change the date. She didn't tell me." When her real birthday came, she missed school to celebrate. Upon returning, she was questioned about her absence. They called her mom to come and pick her up. "So pretty much, they had kicked me out of school. And I had to wait until the next year to start school like I was supposed to. I went back the next year. It was fine. I liked school."

Around the age of 10, she began catching the city bus. Her mom did not want her going to the neighborhood elementary or middle schools. Parents could send their children outside of their community if they provided their own transportation. As a little girl in a big city, her mother gave her explicit directions particularly since there were no other children from here school riding the bus. "It was really just me. Yeah, it was really just me." For safety, she was told to walk down the major street where she could be seen by people and not to walk through the neighborhood to get to her elementary school. As children do, she decided to walk down through the community instead of the major street as she was told. It was dark and early in the morning. "It was eerie, and you don't know what's gonna happen. I think I heard noise on the street or something . . . I'll never forget this. I shot to the street . . . took off . . . like running so fast to that main street." That was her first and last time doing that.

The ride to middle school was visually different. Like elementary, this was not her zoned school. This school is in a middle-class Black area. "The neighborhood was different than my neighborhood. You know, I grew up in the city projects, housing . . . to get on the bus and get over to this other area of town where the houses are nicer. The yards are nicer." She described it as a different world. Black people, those that looked like her, had the things that she only saw on

television. As she reflected more on her bus rides, she said she would not let her kids ride the city bus at such a young age. “But that’s kind of what we had to do, you know?”

During high school, she remembered and appreciated the nurturing from her coaches and teachers which extended beyond those years. Many of her educators were alumni of her school. They knew intimately the struggles of living in the community, and they were glad to return as teachers. She was a majorette, an auxiliary of the band. All three coaches graduated from this high school. It was obvious there was a tradition, a socialization about going out into the world and bring what you learned back to benefit the community.

She left for college as a nursing major. The deeper she got into the coursework; she began to struggle. Remembering what she learned in high school, she went back home to her high school coaches, now mentors, to process her next steps. She knew she was “pretty decent in math . . . I can teach.” Immediately, one said, “when you get to your student teaching, you can just come over here and do it.” The instructional coach helped her with teacher certification test, and a teacher was planning to retire. Things fell in place. Even after she had a major car accident, they held the position for two months while she healed. For years, she also wanted to be the auxiliary director and last year that dream came true. “So, I am at the school that nurtured and taught me. I honestly don’t think that I would be the person that I am if I didn’t go here.”

Summary of Griot 1’s Roots

Griot 1 was taught to value education. Her mother wanted better for her and invested in schooling opportunities and experiences that would expose her to things outside of their improvised community. Griot 1 said she would never allow her kids to catch the city bus to school at such a young age, but she understood why her mother made her do it. She was surrounded by a support system that believed in her and insisted that she do her best and when

she made it, come back, and help her community. These K-12 experiences directly impact why she became a teacher and committed to uplifting her community. Her teachers and coaches modeled the expectation of giving back to the school that raised her as many of them were alumni of her high school too.

Profile 2: Griot 1's Working Conditions

Griot 1 began her teaching career in 2014. She was first a long-term substitute in another school district before returning to her alma mater to teach. She is an Algebra teacher, the Math Department Chairperson, and the New Teacher Mentor. She is a first-generation college graduate. She shared 10 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included high principal and teacher turnover; student resistance; tradition v. new ways; and curriculum and pedagogy. She began talking about the extreme principal turnover; she had five principals in eight years.

Principal attrition had plagued this school community of many years. The first two stayed for a school year then moved on. The third principal created some stability by staying three years. The school was improving and received recognition from the district. Once he left, the culture shifted. The fourth principal, who started in 2019, was not encouraging nor supportive to the staff. "Every time there was a conversation, it's an insult. It's a . . . 'you're not doing anything'." The pandemic intensified the problems, particularly leaving the building and going virtual. "Now you're trying to teach teachers and we're online so everybody's learning, everybody's new." This principal was also at the center of a scandal and once they returned to the building, "we ended up having a student walkout." It was on the news. The students rejected him and "he was out." The current principal started in the fall of 2021. "She's the first female principal that the school has ever had in 54 years."

The return, post-COVID, came with many changes.

> Now we got a to do a new principal and everybody from the students to the teachers to the administration . . . everybody's trying to figure it out . . . every single day. And at the same time, the students are just, I mean, going nuts . . . fights on top of fights on top of fights. Then we make it to January, and we have a fire.

Griot 1 spoke about a student setting toilet paper on fire in the bathroom, which was next door to her classroom. Black smoke filled the hallways and they had to evacuate immediately. But that was not the worst of it. What happened next was outrageous. It happened during lunchtime. Students were tired of standing outside and they were hungry. Since they could not go back into the building, they split them between the auditorium and the gymnasium.

> When I tell you Miss Devoe . . . fights broke out like you ain't seen ever in your life. When I tell you brawls, we had brawls, and I don't mean like one or two. I mean, five or six going on at the same time . . . you leave the gym, go outside in the park area and they are fighting out there . . . four or five fights in the auditorium . . . it was nonstop almost 2 ½ hours straight.

This was an extremely difficult year for everyone and there were so many new adults it was difficult to contain all the frustrations that the students felt. They exploded.

Griot 1 had a new instructional coach who wreaked havoc on the math department because of her inexperience as a teacher and as a coach. "She was one of those ones that took on the idea that 'you guys . . . you don't know anything.'" The previous year she was the math specialist and "she never came into my class . . . ever" to support, therefore, there was no expectation that as coach she would be better this year. There were three new math teachers, and the district was adopting a new math curriculum. These transitions made it difficult for the team to navigate all the moving pieces. As the department chair, Griot 1 had to work closely with the instructional coach while listening to the frustrations of her coworkers. "I felt like she kind of tore the team up." With the new people, the instructional coach should have been "going into the classroom and helping them and supporting them and giving them tools and strategies. A lot of

times, she was giving them, you're not doing this or you're not doing that . . . very unsupportive." Many of her math colleagues were having major problems with the coach. Then they were informed that she turned in her resignation. "I don't know if it's true, but the street committee found out that she, meaning the instructional coach, only had about three years' worth of experience."

With the complexities of the changing math curriculum, new teachers, and district mandates she and her colleagues struggled. The curriculum is on grade level, but the students are not, therefore, it is impossible to keep up with the district pacing guide. Students do not have the skills or background knowledge. To compensate,

> I'm going to have to front load . . . we're gonna do it their way for two days and on the third day, I'm gonna do it my way, the way that I know works . . . the way that I know proves to help my students and then I can go back to your way.

She became frustrated with the instructional coach because she did not listen or understand their concerns. The new stressor is the anticipation of the state changing the math standards. That means new teachers, new curriculum, new standards, and new gaps during these transitions.

Summary for Griot 1's Working Conditions

Griot 1 spent her teaching career working at her alma mater. She intentionally worked there as a way of giving back to the community that raised her. She believed that she could make it better. However, the high turnover of principals and staff and the current school culture made it difficult. The nostalgia of what it was when she was growing up and the reality of what it was as a teacher was disheartening.

> I really enjoy the collaboration and camaraderie. I do, at the same time, hate the fact that it just feels like we can't get it right . . . when you feel like you're doing really good and it's going really smooth and then boom. It feels like a never-ending cycle.

Griot 2: Know Their Situation

> To impact your students' lives, you don't have to know everything about them, but you have to know about their living conditions . . . what's going on . . . in their households or when they leave you. (Griot 2)

Griot 2: Plotting Her Stories/Narratives

Table 4.2 shows how I organized Griot 2's stories in a plot chart. The initiating actions of Griot 2's stories were the lack of school spirit, the behaviors of assistant principals, and lack of math books. The complicating actions were new administration, the expectations from teachers regardless of their circumstances, no protected time for teacher planning and collaboration, and professional development takes up much of the planning time. The high point was students entering high school without basic numeracy skills, parent behaviors and the role of the students at home, teacher autonomy, and Advances Mathematics and Decision Making (AMDM) to be discontinued. The resolution strategy included rating her teaching career experiences, supportive behaviors from leaders to teachers and teachers to students, getting to know teachers and students and building relationships; and district-created units of study for courses. In the end, her relationships with her math teams were like family.

Table 4.2

A Plot of Griot 2's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 1
WHO	students, parents, administration, teachers
WHERE	two urban high schools (two districts)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—lack of school spirit Story 3—assistant principals Story 16—lack of math books

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 1
HER STRUGGLES	Story 4—new administration Story 10—teacher expectations regardless of person situations Story 11—teacher collaboration and planning Story 12—planning as professional learning
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 6—kids lack basic skills Story 7—parent behaviors and role of student Story 13—teacher autonomy Story 15—AMDM course to be discontinued
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 5—rating work experiences Story 8—supportive behaviors (leaders to teachers, teachers to students) Story 9—know your teachers and students Story 14—district units of study
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 2—math team like family
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Many of her students lack basic math skills, therefore, they struggle with high math courses. "Teaching is hard and getting harder" because she had to remediate and teach new math skills simultaneously. While it is a hard job, she is not ready to leave the profession.
HER STANCE	*"Overall, it's been a good experience. I just where I am had a lot more school spirit. And I'm in a situation where I have to re-prove myself, if that's a word, because all of the administration is new. They don't know who I am as an educator. I had to speak up because there's good opportunities that have been given to other people . . . has passed me . . . you don't even give me the opportunity to interview."*

Profile of Griot 2's Roots

Griot 2 is from Georgia. She was raised in a middle-class Black community neighboring a major city. She has friendships with classmates since third grade. Griot 2 graduated in 2000 from an Arts Magnet public school. She shared 17 stories about her K-12 education experiences that extended to college, which is significant to this study. Those stories including favorite teachers; playing the clarinets; and various activities that the band participated in. She began telling how third grade changed her life.

Miss Third Grade Teacher was cool and, “She always made us feel important. She always challenged us, and she just showed us a lot of love.” She made her feel so comfortable in her class that Griot 2 strives to make her students feel the same way. It was in Miss Third Grade Teacher’s class that she met many lifelong friends—her best friend, “she’s the yin to my yang. She is definitely the Wild Child and I’m the voice of reason.” She was still friends with many of those classmates. They matriculated from elementary through middle school to high school. Two of them even went to college with her. She had fond memories of that time.

She realized that she had lived what she called “a sheltered life“ by the time she went to middle school. She commented:

> My elementary school was filled with the same kind of kids, the same upbringing, backgrounds, all that kind of stuff. Middle school was where I got a chance to see what was really going outside of my neighborhood: good, bad, or indifferent.

It was difficult realizing that some children do not have their basic needs met. She wondered how other people lived if not like her and those in her community. She also spoke about meeting Muslim friend. “I learned a lot about his culture and his religion.” Sixth grade was most challenging not academically but learning about difference.

Music played a major role throughout her childhood. “I started playing the clarinets in third grade.” Therefore, she attended an arts magnet high school. She remembered being a scared freshman because she did not know what to expect when she showed up for summer band camp. “You know, all this talk that they gave you about you being ‘fresh meat’ and all . . . none of that happened. I was really embraced. My best friend was there with me, so it was all good.” She learned about the different types of bands and played in three of them: marching band, concert band, and orchestra. Being part of the orchestra was a big deal because there were only two clarinet positions. “You had to be really, really, good to do that.” In Grade 10, she was second chair and first chair her junior year. “It was amazing, absolutely amazing.” She enjoyed the

diversity in magnet too. “You had your art kids, you had your drama kids, dance kids, your band kids, your orchestra kids. But it was still, at that time, a level of academic excellence that floated over the school and I loved it.”

Summary of Griot 2’s Roots

Griot 2 grow up in a close-knit Black middle-class community. She became aware of other people’s circumstances and experiences once she began middle school. She became a musician in third grade and played through high school. Attending an arts magnet high school was full of excitement and participation in varies musical events. She dreamed of going to Florida A & M to play in the marching band there, however, her dad insisted she go to Clark Atlanta University (CAU) because both her parents and grandparents were alumni. She refused to play for CAU’s marching band and never played the clarinet again.

Profile 2: Griot 2’s Working Conditions

Griot 2 began teaching in 2012. The first three years she worked at her high school alma mater. She has worked at her current school for the past eight years. During her tenure, she has taught algebra, geometry, and AMDM. She shared 16 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included the lack of school spirit; new administration; students’ lack of basic math skills; and teacher autonomy. She began talking about the lack of school spirit.

There was more school spirit at her alma mater than her current school. “I might be a little biased because I graduated from there.” Even as a teacher, she could not explain it, “but you just felt it in the atmosphere.” On game day, students would paint their faces, wear their sports jerseys, and other school apparel. Whether a cheerleader, football player, or band member, students would show support for game day. Even the kids who “aren’t athletically inclined or not necessarily into music or any of that . . . they just had school spirit.” The pep rallies were “hype.”

At her current school, she observed, the pep rallies are "lackluster. It didn't feel the same and you could tell that nobody but the teachers, administrators, the band . . . probably 10 kids and the football team cared. There was no face paint."

She spoke of being passed over for opportunities outside of teaching in the classroom. With attrition of principals, she feels like she must prove who she is as a teacher repeatedly. There have been occasions where opportunities are available, but she had not been considered. "I see that a lot of old heads, if you would, are being passed over for opportunity. They [the administration] don't know us and now they're looking outside of the building for people to hire for these positions." She is of the belief that those who currently work in the building should be considered before looking outside.

All in all, she had supportive administrators in her career. She did mention one administrator that she currently worked with. She stated that the administrator did not know how to be supportive. "She just does not come around. And when she does come around, it's because something is wrong." It is difficult because the feedback is always what she needs to work on and never what she is doing well. Teaching is hard enough, so it would be nice to have supportive and encouraging words from the leadership.

> You're already seeing so much negative stuff. You don't really feel like you're making an impact in certain areas in terms of the actual curriculum because they're so low. Now, you can see the impact in their lives . . . but curriculum, your just feel like you're not making any headway. To feel like that everyday going into the classroom teaching and then someone only coming in to tell you what you're doing wrong is a lot to handle.

Students are coming to high school lacking basic math skills. In other words, students show up to high school math with third grade ability. It is harder to work with these students when she was teaching algebra, the tested subject. When she started teaching, there were a few students that were working below grade-level but now, more than half of the class is struggling. "I'm very excited if I have a class of 25 students and I got seven in there, that's rockin' and

rollin' and we can start from day one of Algebra versus day one of fourth grade." She was expected to begin where they are academically and get them at least to proficient by the end of the school year. COVID made the situation worse because students and teachers were trying to navigate online. Many students did not attend school online which put them further behind. When they returned to face-to-face learning, they had to make up the year of math they missed in an online platform while learning the current year of math.

Additionally, the administration implemented make-up days as a solution for raising grades. In essence students who have failed or missed assignments throughout the semester have an opportunity to do the work with no penalty. The student response to this school practice, however, is do nothing until the end of the semester. "And you can come out with the same grade in the class as someone who's been busting their butt the whole time because you've been allowed to make up what you've missed without penalty." Teachers are than expected to grade multiple assignments from lots of students within a short time. This is taxing on teachers. Are students learning?

She spoke about parent behaviors and student roles in their household that hinder student success. There had been times when she called a parent regarding their child's attendance.

> They don't care. And instead of trying to assist me and make sure their child gets where they need, what they need, if a call and say oh, your child has missed four or five days of class . . . [the response] oh, he was sick, just send him his make-up.

She expressed that she cannot "want it more for somebody then they want for themselves." Teaching without parent support was extremely difficult. The poverty in the community also would directly affect student attendance and performance. Many of her students worked to support their families, especially during COVID. When having lights on in the home is a priority, school becomes secondary.

> That's hard to balance too because as an educator, my first job is to educate you. At the time, I have to have compassion because I can't tell you to ask your manager to not schedule you during school time, if it's going to make a difference between you having a roof over your head or not.

Administrators, while they say they understand the demographics of the students, are "not in the trenches with you with students coming in and telling you their living conditions . . . all they're concerned about is, what the scores look like." The data showed that "70% of the class is below average. What do you want me to do? How do you penalize me for that?" Furthermore, she was not an elementary school teacher, yet the students are on elementary math levels.

Summary of Griot 2's Working Conditions

Griot 2 had an amazing high school experience and she wanted that for her students. It was well rounded with great academics, school pride, and lots of "clean fun." She began her teaching career at her alma mater, an art magnet, where she was disheartened to find that the school culture was not like it was when she was in school. She often spoke of the lack of "school spirit" at her current school where she taught for eight years. Griot 2 believed that if the students had more school spirit, they would enjoy school more. With each new administration, she spoke about the need to "re-prove" herself as an educator only to be passed over for opportunities outside of the classroom. She also stated how students are not mathematically prepared for high school. Finally, she spoke of family priorities with parent and student roles; a lot of parents do not care and/or many students work to help support their family.

Griot 3: Doing Too Much

> I feel stretched a lot. I think sometimes people take advantage of our love for their kids . . . most of the time, I don't think our load is realistic. (Griot 3)

Plotting Her Stories/Narratives

Table 4.3 shows how I organized Griot 3's stories in a plot analysis chart. The initiating actions of her stories were her roles and responsibilities, being short staffed, COVID losses, money spent on programs, not teachers, and the ripple effect of high turnover. The complicating actions were stretched administers, planning for multiple content areas, the struggle and necessity of school breaks, parent involvement and student roles at home, social media dreams, teacher observations specifically, and the culture of observation in general. The high point was advance placement student requirements that differ from general education requirements, the exploitation of teachers, no common content planning, teacher autonomy, the disrespect of experienced teachers, and being overlooked for other opportunities as an educator. The resolution strategies were being intentional to create a comfortable learning environment and slow pacing down to help students learn. The resolution ending was believing teaching is a calling, being at the crossroads of career, seeing the "writing on the wall," and having a good team of co-workers.

Table 4. 3

A Plot of Griot 3's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 3
WHO	administration, teachers, students, parents
WHERE	two urban high schools (two districts)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—Griot 1 roles & responsibilities Story 2—short staffed Story 9—COVID losses Story 22—spending on programs not teachers Story 24—high turnover & the ripple effect

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 3
HER STRUGGLES	Story 1—teachers treated like slaves Story 4—“good ole boy” parent complaints Story 5—principal behavior (threatening demeanor) Story 11—defending self against parent pushback Story 12—administrative position, ill-prepared for politics Story 19—mismanaging funds for ESOL students
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 15—testing last 10 years; learning styles v. teaching styles v. test requirements Story 16—teacher autonomy Story 31—Griot empathy for parents, grandparents, guardian
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 3—fought for equity for ESOL students Story 7—coping with testing anxiety Story 17—plan for student learning style Story 20—letters to the tests Story 24—student mindset Story 26—student reflection Story 28—parent mindset shift about Math
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 2—parent used Griot as contact for her child Story 6—parent support teacher expectations Story 9—Teacher of the Year Story 14 —It’s a calling
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Being on the “state list“ heightens the stresses of working at this school and pressures to pass the state tests. Curriculum pacing ensures students are on track, however, it assumes that students are performing at grade-level. When they are not, pacing is nearly impossible because students are missing background knowledge and basic literacy skills.
HER STANCE	*“My working experience, I feel stretched a lot. I think sometimes people take advantage of our love for their kids. And sometimes our, most of the time. I don’t think our load is realistic to have balance. And even realistic in this post COVID era, I feel like we’re trying to go too much back to business as usual. When we really need to address the learning losses and not just with another test, but actually take the time to actually get the students back on track.”*

Profile of Griot 3: Her Roots

Griot 3 is from Georgia. She was raised in a Black middle-class community. Many members of her family and extended family are educators. Her father loved history and they

would watch history programs, like Eyes on the Prize, together. Griot 3 graduated in 1998. She shared 26 stories about her K-12 education experiences. Those stories included favorite teachers, math and science not being “her ministry,” being in band and Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), and having dyslexia. She began telling how she went to Catholic school.
The strictness of Catholic School was where she began her schooling and early on, she and her family realized it was “not the best environment for me. They used terms like “busybody“ and “hyperactive” to describe her “inquisitive” nature. She would “ask a lot of questions . . . in hindsight, I probably felt stifled: It was too strict” It was the epitome of “old school teaching.” Students were expected to learn by “basically regurgitat[ing] the information.” She did not remember having Black teachers but most of teachers were nuns and White. “It might have been some racist things there . . . I probably blocked out certain things . . . but just thinking in hindsight . . . clearly, they [my parents] got me out of there. My parents had the insight: this is not working for her.”

Before going to public school, she was tested for dyslexia. “I had dyslexia, but it didn’t really pick back up until I got to college.” All the while in elementary and secondary school, it did not hinder her academically.

> I realized, you know, flipping B’s and the D’s. I have to rewrite things multiple times because sometimes I think faster than I can write. English class, you had to do your draft and had to rewrite and rewrite until you get things right. It was only in college that she had to acknowledge her dyslexia and get accommodations.

She concluded that this learning disability may have been the cause of her struggles in Catholic school.

Her love of history had shared roots at home and at school. The lessons that impacted her most were those about Ancient Egypt and Black people. She was able to make the connections of

Black people being more than the enslaved Africans of the United States. At home, her parents nurtured her love of history by giving her experiences.

> The beautiful thing of that era . . . it was a lot of awareness. You saw Andy Young and all these great people on TV all the time . . . I was interested. I would sit there and watch Eyes on the Prize and all those different things on PBS with my daddy. That was our thing.
>
> She read lots of different types of books and enjoyed the museum.
>
> I remember when they opened the Vanderbilt Estates . . . mom I wanna go. [She asked] "That's what you want for Spring Break? Okay, that's what we'll do." I was placed in a space that they encouraged whatever my thing was . . . either history or the arts."
>
> She was able to feed her love of learning at school and at home and she was grateful.

Summary of Griot 3's Roots

Griot 3 began her schooling at a Catholic School. It was not a good fit for her because she was very inquisitive but was expected to comply with the nuns'—her teachers—commands. They often considered her to be hyperactive because she was a "busy kid." She was diagnosed with dyslexia although it did not affect her schooling until college. She had a love of history mainly because her father loved history. He was from Birmingham and knew the Civil Rights Era intimately; "he knew the little girls that got bombed and the families." They watched Eyes on the Prize and other PBS specials together. She loved learning about Black people.

Profile of Griot 3's Working Conditions

Griot 3 began her teaching career in 2005. She has taught in her current school for eight years. She is the Social Studies Department Chairperson and this year she taught U.S. History, Advance Placement (AP) U.S. History, African American History, and Economics. She shared 24 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included her roles and responsibilities; being short staffed; exploitation of teachers; COVID losses; and being

overlooked for opportunities. She began talking about the role as department chair and teaching a tested subject.

"I'm the chair as well as teacher and I have a tested subject. So, it's already high stress, the testing subject, because of the frustration of pacing." Curriculum pacing is a theorized solution for better test scores that also stifles teacher autonomy because it is prepackaged and scripted. She literally does not have time to teach. "We don't have time to really teach the material because we have to worry so much about pacing . . . I'm basically showing it to you . . . it's not going to be done with fidelity because it's so much [to contend with]." Teacher time, the more clerical aspects such as lesson planning, and calling parents, was being commandeered by meetings.

> Example, in the week you might have a meeting during your planning period, let's say Tuesday, but then Wednesday you're expected to stay after school for something else. And then you still have to turn in lesson plans on Thursday . . . it's a lot. Pacing and time for a teacher . . . that's not a lot of time to cover from colonization to Obama.

Unfortunately, teaching to the test is the option and it counters the pedagogy of veteran teachers. "When the kids asked you a great question, because they're activated, and you want to have those moments and sit in it. Unfortunately, we can't. We don't have time for that in my school in a testing subject."

Experienced teachers are disrespected nowadays. There was a time when a novice teacher looked to a more veteran teacher for guidance and mentorship within the profession. She recalled when she started teaching, "I was that teacher that would gravitate towards people who have been doing it . . . just pick their head . . . those type of conversations. I don't see that as much from the younger ones." It is more like "us versus them," depending on the building. "The new young, nice shiny teacher versus the older teacher because we might question them, because we

do have experience." It is not everywhere. Some teachers and schools embrace "the wisdom" of veteran teachers.

With the high turnover in her school, often new administrators had brought in new staff without considering those with institutional knowledge of the building. "I remember when the first person [principal] came in. He was like a drill sergeant . . . you don't know what you're doing. We're gonna bring these [outside] people. It was literally like us and them." The end of COVID disrupted that narrative.

> When we had "real school" and stuff started blowing up in their face . . . we told them XYZ as the older teachers who'd been there, then it was like, Oh wait . . . it's like what we told you, but you didn't listen . . . we didn't know what we were talking about.

At this point, she felt,

> I've hit the ceiling at my school. I don't think, even though I'm capable of things, I don't know if they will let me move up and do other things because I am a good teacher. It's like, "she's gonna get the job done. She'll get the work done." I'm a worker bee . . . "You're good in this space. And we know we can depend on [you]."

Being overlooked for opportunities was frustrating particularly knowing she was qualified. She spoke about a time when she was overlooked for a coaching position in the building. They hired someone outside of the district.

> I met this lady in St. Louis on my fellowship, and she's like, "I'm gonna be your instructional coach." She quit after a month. I was in my petty pocket, and I told my AP they would not have had that problem if y'all would have picked me . . . hindsight, y'all didn't even advertise [the position] to us.

COVID taught a powerful lesson to Black women teachers. Working in education is not sustainable if there is no work-life balance.

> I know the system's gonna have to change if they want to survive . . . because the way we are going now, we're not gonna just lose the bad people. We're gonna lose some good people. One thing I have to say about COVID, it was a hard reset. People got to sit down and see different things they could do . . . I love what I do but on the flip [side], I can't go to the gym like I wanted to . . . I can't take care of myself the way I've done before just because of the job."

COVID helped her evaluate what was important; not only her health but being healthy to take care of her aging parents. “If they call me, nothing else matters, it doesn’t. But on the flip side, I have to be well enough for myself and for them because if I’m not well then, who’s gonna take care of them.” Therefore, the school district needs to rethink how they treat their teachers.

> They’re gonna have to figure out better ways to make balance because people will find other ways to make money and we’re gonna have more people leave the profession if they don’t; especially if I can use my skillset and be less stressed out and have more time. There are online positions.”

When she taught online during COVID, she found the four-day week to be beneficial for teachers.

> We had a day to do our clerical stuff. For me, I know that [made] a world of difference. I got to do grades . . . phone calls, lesson plans, I had time versus ok, you have 90-minute planning period . . . but let’s be honest, I’m a teacher. So, I gotta go to the bathroom. I might want to eat. I might want to breathe for a second.

Teachers cannot continue to work this way.

Summary of Griot 3’s Working Conditions

Griot 3 had the dual responsibility of being the department chair and teaching a tested subject, U.S. History. She is interested in new opportunities within education but had been overlooked for building leadership on more than one occasion. She is now at the crossroads of her career; should she stay until retirement or leave the profession all together? COVID has also shown the possibilities of remote work. It was a “hard reset” for people to imagine new ways of working.

Griot 4: Teach by Any Means Necessary

> I’ll never tell you I don’t throw rocks; I just don’t hide my hands. If it’s right for my babies . . . I’m going to do it. (Griot 4)

Plotting Griot 4’s Stories/Narratives

Table 4.4 shows how the I organized Griot 4’s stories in a plot analysis chart.

Table 4.4

A Plot of Griot 4's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 4
WHO	parents, students, principals
WHERE	several urban schools (4 districts)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 8—school mandates like the penal system Story 10—school as a dumping ground Story 13—limited parent support, life is happening Story 18—see test scores not children Story 21—children told they can't Story 22—students need tutoring Story 23—student mindset Story 25—curriculum not working for students Story 29—student effort Story 30—student efficacy
HER STRUGGLES	Story 1—teachers treated like slaves Story 4—"good ole boy" parent complaints Story 5—principal behavior (threatening demeanor) Story 11—defending self against parent pushback Story 12—administrative position, ill-prepared for politics Story 19—mismanaging funds for ESOL students
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 15—testing last 10 years; learning styles v. teaching styles v. test requirements Story 16—teacher autonomy Story 31—Griot empathy for parents, grandparents, guardians
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 3—fought for equity for ESOL students Story 7—coping with testing anxiety Story 17—plan for student learning style Story 20—letters to the tests Story 24—student mindset Story 26—student reflection Story 28—parent mindset shift about Math
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 2- Parent used Griot as contact for her child Story 6 – parent support teacher expectations Story 9 – Teacher of the Year Story 14 – It's a calling

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 4
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Griot 4 challenges all things that are not good for students including administrators, parents, textbook publishers, systems, and student mindsets too. She recognized that many of her students have test anxiety and she worked for find strategies to help them overcome. She is confident in her ability as a teacher and has no fear about advocating for what she believes is right for children.
HER STANCE	*"You only give me a contract for one year so why am I worrying about next year when I haven't done this year? Why would I not do right by these children? This baby that I am being allowed to teach and learn from, they might have the cure for a disease that might not affect me but might affect my children's children. I can't worry about next year . . . let me do for my children what I need to do now. We're not addressing how our children learn and how they learn through trauma."*

The initiating actions of her stories were schools with mandates like a penal system and as dumping grounds; limited parent support because life is happening; seeing test scores not children; children told that they can't and they believe it; student mindset, effort, and efficacy; students need out-of-school tutoring; the current math curriculum is not good for this population of students. The complicating actions were "treating teachers like slaves"; "good ol' boy" parent complaints, threatening principal behaviors, defending self against parent pushback, having an administrative position but being ill-prepared for the politics, and mismanaging funds for ESOL students. The high point rise of testing—learning styles versus teaching styles versus test requirements; teacher autonomy; Griot empathy for families. The resolution strategy was equity for ESOL students; coping with test anxiety; plan for student learning styles; letters to the test; change student mindset; support student reflection; and change parent math mindset. The resolution ending was parent trust Griot; parent support teacher expectations; Teacher of the Year; and "it's a calling."

Profile of Griot 4's Roots

Griot 4 is from New Jersey. She was raised in a diverse middle-class community. She was in school during a time where there were limited positive images of Black people, therefore, she felt the weight of representing the whole race. Griot 4 graduated in 1980. She shared 31 stories about her K-12 education experiences. Those stories included texting anxiety, bullying, honor roll, expectations of excellence, her love of sewing, and being exhausted. She began talking about her anxiety during tests and her White teacher's response.

Although she was a good student throughout her childhood, she struggled when taking tests. "I got real nervous when I took tests and I would scratch my head and shake my leg. I remember a teacher saying to me, 'you need to wash your head'. That was very impactful on me . . . my hair is clean." The fact that this was a "Caucasian teacher," added intensity to the stress of testing. "Even though I was always prepared well, I knew I couldn't fail due to the expectation from my family . . . that brought a lot, a lot of stress on me." She was raised knowing that she was as good as White people and that came with a weight to represent the entire Black race.

Race was ever present in this interview. She spoke of experiences with her "White friend" from elementary school. "I remember in first grade, my friend . . . trying to wash dirt off my hands, knowing that I was Black. [long pause] I was like, this is my color." Years after that incident, she spoke to her mother. She pointed out that Griot 4 would say "my White friend, [name]" but call her Black friends only by name. "Why did you call [name] your White friend? Why is she just not 'your friend'? My mother [pausing] made it easy for me to see people as just human, which was beautiful." But that same friend, visited her house once and was "amazed that there was a fire lit and the house was clean. I remember watching her just looking around. And me and my big mouth saying, 'what did you expect, roaches?'" Her mother was not pleased with

that response. ”I was like, ‘she [was] looking at the house like she didn’t expect us . . . me to have my own bedroom’ My siblings had their own bedroom.”

In high school, during her junior year, she led a walkout protesting the Homecoming Queen. The student body voted for their choice, however, “I remember they would not crown [name of person] as Homecoming Queen . . . because she had a baby out of wedlock. She had won the votes, but they did not crown her Homecoming Queen and she was a Black girl.” She decided to stage a walkout as the student council president, but she remembered “telling them, we can’t act a fool because my mother will come up here and whip my behind.” During the crowning ceremony, they walked out because they “couldn’t change that.” Instead, they honored the one they chose.

> She was garbed in red, black, and green. That was one of the best days ever. And we all saluted her as our Homecoming Queen. And I will say, I felt bad for the other girl because I don’t even remember her name, but it was Blacks, Whites, Browns, Tans, and Yellows . . . It was everybody celebrating her because she was our vote.

She was teased for being smart and dark skinned. Some students walked past her advanced math class and told her that they had seen her. They said, “you like a fly in a bowl of milk. You was the only Black thing in there. Hmm. [long pause, heavy exhale, and emotions]. I was like a fly in the bowl of milk. I was always referred to like that.” Other times she was called “Oreo, Black on the outside, White on the inside,” or “militant . . . I had to let them know militant means arguing for a cause.” Perhaps she received that better than the other names they called her.

There were several times during her interview where she spoke of the weight of Black excellence and representing the whole race. She said, it was so exhausting that “I went to the military instead of straight to college.” She made her parents proud but as the oldest grandchild with four siblings, she always felt the pressure of being excellent from the “demands of my

household . . . I was like the example. It was so much put on me and I guess I put so much on myself with everything. So, I was exhausted." During the time she was growing up, there were no positive images of Black people.

> You got to realize, back then there were images, that we weren't excellent, and we weren't powerful, and we weren't highly educated even though you were seeing all these professional people around you. So, I think my mom because she didn't graduate, she was determined that her kids would. Yeah, she was hard but she was loving.

Summary of Griot 4's Roots

Griot 4 is from the North and came of age in the sixties. She experienced race and racism in accordance with the times. She faced bullying with an undertone of racist mentality from her Black peers, "the fly in a bowl of milk." She also was aware of the microaggressions, although not that language, of a White friend coming to her home and assuming that she lived in poverty. She fought for and led a protest against the White homecoming queen after the students voted for the Black one. Consequently, she felt the weight of representing the entire Black race.

Profile of Griot 4's Working Conditions

Griot 4 began her teaching career in 1998. She had worked for four urban school districts within the metropolitan area. In her current position, she taught 8th grade Math. She shared 31 stories about her teaching experiences. Those stories included the different experiences in different districts; parent complaints, pushback, and support; testing and test anxiety; fighting for English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students; and strategies that she used for students. She began talking about coming from the North to teach in the South.

In the first district she where she taught, "I felt like many times teachers were treated like slaves . . . it was like the plantations in [this] county [school district] and sometimes the powers that be thought that they were [chuckle] slave master or the overseer or something." If she felt something was unfair, she did not "brattle my tongue . . . I made it known and I had a lot of

pushbacks with some authorities. Wow . . . the master was usually, not trying to be funny or ugly, was a Caucasian but the overseer was a Black administrator." They spoke "to educators as if they were subservient and less than and wasn't qualified to do the job." What saved her from "my mouth" were "scholar results" and supportive parents, "because they knew I loved their babies."

In another country school district, she experienced White parent pushback as a Black teacher of White children. "I was really in the 'good ol' boys' place.' That was a time that I felt that teachers that looked like me [chuckle] they didn't want me teaching their children that were blonde haired and blue eyed." At the time she taught three preps: "Eighth grade class that got high school credit, ESOL, and a regular class. The parents went to the county on me all the time . . . 'cause I was too hard on these students . . . their students had never got a C before" To combat this, "I learned to do reflective journals and have the scholars do them. It started with, 'I earned this grade because . . . ', 'I will maintain or improve this grade by . . .'" They were honest about their grades in the reflective journals and that was what she would show parents.

She developed a strategy to help students cope with testing anxiety. "The children, I had them actually do pictures. Some of them had themselves in a casket and the killer was this principal . . . and the test. The pallbearers were their friends. And they were overwhelmed." All but one student earned the high school credit "and then the parents would bring the brownies and gift certificates." The principal's perspective changed. "Oh, you did such a great job. We can't wait . . . we look forward to next year." I said: "I don't. I resign . . . you can have it."

The last two schools she worked in felt like a dumping ground with similar conditions. "I feel that I was sent here. One of the most challenging places I've ever worked when I came here

four years ago. It was wild. But one of the best principals I ever worked under." However, the school was a dumping ground.

> They would always send the children that would do the worst things to that school . . . had nothing to do with their ability. It was just the actions that they would take. And we were mandated to instruct them. And many times, with no administrative support . . . but the conditions of having children fight all day . . . all day. Smoke weed all day in the hallways and curse the teachers out . . . and curse the area superintendent, this is all stuff I saw for myself, not heard, and you're still expected to teach them was difficult. But I found with this population that being constant and consistent with the babies and always addressing them with the utmost respect as if you would want to be addressed . . . I'm matter of fact and extremely firm, but respect is always due.

The testing culture of "one test after another" stifles children. Often students' needs are not being met.

> I feel that we should test our babies in a different manner . . . the way they learn . . . the way they're gonna show up in the work . . . if not, we're injuring them and saying that they are abnormal. We're starting to look, in the last 10 years, only at children that test well, and I think that's pushing so many children away from being educated if they don't perform. I think that's where education is losing, especially our educating of Black and Brown children.

Furthermore, teachers are not allowed to be the "physician in the room." Teachers are in the best position to see what students need. Test scores do not accurately show or tell who students are.

> A blanket solution does not work for each scholar. I've been to schools that melanin children, no matter how deep the melanin, have soared because they were allowed to learn the way . . . you are allowed to teach them the way they learn. Not a program. Not sit still, be quiet, and click, click, click.

Summary of Griot 4's Working Conditions

Griot 4 has taught for 25 years. Two things that she said she understood early in her career were the gaps in resources and supports for ESOL population and the testing anxiety of her students. She became a strong advocate for her ESOL students. Griot 4 also was thoughtful about helping students process through and cope with their nervousness around testing. She spoke of the culture of testing that tends to judge students' academic trajectory according to their

test scores. Finally, she spoke about teachers not having autonomy to be the "physician in the room," implying the lack of trust in teacher professionalism.

Griot 5: Southern Respectability

We were quote-unquote, "good Black folks." Her kids knew how to behave. (Griot 5)

Plotting Griot 5's Stories/Narratives

Table 4. 5 shows how I organized Griot 5's stories in a plot analysis chart. The initiating actions were teaching second graders in a trailer, community circumstances and culture, student trust Griot during family crisis, district buys partial curriculum, more male teachers needed, and more custodial staff. The complicating actions were Griot traditional expectations of students; childish consequences for adult behavior; student fights; amnesty or recovery days, irresponsible with school-issued computers; inadequate teaching planning and professional learning; standardized lessons and lesson plans; race differences accepting student supports; planning student violence with gun; and girls flirting with men. The high points were administrators catering to parents; blame teachers; breaking up fights as a teacher; the inconsistency between classroom pass rate and standardized test scores; athletes "no pass, still play"; no homework expectation; teacher autonomy depends on building leadership; student fragility; and teachers are not safe. The resolution strategies were clashing of frustrations between teachers and students; "put me out to pasture"; students reject education; boys-to-men lessons; and student interactions outside of family unit. The resolution endings were Black teachers have more degrees; ghetto realities; teaching middle school is her niche; student gender differences; Mexicans stereotypes are false; and love coworkers.

Table 4.5

A Plot of Griot 5's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 5
WHO	students, principals, teachers
WHERE	several urban schools (3 districts)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—teaching 2nd-grade in a trailer Story 6—community culture Story 30—student reach out to Griot 5 via Facebook because of family situation Story 31—districts do not buy full curriculum Story 32—need more male teachers Story 36—building not clean
HER STRUGGLES	Story 4—Griot 5 expectations of students Story 11—adult behavior but childish consequences Story 12—student fights Story 14—amnesty/recovery day Story 17—parent/student irresponsible with computers Story 21—teacher planning and professional development Story 24—standardized lessons, lesson plans, etc. Story 26—Black parents v. White parents on student support services Story 28—planned student fight with a gun Story 34—girl behaviors
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 9—administrators carter to parents Story 10—blame the teachers Story 13—teachers injured breaking up fights Story 15—pass rate v. test scores Story 16- no pass but still play sports Story 18—excuses for student homework Story 23—teacher autonomy depends on building leadership Story 27—student fragility Story 29—Teachers are not safe
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 8—clash of frustrations between teachers and students Story 22—“put me out to pasture“ Story 25—students reject education Story 33—boys-to-men lessons Story 35—student interactions outside family unit

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 5
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 2—Black teachers more degrees than White teachers Story 3—ghetto realities Story 5—middle school is her niche Story 7—student gender differences Story 19—Mexican stereotypes are false Story 20—love coworkers
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Griot 5 is conservative. She came into the profession through the lens of her childhood experiences. She expects students to be respectful, parents to be involved and folks to go to church. She enjoyed working with ESOL students, Latino population, because they are respectful Christians. She also has bias about how boys and girls should behave. These expectations impact her teaching experiences. Hence, she is exhausted and ready to retire. "Put me out to pasture."
HER STANCE	*"I love teaching. I hate teaching."*

Profile of Griot 5's Roots

Griot 5 is from Alabama. She was raised in a two-parent home (until they divorced) and a multigenerational home. Segregation and integration were prominent in her experiences. Griot 5 graduated in 1990. She shared 40 stories about her K-12 education. Those stories included integrating White schools; Black and White teachers; culture shock; no overnight camping with Brownie Troup; and White teacher microaggressions. She began telling how her mother was adamant about her going to White schools.

She began her began first grade in an integrated elementary school in Montgomery, Alabama. "What is now called, Minority-to-Majority . . . we were the first students to be bused to a predominantly White school. There were less than, probably 100 Blacks, might have been 50, but we made up well under 10% of the population." Her mother insisted she and her sister went to White schools. "She felt like she had raised us where we could assimilate in the White society. And yeah, we were sent there. And I'm glad she did it."

This integrated experience was the norm for her until high school. She experienced "very little racism and the racism I experienced was subliminal. Some of the best teachers I had there were White teachers who, you know, relished the opportunity to be able to integrate." She recalled an incident with her third-grade teacher.

> I was too mouthy, and she expected to tell me to do something, and you know, that was just the way it was going to be done. I had always been taught to speak up and speak out and she did not appreciate that. And I think that was the only time I've had a conference in elementary school for behavior. I could sense that she did not appreciate us being there.

Throughout her elementary years, she always had two teachers in each grade level: one Black and one White. There were few Black teachers that "they actually moved from the Black schools to the White schools to integrate them. The teacher population was about 50/50."

The "Great Black Flight" during her junior high school years, was "all the Black people who thought they were middle-class or upper-class Black people tried to get their children either [of the White] junior high schools." After her parents divorced, "we moved out and I was zoned for a Black school. And my mom took me to the nearest White school."

Leaving predominantly White schools to attend a Black high school was a culture shock particularly being with Black students.

> I went to a predominantly African American high school it was like 98% Black. I had to get used to being around my people, because these were Black people from the other side of town. But by the time I ended up acclimating to and enjoying it and understanding the culture of it, it was time to go to college, which, influenced me going to and HBCU. The culture shock . . . students being loud and ignorant for the sake of being loud and ignorant. I saw students with tattoos. Had a couple of drug dealers at the school that would pull out lots of money. Students in designer clothes you wouldn't even see rappers wearing on TV.

Summary of Griot 5's Roots

Race and race relations were a major part in Griot 5's K-12 schooling in Montgomery. Her mother was adamant about her going to White schools because they were "good Black

folks." Every year of elementary school she had two teachers per grade: one Black and one White. Griot 5 spoke about the Great Black Flight where middle-class Blacks moved to the suburbs following Whites leaving the city. She was culture shocked, however, when she went to a predominately Black high school; up until then, she had only attended White schools. Even at the predominantly Black school, cheerleaders were chosen from the two highest scoring Blacks and the two highest scoring Whites.

Profile of Griot 5's Working Conditions

Griot 5 began her teaching career in 1997 as a Grade 2 teacher. She realized that middle school was a better fit for her. She is an eighth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher. She shared 36 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included teaching second-graders in a trailer, her expectations of students and parents, student gender differences, fights, teacher injuries, stereotypes of Mexican students, and student fragility.

She began talking about her first year as a teacher. "I love teaching. I hate teaching." Her first teaching assignment was in an overcrowded school. She taught second grade in a trailer.

> They put me outside in the trailer and I was the only teacher outside in a trailer by myself . . . reason being . . . they couldn't justify putting a tenured teacher outside. So, the new teacher had to go. It was a miserable experience and when I say I hated it, I hated it. I hated it with a passion. I don't even know how to explain it. But it was almost like it was Mean Girls . . . like our administrators were two Black women . . . they cared more about how you dressed and look professionally than they did about the curriculum.

Although, it was a failing school her students "were miraculous on the test" and they tested well every year. This year, however, "I think this is gonna be the first year my scores are gonna crash." Nowadays, "I hate to say it, I don't like teaching now. I like teaching. I don't like the kids now. I don't like these kids now." The pandemic was last year. "It's not pandemic kids anymore. We can't say pandemic anymore." The behaviors have intensified post-COVID.

> I had a little boy tell me, get the fuck out of my face earlier this year. And I said something back to him. He didn't like it. His response was, Imma tell my mama. I'm like

> dude, you just told me to get the fuck out of your face a minute ago but now you're a baby, you want to call your mama.

There had been an increase in student fights too. She said that the superintendent reported a 200% increase in fights between the October 2021 and October 2022. There is an expectation that teachers break them up.

> Why are we gonna break up fights, injure ourselves . . . you really don't have pay workman's comp if you feel like what we were doing was outside the parameters of our job so why are we going to put ourselves at risk and start breaking up fights now?

While breaking up a fight, she broke a bone in her hand and had surgery.

> I remember that principal . . . called my doctor and asked the doctor why I could not come back to work. And the doctor called me and called human resources. He was like, that was not protocol. He literally gave me a documented excuse because it was my dominant hand. He said, she can't dress herself. She might be in a situation where she can't do hygienic things at work.

In comparison, a White teacher also broke her hand. She had recently married and "she was trying to get pregnant . . . and was holding her days. She still came to work."

While student behavior worsens, "they give kids ropes to keep jumping and extending and extending. And they keep tightening ours." Teachers are policed for everything they do. "Teachers can't do this. Teachers can't do that. Don't say this. Don't say that. And it's just at the point now where people use mental health days left and right because it is really no recourse."

Her classroom bias stems from her childhood. "I grew up speaking correct English or the King's language." She was teased by classmates and playmates, "telling me I talk like I was White. I grew up valuing education. I grew up with a strict Christian background." This background guided her pedagogy. "When I first started teaching, my first year, I wouldn't give homework on Wednesdays because Wednesday was Bible Study Night . . . probably like the first five, six years teaching. I didn't give homework on Wednesday" Times have changed and "people stopped going to church [pause] and you ask these kids now, what church do you attend?

They look at you like you're crazy. I go to church with my grandma sometimes . . . and sometimes means Easter, Mother's Day, and Christmas."

Before teaching, she had not been exposed to such poverty, "where welfare was a way of life for them . . . where kids were income." She believed that mothers choose to have children back-to-back to get "child support. Well, I know that child is getting ready to graduate and I'm going to need more money so let me go have another baby." This experience was a struggle for her in the beginning. "I could not find my niche. And I would literally stand in the shower in the morning and cry getting ready for work because I hated going to work just that badly."

One of the residuals of COVID was "the fragility of students." There had been an increase in anxiety, depression, and suicidal behaviors due to the isolation of online schooling. One student

> broke down crying out of nowhere [telling her] the doctor took me off the medicine I was taking because I didn't like the way it made me feel . . . I wouldn't eat that stuff. She was like, I suffer from depression and anxiety
>
> She noticed another young lady had been absent for a few days.
>
> She's normally not absent and a decent student academically too. But she came up to my desk and she said, I know I ain't been in school and you don't like for folks to be absent, but she said I had to go to an institution because I tried to commit suicide.

Alarmed, she tried to process what the young lady said and why she was telling this story not her parent.

> So, her mama never said anything to us. You send this child back to school after she'd been in a facility and tried to kill herself. She needs a safety plan. Does somebody need to go to the bathroom with her? You know . . . that kind of thing. What are some triggers for her that I might not need to say.

Summary of Griot 5's Working Conditions

Griot 5 discovered early in her career that teaching middle school was a good fit for her. She has traditional expectations of her students: respecting adults, speaking "good English," and

when teachers have been injured, including herself. She struggles with the changes that have happened in education post-COVID and is ready to be "put out to pasture." She was at a crossroads in her education career.

Griot 6: Tunnel Vision to Retirement

> Even though I have days like, I don't know why I came into this profession, I still love teaching. I'm just waiting for these five years. Hopefully, I could just retire in five years. (Griot 6)

Plotting Griot 6's Stories/Narratives

Table 4. 6 shows how I organized Griot 6's stories in a plot analysis chart. The initiating actions were principal philosophy, culture, and climate; camaraderie with coworkers; principal fights for teachers; first Black superintendent investment better resources better results; Griot moves to new state with new school culture; and taught middle and high school. The complicating actions were principal types and the shift in principal traits and behaviors. The high points were principal behaviors of divide and conquer; teacher retaliation and pushout; teacher union shift; rise in testing; graduation tests; teaching tested subjects; and current teacher autonomy. The resolution strategy was teacher autonomy of the past and help parents help their students. The resolution ending was strictly business with current Black female principal.

Table 4.6

A Plot of Griot 6's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 6
WHO	principals, students, teachers, parents
WHERE	several urban schools (2 states, 3 districts)

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 6
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—principal philosophy; culture and climate Story 4—camaraderie with coworkers. Story 9—principal fights for teachers Story 12—first Black Superintendent; invest in resources better results Story 15—new state, new school culture. Story 16—taught middle and high school
HER STRUGGLES	Story 3—principal types. Story 10—shift in principal traits and behaviors
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 2—principal behavior; divide and conquer Story 7—teacher retaliation and pushout Story 8—teacher union shift Story 11—rise in testing Story 13—graduation test. Story 14—teaching tested subjects. Story 18—teacher autonomy currently
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 5—teacher autonomy in the past Story 17—parent support for student support
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 6—Strictly business with current principal
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	The first 10 years was her most fulfilling time as a teacher. She had a principal with passion and commitment to what was best for students and teachers. The most traumatic experiences came working for two Black female principals. She never wants to work for a Black female principal again. Currently, there is no trust in teachers which affects morale. Wrestling with regrets about being a teacher she hopes to retire in the next five years.
HER STANCE	*"Even though I have days like, I don't know why I came into this profession, I still love teaching. Education needs to find a path for teachers like me who have the experience, who might want to get out of the classroom but not necessarily go into a leadership role. Everybody don't want to be a principal, but it needs to be other roles out there. And everybody doesn't want to be in district office either. I just feel like education is going to be no more because your veteran teachers who are pretty good, they're leaving, or they just so tired of the crap that comes along with it . . . they just walking away. So, the new teachers that's coming in, many of them don't have the grit . . . they don't have the passion."*

Profile of Griot 6's Roots

Griot 6 is from Florida. She was raised in a Black middle-class community. She had a very diverse schooling experience which included Cubans and Haitians. She could remember the Mariel boatlift in 1980 when thousands of Cubans emigrated to the U.S. Griot 6 graduated in 1989. She shared 34 stories about her K-12 education experiences. Those stories included riding private vans to schools, favorite subjects, favorite teachers, and her dream of being a United Nations interpreter. She began telling how all her elementary teachers were Black women.

She recalled many of her teachers by name. "I had great teachers . . . the majority of my teachers were Black women. I did not have a Black male academic teacher until I got to senior high school." Her fourth-grade teacher was one of her favorites. "I remember her good because she was that strict teacher. She didn't play. She made sure that you did what you were supposed to do. She didn't care about your feelings." Teachers were stern back then and they had the support of parents to discipline students. "They were stern in what they believed in." Her elementary teachers instilled a strong academic foundation. "As I went from grade to grade, I knew I was going to be good in all my subjects because of what they taught in third and fourth grade."

Miami had "diverse schools and neighborhoods . . . I saw White teachers, I saw Hispanic teachers, I saw Haitian teachers." Her neighborhood included "people who were Puerto Rican, Cubans, Colombians, Dominicans, Haitians, Bahamians, Jamaicans . . . you just saw diversity everywhere." There was also a lot a bullying.

> I can remember the Mariel Boatlift coming over in the 80s. Those Cuban kids coming into the schools couldn't speak a lick of English. Same thing with the Haitians. I remember how badly Haitians were treated growing up because of news reports about Haitian people. They were constantly picked on.

Spanish was one of her favorite subjects in high school. She had many opportunities to practice the language within her community.

> I took Spanish for four years and did well. It was a good experience. I think when I look back at it, it was more textbook. If it was more so conversations, where we were getting outside the school, like maybe going to a restaurant or to a Spanish business to practice it, I think I probably would have retained more than just what was in the textbook.

When she went to college, she was asked to consider Spanish as major or minor, but she did not do it. “I regret that. I should have done it.”

She enjoyed U.S. History too. Her teacher “didn’t teach from a Eurocentric perspective. It was about Black History. She knew how to involve Black Culture in her lessons, and that’s what made me really want to come to her class and learn more.” Her math teacher also had an impact on her.

> It was just something about the way she was teaching . . . her style of teaching and how warm she was and how welcoming her class was. She was just a sweet lady. The way that she talked to us . . . she was a disciplinarian too, but it wasn’t harsh. When you came into her class, you felt loved, you felt welcomed. You knew that you were gonna learn in there. You know you’re gonna get encouraging words. She never made you feel stupid or dumb or anything. Even if you didn’t like math, even if you didn’t know math, when you walked in there, you felt that you were going to be successful.

She chose a trip to the Capitol instead of Disney World. Grad Bash was an overnight senior trip to Disney that included “different concerts and rides“ and other activities. Seniors looked forward to this celebration, however, that year it was the same time as the capitol trip. Close-Up was a three-day event in Tallahassee. “That’s where you saw how government works. We were able to meet the governor, your legislators, and see how they were passing bills.”

The trip to the Capitol influenced her decision to become a history teacher. “I always wanted to be a lawyer. Then I saw how many years of school that you have to take.” There was one other occupation that she considered.

> When I was doing well in Spanish, I was like, “I can be an interpreter.” I thought I was gonna be an interpreter at the United Nations. I could see myself doing that, but you have

> other people, family members who were like, you can't do nothing like that. They put a damper on my dreams, and I settled, and I became a teacher.

Summary of Griot 6's Roots

Griot 6 had a diverse K–12 experience growing up in Miami. Her favorite teachers taught her math and social studies. She took Spanish throughout high school. One of her favorite teachers taught social studies from the lens of Black Culture, now known as culturally responsive pedagogy. She chose a trip to the state capital instead of Disney World during her senior year. She dreamed of going to the United Nations to be an interpreter but was discouraged by her family.

Profile of Griot 6's Working Conditions

Griot 6 began her teaching career in 1996. She taught middle school for the first 11 years and will end her career teaching high school. She is a first-generation college graduate. She is an American Government teacher. She shared 19 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included the shift of principal traits and behaviors, teaching tested subjects, teacher unions, teacher autonomy then and now, and what parents need to support their children.

The first 10 years of her career were great. The principal understood the power of building relationships. He believed "if the students are happy that means the teachers are happy. If the teachers are happy, that means that the parents are happy." He explained that "sometimes he would be in favor of the students and sometimes the teachers. It all depends on the situation." He created a culture of care and support for all stakeholders. "I can honestly say, we had a great staff. People were supportive. People were passionate about teaching and passionate about the kids. You had teachers who understood their content and who knew how to teach across all subjects." If they were short staffed, the administration would step in. "If we didn't have enough subs, you had administrators that would actually go into your classroom and hold your kids

. . . not looking for anybody else to come in. They would actually teach. I enjoyed that environment so much."

Once, before testing, she and her colleagues decided to give their students a brain break. She taught honors students in a magnet school.

> If you are in the magnet program, you didn't take P.E. [physical education], so you never went outside because it was theater . . . it was dance and it was art. So I came up with this idea, telling [coworkers], let's go outside. We could play kickball or softball. We took the kids out. Who come on a cart where we were? All of us froze. He gets off the cart. He gets a bat and tells one of the kids to pitch the ball, and he chose a student . . . now you run for me. He didn't fuss. He said it was a good idea . . . that will release some of that anxiety from the kids before they take the test.

He was that type of principal, and she never had another principal like him. "It was just a joy going to work." There was a teacher that was struggling. He would not listen to the advice of others and ultimately, they let him go. "But [the principal] was working with the union steward and rep in the building to try to help him save his job . . . I saw him, as a principal, trying to save his job."

Teacher unions were part of her early years in education. The union building representative and stewards worked as liaisons between teachers and principals. However, when her favorite principal retired there was a shift. "When the female principal came about, we had a new union steward. He wanted to be in her good graces. In staying in her good graces, he wasn't representing us at all." There was also a greater issue with the union "embezzling money or something with money management . . . just a mess." Teachers begin to leave the union and work conditions begin to deteriorate.

> Right about now with unions in [this state], there's no union for teachers. I mean, I know there's some out there . . . to me, it's more set up as an organization. You don't have a union rep. I just don't see no union. I know there's organizations out there that represent teachers if they need it, but I'm not part of it.

If there was a choice, she would not teach tested subjects.

> The pressure, the pressure that comes along with testing subjects, that constant coming into your classroom and then the school has their way of thinking how you should teach it, but if you don't have that social studies background, you don't understand.

They were on a "4x4 schedule," which meant they teach a year's curriculum within a semester, for example from August to December. There were 28 social studies standards covering, the exploration of America all the way up to President Obama. "The kids don't have background knowledge like that. They don't want to see the lecturing, but you have to understand the kids have to take notes as I explain . . . to make sure that they understand."

Unfortunately, she also had to contend with misinformation on TikTok and other social media sites. "I can give you a perfect example. The kids, this year, were telling me that Dr. King was smothered to death by his doctor . . . [she asked] 'Where are you getting this information from?' my teacher told me." That needed to be addressed.

> So, when it comes to U.S. History, there's too many standards that you have to cover, they're Eurocentric, they're not bringing any cultural relevance, and you're actually teaching to a test. When the kids don't do well, you're to blame. Too much anxiety and too much pressure. This is why I stay away from U.S. History.

Parents are doing the best that they can. Life is happening. "You have a lot of parents who just don't have the resources . . . don't have the know-how . . . just don't know what to do." There is a disconnect between the schools and the parents. "That's a big issue, especially in your Black schools where you have Black administrators, you have Black teachers. I feel like we have the resources, but we don't know how to tell the parents how to use the resources." For example, calling parents to tell them their child is failing does not solve the problem. "What type of support, what type of resources, what type of solutions am I providing them to help their child succeed and pass the class?" Parents and grandparents have varying education levels and situations. "These parents don't have the traditional jobs, 9-to-5; they're on shifts. Some parents were doing well, but because COVID hit, now they're just trying to figure out what am I going to

do and that's impacting the kids also." There is little parental involvement," but it is complex. "I don't think they don't want to; they just don't know how to, and I keep saying this . . . we need parenting classes. You need to show parents how to raise successful kids."

Summary of Griot 6's Working Conditions

Griot 6 had taught for 27 years. Her first decade in teaching was the greatest. Her principal maintained a school culture and climate that supported teacher autonomy, trust, and care. Once he retired, her experiences with principals were different, especially with Black female principals. She had never had a positive experience with them. She spoke about the decline of teachers' unions and how it is the reason for horrible working conditions. Griot 6 prefers not to teach a tested subject because of the pressures. She is empathetic toward parents because she understood that many of them are doing the best that they can and that they could benefit from parenting classes.

Griot 7: I'll Stay But Not Like This

> You're not giving up on education or giving up on children or you're not giving up on the advocacy work or equity or the engagement work. It just may be done from a different place or a different standpoint. (Griot 7)

Plotting Griot 7's Stories/Narratives

Table 4.7 shows how I organized Griot 7's stories in a plot analysis chart. The initiating actions were first two years of racism; new principal created culture, climate, and community; moved to a new state; ESOL assignment; both parents are teachers; and being a Black female teacher. The complicating actions were White teammates exclusionary behaviors; transitions from school to school; iterate teaching assignments; the recession and the Black middle class; the effects of national immigration issues on students and families; school differences within the same district; team collaboration differences; student supports and parent needs; and 9-11 and a

military town. The high point was turnover and new opportunities; ESOL students and standardized testing; and ESOL students and online learning during COVID. The resolution strategies were Griot 7's spiritual beliefs; principal traits and beliefs; traumatic experiences coaching for teachers; equity in practice; mentoring ESOL teachers; and building relationships with ESOL students' parents. The resolution ending was Griot self-care and wellness.

Table 4.7

A Plot of Griot 7's Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 7
WHO	principals, students, teachers, parents
WHERE	several schools (2 states, 2 districts)
HER BEGINNINGS	Story 1—first two years of racism Story 2—principal creates culture, climate, and community Story 6—new state, new systems Story 7—ESOL assignment Story 11—both parents educators Story 23—Being a Black female educator
HER STRUGGLES	Story 4—White teammates exclusionary behaviors Story 9—transitions from school to school Story 12—iterate teaching assignments Story 13—recession and the effects on middle class Black families Story 15—national immigration issues, local affects Story 19—the differences in schools within the same district Story 20—team collaboration differences Story 25—Reflection on student supports and wondering about parent needs Story 26-—9-11 and working in a military town
HER TIPPING POINT	Story 10—lots of opportunities, what's next Story 14—ESOL students and standardized testing Story 21—ESOL student learning online during COVID

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT 7
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	Story 3—Griot 7's spiritual beliefs Story 5—principal traits and beliefs Story 8—coaching teachers for traumatic experiences like COVID Story 16—coaching teachers for ESOL students Story 17—equity in practice Story 18—mentoring ESOL teachers Story 22—Building relationships with ESOL student parents (support, student advocacy, etc.)
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Story 24—teacher self-care and wellness
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Griot 7 shared the richness of her 20 years in education from 9-11 to ESOL student learning during COVID. Her experiences include racism and systems that maintain its horrible effects on Black and Brown students. Often the assumption is that ESOL students do not include Black peoples of Africa and the diaspora who speak many difference languages. Her experiences with the variety of ESOL learners spotlights the nuances of the Black and Brown population in the U.S. public education system and it speaks to the complexities thereof.
HER STANCE	*"Black female educators . . . we just have this thing of nurturing and caring and I think it's just in our DNA . . . making a way where there's no way and you know all those things that are so stereotypical of Black women . . . it is possible to do those things somewhere else, in a different capacity . . . I am in the process of learning about self-care. A light bulb went off after the pandemic. You are not going to be here to do all these things that you are capable and gifted in grace to do if you are not well . . . physically, mentally, emotionally. All those things matter. I think the pandemic showed us that you got to take care of yourself. That's it."*

Profile of Griot 7's Roots

Griot 7 is from South Carolina. Her parents were both educators and her father was a pastor. She graduated in 1999 from public schools. She shared 23 stories about her K-12 experiences. Those experiences included riding the school bus from the school where her mom taught, playing sports, participating in the Model United Nations Debate Team, and her favorite teachers. She began telling how she has always been in a school.

She enjoyed her K-12 education, "but I also feel like the days never ended . . . I finished my school day and then I had to go back to school when they [parents] had things after school." Her day began with riding to her mother's school to catch the bus to her school. "That was always the original plan." However, she would catch the bus at different stops on the bus route if they were running late. "I've literally been in schools all my life. My mother went into labor with me at work during lunch duty." As she got older, she recounted, "I was over going to school after school in middle school." By that time, she had two younger brothers the afterschool routine became more hectic.

> I definitely was over riding the bus . . . because that's where the kids start to have fights . . . when you don't know who you are, where you came from, are you a human or an alien. Once you are in middle school, I remember just sitting there looking like man, not today. Can we just sit down so this lady can get us home?

Her second-grade teacher knew her parents and did community work with them. "You had to be on top of your stuff in her class, but it was fun. She probably exposed us to some things that were not curriculum-based, but things that we needed as African American children who were very engaged." Ms. Second grade exposed her to many "literacy activities that were focused on Black authors and Black History Month. It was always something tied to what we were doing to give us that self-confidence or that pride to be who we were." During writing, "we wrote about what we wanted to be and what famous person we could connect to." One assignment was to write a letter to a famous person.

> I remember some of those activities that we did. It was always about being proud of who you are and where you came from. And it was connected to culture and heritage and life lessons that are not so obvious at first, but hits later down the line.

She spoke about one teacher who matriculated through school with her. "It's the same teacher who I had in elementary school. And I felt like he followed me through middle school and so when I got to high school, he was there too." She could not believe he was there, again,

because "up until high school, we just did not get along. I was always something . . . we butted heads. He was a White male in a very urban setting." Interestingly,

> He thought I was a great candidate for the Model UN Debate Team. It ended up being really fun and through that I was able to see different college campuses; a lot of the competitions were held on college campuses.

She experienced college life throughout her high school career. In hindsight, she realized that freshman were not traditionally on the team but this teacher saw something in her. She also wondered if she had an "inferiority complex or something" because she did not understand why he was "bothering me, picking on me . . . I didn't raise my hand, don't call on me . . . I don't want to talk to you, you're not the cool teacher."

She spoke of the expectations of her FBLA advisor. Ms. FBLA was a member of her church.

> I just remember this is the one class, I'm not saying anything, like nothing at all. I'm gonna do what this lady says to do, so I can hurry up and get out of here and be gone. And she cannot tell on me because she also had a reputation for talking to parents and telling things that happened and telling all the details of that thing that happened. I was like, it won't be me. She won't be calling my parents.

That teacher was "old school": "She allowed us to just be who we were and fall into the person that we were becoming. I remember her teaching a lot of life lessons . . . and traveling." There were many competitions she participated in, and Ms. FBLA required a particular dress code.

> The girls could not wear pants; khaki skirts, skin tone/flesh tone pantyhose, navy blue shoes, a white pressed button-down collared shirt, and a navy-blue blazer. And we could only wear the lapel pins and any officer related pin on our uniform. She was very adamant about Black girls having skin tone pantyhose . . . She did not play about that uniform.

When traveling, it was important to "show up as a group, a cohesive unit. That taught me about presentation." She carried those lessons that she learned in FBLA to college.

Summary of Griot 7's Roots

Griot 7 spent much of her life in school because both of her parents were educators. She rode to her mother's school every morning then caught the school bus to her school. This was her routine until she started driving to high school. One teacher seemed to matriculate through school with her. Although she initially did not like him, he became one of her favorite teachers. He put her in the United Nations Debate Team which she participated in throughout high school. She will never forget the life-changing assignment that her second grade teacher gave her. She had to write a letter to a famous Black person; she chose Harriett Tubman. Her FBLA advisor taught her professionalism that has also been foundational for adulthood.

Profile of Griot 7's Working Conditions

Griot 7 begin her teaching career in 2001 shortly after 9-11 in a military town. She has taught elementary, K-5, and worked with ESOL students and their families. Currently she is an instructional coach that works with Multi-Tiered Student Supports (MTSS) and the Early Intervention Program (EIP). She shared 26 stories about her teaching experiences. Those experiences included racism; culture, climate, and community; principal traits and behaviors; working with ESOL students, families, and educators; teaching ESOL during COVID; and being a Black female educator. She began talking about the racism she experienced her first-year teaching.

In the 20 years that she has been an educator, the first two "were kind of trying." Her first day as a teacher, the administration had not prepared for her arrival.

> I didn't have any furniture; no desk, chairs, nothing on the first day of school. That was a bit jarring. But then as I learned more about where I was, it made complete sense. There was a principal there who was on his way to retirement. He didn't really, in my opinion, care much for the Black and Brown people there, students or teachers. And you were just kind of left on your own to fend for yourself.

She did have a supportive team that day. They helped her find furniture and moved it from building to building "in our best little teacher outfits" so she could have a class.

The principal's behavior and the school culture that he created "explained why there weren't a lot of Black and Brown teachers there because they knew they didn't have to tolerate that. They could go somewhere else." Three of her teammates where in a different building. She found out,

> They moved to that building because we were originally in a building with the Special Education Units, and they said that they did not think that they needed to be bothered I their old age with all the noise and commotion. I just could not believe for the life of me that three grown women would talk about children like that. So, I was left in a building with the Special Education Team and teachers.

Those teachers rarely came to work, leaving her "pretty much by myself with three substitutes." She learned "how to be a great level chair and make decisions with people who had no desire to make decisions for themselves. It was off-putting but I guess it taught me a lot at the same time."

There was a major culture shift once that principal retired. She worked with the new principal for three years. He "strategically taught us how to interact with the community. He would take us places and introduce us to people . . . make connections." With him, she "learned how to be an advocate. I learned how to be a voice for children or families who didn't have as much as the next or they just didn't know." Working in a military town that many students experienced as their family members deployed.

> I remember having a little girl in my class and her father got killed in 9-11 or shortly after he got deployed. I remember looking up at the 11 o'clock news and I saw his face and I just collapsed in my living room. It can't be. And literally five minutes after that, the principal was calling us to get a plan together for the next day. He said, to about five of us, don't come to the school. I want you to go to the house. He met us there and he said just sit with the family. Just sit with them. Whatever, they need, do that today. Just be there.

She worked as an iterate ESOL teacher for years. The World Languages Department assigned teachers to schools according to need "before we became a charter district and teachers

were selected by principals." She experienced different parts of the school district and saw disparities firsthand.

> I felt like I got to see a lot of the different dynamics across different types of students, different types of teachers and administrators. It gave me a wide view of the district but it also exposed a lot of the inequities across the district. Some schools had everything you needed and then some—you couldn't ask for anything else. And some, how are you functioning without the basic necessities.

She spoke about ESOL students and standardized tests. "They took every test every other child took and that was hard as an adult to watch children struggle through something that you knew . . . this is pointless. But you know compliance is a thing and you got to do it." This is not good for the students. "I didn't feel that that was right to make those children sit there and take a test knowing their language proficiency was almost nonexistent. But they're taking a state test this is gonna dictate the next steps for them and it weighed so heavily."

Teaching ESOL to students online during COVID added a more nuanced experience. She left ESOL in December 2019, however, since she worked with the students and families for years, she became a major support for the new teacher and the students. "Making sure those kids had internet" and other resources was imperative. "Those kids didn't get what they needed: 1) because of the connectivity issues that we had and 2) the teacher didn't know how to teach those types of children and definitely not remotely." However, because of her relationship with students and families, "they would text a lot or email a lot during that time just to get somebody to answer them" Both the teacher and the students "suffered greatly during that time."

Summary of Griot 7's Working Conditions

Griot 7 was a 20-year educator. Her first few years were plagued with a racist principal and co-workers. However, the next principal taught her to be a leader. He created a caring culture in the school and community. After moving, she became an iterate ESOL traveling within the school district to service this population of students and families. She observed drastic

socioeconomic differences between the schools. After the recession, she saw Black affluent families struggling. During COVID, it was challenging to support ESOL students online; the combination of language and technology barriers made it difficult. As an instructional coach, she was able to support teachers who teach ESOL students.

Griot Collective Plot

Table 4.8 shows how I summarized the collective Griot stories in a plot analysis chart. The characters included teachers, students, parents, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. The setting was public schools, traditional and charter, that serve predominantly Black and Brown students. The initiating actions tended to be first impressions and general awareness of school leadership, teacher-related issues, student-related concerns, and resource/curriculum issues. School leadership included turnover, traits and behaviors, gender, and experience level. Teacher-related issued ranged from short-staffed, workload management and expectations, and instructional coach behaviors. The student-related concerns were effort, efficacy, testing, access, opportunity, and the lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. Resource and curriculum issues varied from COVID losses (academic and well-being), investing in programs not teachers, and curriculum that did not support student needs.

Complicating actions were staff dynamics, education environment, student and parent relations, and external factors. Staff dynamics included teacher turnover, new administration, relationships and interactions among school personnel, and workload management for teachers and administrators. The education environment encompassed physical, social, and emotional aspects; curriculum and pedagogy; culture of teacher observations; standardized lessons; amnesty days; and the differences between schools in the same district. Student and parent relations toward schools and teachers included parent involvement; student resistance; parent

resistance; student roles at home; teacher expectations of parents and students; and fights. The external factors mentioned immigration, recession, and social media.

The high point involved educational challenges and the teacher and school environment educational challenges were lack of basic skills; evolution of testing culture; ESOL students and standardized testing; pacing; and student accountability. Teacher and school environment included autonomy, exploitation, disrespecting experienced teachers, overlooked for opportunities, injured breaking up fights, safety, and no common planning.

The resolution strategy was how Griots collectively processed and strategized their work, its challenges, and their survival in the profession. They spoke about the effects of school culture and climate; equity and inclusion; and family and community involvement. School culture and climate included supportive and non-supportive behaviors from administrative team; district units of study; coping with test anxiety; post-pandemic frustration and burnout; and pushout. Equity and inclusion centered around ESOL student and family needs, and staffing supports. The need for family and community involvement showed the need and openness for teachers to have "the village" to support their efforts with students. The family and community are also responsible for the success of students.

The resolution ending spoke about challenges and struggles, team dynamics, professional fulfillment, educational insights, and personal wellbeing. The challenges and struggles are the current state of public education; the mesa, micro, and macro realities of being a Black women teacher in public schools. The Griots found solidary within their teams and/or coworker relationships. Professional fulfillment is a spiritual belief that teaching is "a calling." Educational insights highlight the lessons they learned through teaching experiences; Black teachers have more degrees than White teachers; ghetto became a reality; grade level niche, and false

stereotypes. The Griots concluded that their well-being matters, and it is the catalyst for re-evaluating and planning their next steps whether they stay in the education or not.

Table 4.8

Plot Elements and Collective Griot Characteristics

PLOT ELEMENTS	GRIOT COLLECTIVE
WHO	Students, parents, teachers, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches
WHERE	public schools that serve predominantly Black and Brown students
HER BEGINNINGS	School leadership Teacher-related issues Student- related concerns Resource and curriculum issues
HER STRUGGLES	Staff Dynamics Educational environment Student and parent relations External factors
HER TIPPING POINT	Educational challenges Teacher and school environment Advanced education concerns
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	School culture and climate Equity and inclusion Family and community involvement Leadership and administration
IT IS WHAT IT IS	Challenges and struggles Team Dynamics (teacher sub-culture) Professional fulfillment Educational insights Parent-teacher relations Personal well-being
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	Teaching is a calling otherwise you will not last. The struggle between advocating for children at the expense of the teacher is waning. No longer are teachers willing to be exploited by the corporate models in education; the inhumanity is not good for students or teachers. Once this generation of Black women teachers leave education will change forever.
HER STANCE	*"We love the children, but we must take care of ourselves. Long gone are the days of self-sacrifice and martyrism. Now is a time to re-evaluate career goals and set boundaries even if that means shifting to another position."*

Summary of the Griots' Experiences

The Griots experienced many of the same situations but its effect on their profession differed. One Griot may have perceived a situation as complicating their work whereas another may perceive it as a tipping point. This may speak to a level of tolerance and/or time in their career. In the beginning of her teaching career, she may have been more optimistic, however, as the years progressed, her optimism and her belief that she can make a difference was waning. It was clear that well-being was more important than self-sacrifice. From the collectivism of these Griot experiences, broader themes emerged.

Emergent Themes

> There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.
>
> –Audre Lorde

There were 160 stories that emerged in this study. I categorized them into 11 themes:

1. leadership,
2. teacher autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration,
3. student behaviors,
4. Black feminist thought in education,
5. parents and families,
6. district directives on curriculum and pedagogy,
7. other stories,
8. career crossroads,
9. ESOL,
10. testing,
11. COVID.

While I chose to place in them in single categories, in accord with Audre Lorde's quote, there was no such thing as a single-issue; instead, there was overlap. Single stories could have been in multiple categories. Table 4.9 shows the number of stories for each category.

Table 4.9

Emergent Themes and Their Frequency

THEMES	NUMBER OF STORIES/NARRATIVES
Leadership	40
Teacher Autonomy, Camaraderie, and Collaboration	19
Student Behaviors	19
Black Feminist Thought in Education (Teaching)	16
Parents and Families	16
District Directives on Curriculum and Pedagogy	16
Other Stories	12
Career Crossroads	9
ESOL (English as Second Language)	5
Testing	4
COVID	4

Table 4.10 shows the number of themes and sub-themes that each Griot mentioned.

Table 4.10

Themes and Sub-Themes for Each Griot

THEMES	Griot 1	Griot 2	Griot 3	Griot 4	Griot 5	Griot 6	Griot 7
1. Leadership/Administration							
1.1 Principal	x			x	x	x	x
1.2 Assistant Principal		x	x			x	
1.3 Instructional Coach	x		x				
1.4 Culture and Climate	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1.5 Behaviors and Traits	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

THEMES	Griot 1	Griot 2	Griot 3	Griot 4	Griot 5	Griot 6	Griot 7
1.5.1 Toxic			x	x	x	x	x
1.6 Turnover	x	x	x				
2. Teacher							
2.1 Autonomy	x	x	x	x		x	
2.2 Camaraderie	x	x	x			x	
2.3 Collaboration	x	x	x				x
2.4 Turnover	x		x				
2.5 Wellness			x				x
2.6 Workload	x		x				
2.6 Calling			x	x			
3. District Directives							
3.1 Curriculum	x	x	x	x	x		x
3.2 Pedagogy	x	x	x	x	x		x
4. At the Crossroads in Career							
4.1 Regret						x	
4.2 Pathways/Opportunities from Classroom (Not Principal Track)		x	x				x
4.3 Retirement					x	x	
5. Student Behaviors							
5.1 Fighting	x			x	x		
5.2 Role in Household		x	x		x		
5.3 Societal Influences			x				
6. Parents and Families							
6.1 Lack Involvement	x	x			x		
6.2 Limited Involvement	x		x		x	x	
6.3 Social Dynamics		x		x	x	x	x
6.4 Involvement				x			x
6.5 Complaints				x	x		
7. ESOL Students							
7.1 Inequity				x			x
7.2 Language Barriers							x
7.3 Support for Families							x

THEMES	Griot 1	Griot 2	Griot 3	Griot 4	Griot 5	Griot 6	Griot 7
8. Testing							
8.1 Student Anxiety				x			
8.2 Teacher Pressure/Demands	x		x	x	x	x	x
9. COVID							
9.1 Learning Loss			x				x
9.2 Social Emotional Loss			x				x

Leadership

Table 4.11 presents stories reflecting key aspects of each Griot's experience and reflections on the theme of leadership.

Table 4.11

Examples of Griots' Leadership Stories

GRIOT	QUOTES ON LEADERSHIP
GRIOT 1	Story 6—Theme: *Old school, new school.* "This is one of those schools with a lot of history and tradition that is carried amongst the teachers because those are the people that stay the longest. [However] we've had an influx these last couple of years of administration, so things have changed because you still have [veteran] teachers that say this isn't the old [high school] or the old [high school] did it this way. Now you have a new administration, new teachers, and in their minds, it's the new [high school]. You have the old [high school] versus the new [high school]. The principal is trying to navigate her way through and figure out as you go . . . what things to hold on to continue the tradition and we're building culture with things to kind of change and tweak because we have evolved. We're not the old [high school]." Story 1—*Principal turnover.* 5 principals in 6 years; "The fourth principal was there in 2019 and 2020 when the pandemic hit. He was okay. His style was a little different. It took a moment to kind of come around to him. It's like one of those people coming in and they kind of insult you. Not you in particular, but as a staff. You had a staff that had been there for three years and they're working and they're moving . . . closing the achievement gap. We know these things are happening because we can see it and it's coming from the district. They said that you guys are improving and you're doing well. Then you have somebody come in and say you're not. Every time there is a conversation, it's an insult."
GRIOT 2	Story 3—*Assistant principals.* "I've had some assistant principals who weren't the best to work with, who were micromanagers and some . . . well, one that I'm dealing with now, that does not come around much. But it seems as if she only comes around to have her 'gotcha moment.' You know what I mean . . . to see if she can catch you

GRIOT	QUOTES ON LEADERSHIP
	doing something which I'm an OG, you ain't gon' catch me doing nothing ma'am (laughing)." Story 4—*New administration*. "I'm in a situation now where I'm having to 're-prove' myself—if that's a word [chuckle]—'re-prove' myself because all of the administrators and the principal is new. They don't know who I am as an educator. So there's opportunity. I had to speak up because there's good opportunities that have been given to other people and has passed me. I'm just like, you don't even give me the opportunity to interview? Like do you know I've done X, Y, and Z. That's what I'm dealing with now."
GRIOT 3	Story 15—*Culture of observations*. "Depending on if it's truly supportive, it could be a loving and I'm [building] you up. I'm feeding into you, type of culture but on the flip side, it can also feel like a culture of intimidation and 'gotcha.' My AP told me before I even did an observation, that whenever you go in [a classroom to observe] you give glows and grows. You start with the glows because you don't want to tear somebody down. Even for something as simple as their bulletin board was real pretty. [As the department chair] I've heard other teachers say that other people have literally come to them with no glows, nothing but grows, and kind of fussy. It definitely made me shut down [as a teacher being observed] because it's like, am I doing anything right? It can be like pins and needles, a crazy type of situation, if not done correctly. If done correctly, it could feel like I could grow. It's okay for me to make a mistake. I have help and support [pause] to make me better versus, Oh no, I'm about to get in trouble again." Story 3—*Stretched administration*. "Truth be told, the admin that's over us they have them over testing. He's pushed and pulled a lot of different ways. He supports us when he can. With the way the testing calendar [is] it feels like they're testing every other week or every week. And when he's not testing, since he is a male, they pull him for discipline too. He just doesn't have the time to. The blessing is that we'd have the support from the district office because like I said, we don't have a coach. Certain things, like I said, things fall back onto me but I'm still trying to do that and manage my classes as well." [long pause] Story 7—*Exploit teachers*. "I think most teachers, we're coming for the kids. I believe in the whole kid . . . because our love for our kids, you kind of get guilted . . . they try to guilt you into doing things when realistically it's like above and beyond. Technically, it's more than what I'm supposed to do as a teacher but they take advantage of the fact that you love the kids. This is more in the news, but it lends to [my point]. The issues with school shootings . . . the proposal was to give teachers a gun. It's outrageous because at the end of the day, that's not what I came into education for . . . to basically be security too. As well as . . . I'm already a mother, a counselor, a sister, you know, I'm all the things. We're dealing with people; we're not just dealing with a robot or a thing. That goes back to [the idea that] anytime something happens, their reaction is, "we'll get the teachers to do XYZ," when technically, it's not our job. That's more of an extreme but it's real."
GRIOT 4	Story 5—*Principal behavior*. "I never [really connected] with the principal. He was an ex-military guy. I never met with him in his office. I always told him I don't feel safe and come out in the open. I'll meet with you; you can make me meet but you

GRIOT	QUOTES ON LEADERSHIP
	can't tell me where to meet and I don't feel safe . . . I can't be trapped in your office because I don't trust you. And it doesn't appear that you trust me . . . I don't feel safe. And he was repelled by that but he's a real big guy and he intimidated people with his presence. He wanted to write me up. He wanted to but he couldn't find a way. They talked to the children, and you know children are going to be honest, right? She's hard, but she always treats us with respect." Story 12—*Admin wants the title but doesn't understand the politics.* "I've just been around so many administrators that want the title, but many of them, I won't say, didn't want to do the work, but they didn't know the weight that the work carried. Many succumbed to or collapsed to the politics of it instead of what was right [long pause] for the people doing the work and for the scholars receiving the best of what they need to be successful. I've always been one to push back on the conditions [long pause . . . sigh]. Now, I guess the new phrase is, the optics of the thing. People want to look the part and many times it wasn't the part."
GRIOT 6	Story 2—*Principal behavior.* "And then there comes the female principal. She had a good staff that was already intact. But that wasn't her thing. She wanted everything to be her way . . . she had an ego. I wasn't her favorite. She actually called me in her office, with another teacher, to say, 'I heard that y'all were talking about me.' We looked at her wondering what she was talking about. She was a little older than us and stated that she was a grown woman. We told her that we too, were grown women. [Shortly afterwards] if I was in charge of something or if I had a title [leadership role] . . . all of a sudden everything is being taken away because she was going into a different direction. You begin to see the shift in staff. We didn't have each other's back at this time, so there were more people kissing up to her trying to get on her side. She was about divide and conquer. With that, you begin to see the downfall of the school. Once upon a time we were the school where people were trying to send their kids to, and teachers were trying to come in. Now, teachers are trying to get out. We never had a turnover rate that high with the [previous principal]. With him, everyone was trying to stay and nobody wanted to leave. But once she came, it was just ugh . . . a terrible, terrible experience."
	Story 10—*Shift in principal traits and behaviors.* "I think people are more out for money, I would say . . . money, title, power. It's hard to say, but the shift came with testing. That's when we began to see the changes . . . standardized testing became nationwide and the decline with the teachers' unions. Then principals felt that they could do anything they wanted to because they knew that they'll get away with it. [pause] And the shift in society . . . decline of parental involvement. People begin to see, if I get this degree and become a principal, I can make all this money and control budgets."

The Griots shared 40 stories about leadership. These were categorized into either traits and behaviors or culture and climate. Leadership included principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. School leadership teams are led by the principal, but assistant principals and instructional coaches have more direct interaction with teachers, therefore carrying out the

vision of principal. The traits and behaviors of the principal affects the school culture and climate through the behaviors of the leadership team. The principal as mentor to the leadership team, sets expectations on how assistant principals and instructional coaches interact with teachers. The culture and climate of the school is then a product of the experience level of the leaders. Their inexperience effects teacher morale and teacher working conditions.

Themes of Teacher Autonomy, Camaraderie, and Collaboration

Table 4.12 presents a sample of Griot stories themed on autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration.

Table 4.12

Stories of Teacher Autonomy, Camaraderie, and Collaboration

GRIOT	QUOTES ON AUTONOMY, CAMARADERIE, AND COLLABORATION
GRIOT 2	Story 2—Camaraderie. "My math team in both schools has always been like a family. Everybody that I worked with, started out with at [high school] math-wise, I still talk to them today. My math team too, a lot of them have transitioned out [left the profession] and everything . . . we get together like every summer we get together and we do brunch every Friday. Both experiences have been like a family."
	Story 11—Collaboration and planning. "It's challenging because I'm a singleton [the only one teaching the course] this year. So, I don't have anybody to plan with . . . well. . . well I'm not gonna say that. I'm a singleton but I have a team teacher. But my team teacher and I do not have the same planning period. They expect us to make our own time after school to get that done, but I just told you that I'm a single parent. Luckily, it's a class for me that I've been teaching for forever, and she has as well. So there's not a lot of planning and collaboration that has to go on with us other than a phone call that says, hey, tomorrow we're moving into such and such. I'll say, 'here's the notes and the worksheet or whatever . . . she's like, "Okay. I'll send it back to you with the modifications that I need for my kids. That's our planning and collaboration."
GRIOT 3	Story 13—"I think we had more freedom when I first started. This is year 18 for me. And I remember that was [state standards/curriculum] and basically it gave you a list of things to cover and as long as you covered it, you were fine. Then you know, of course, there were some gray areas . . . I see both sides. If we didn't have pacing and things like that and standards, you might have a person in American History to teach the Civil War the whole because that's their jam and they love it. You have to have some type of outline because if not . . . the kids take the test and they know the Civil War but they don't know anything else. On the flip side, I think it's so much. Depending on what you are teaching [testing or non-testing subject] . . . like I had World [History] and

GRIOT	QUOTES ON AUTONOMY, CAMARADERIE, AND COLLABORATION
	Government before. I had a bit more time to be creative because it's not as much pressure with the test. I still had to pace out but it's not like it's a tested subject. Then too, I think it's different in different schools. Our school, just being transparent, is on the state list. That means, we have people in our classroom constantly. we have people critiquing . . . do this . . . do the gradual release . . . this is best practice. What about rigor? What do these questions look like? Where, you know rigor might look different . . . versus if I was at a school that wasn't on the list. And was quote-unquote performing. I probably would have a little bit more space to do certain things because we don't have that type of pressure."
GRIOT 5	Story 23—*Teacher autonomy*. "Depends on building leadership. That depends on the individual school that you're in. It doesn't even depend on the district. It depends on your leadership. I did have a principal, one of the positive things I could say about her and her administrative team that she supervised, they were very hands-off. You know what you need to do, you know what your standards are, however, you want to deliver them, you go deliver them. You know we are coming in for evaluation on ABC-XYZ day. This is what we expect to see. For the most part that was it and I appreciated that. We did have quite a bit of autonomy. Now this year, they went to a new reading series [curriculum] and it's pretty much mapped out for us. Being a seasoned teacher, you find ways to implement yourself into your lesson . . . what you want your students to get out of it and things. But it depends on the building and who's supervising that building and expectations, as far as autonomy is concerned. In another school, they wanted everybody to have the exact same lesson plans and be on the exact same lesson every day . . . 15 minutes before the lesson ends, everybody ought to be at this part of the lesson. And I'm like, we don't have the same kids. I have 71 kids. Out of 71, three of them tested at level three, which was considered proficient. But you want them putting out essays and projects and stuff like the gifted kids. And the gifted kids really weren't gifted. They might have a strong foundation early on in their educational beginnings but moving through [matriculation] we don't teach kids to think. And that's where our students are being left behind other cultures of students. We're saying this is the information, this is what you need to know, tell it back to me. It's not asking them to think."
GRIOT 6	Story 18—*Teacher autonomy*. "Teacher autonomy is not there. The trust is not there. You're not treated as a professional. Even when it comes to taking time off, you're telling me I got to bring a note. You have doctors and dentists . . . they're looking at me like 'what?' I have to give the note to my principal. So, I just feel like the autonomy for a teacher is not there. Especially for a social studies teacher. Lesson planning... with all this that's going on around us, what the State of Florida is doing with the AP African American History classes . . . when Trump was in office or what's going on with Trump at this time. These are things that the kids need to know. And it might not be a standard but let me teach the real stuff . . . the news that's taking place at this time and relate it to the standards and the kids will get it. Our kids think social studies is nothing but about old White men. And when you look at those standards, that's what it's about. Old White men that have done these great things [long pause]." Story 14—*Teaching tested subjects*. "The pressure, the pressure that comes along with the testing subject, that constant coming into your classroom and then the school has their way of thinking, how you should teach it. But if you don't have a social studies

GRIOT	QUOTES ON AUTONOMY, CAMARADERIE, AND COLLABORATION
	background, you don't understand. . . . you have 28 standards and because we are on a four-by-four [instead of a traditional two semesters for each course the course is taught in one semester]. That means from August to December, I have to teach from Colonial America, better yet the exploration of America, all the way up to President Obama. The kids don't have the background knowledge like that. They [administration] don't want to see the lecturing but you have to understand the kids have to take notes. I have to explain to make sure that they understand because like I said, they don't have the background knowledge. Many times, they [the administration] want you to group them together or give them this and give them that. That's the issue that we are having in social studies at this time. When it comes to U.S. History, there are so many standards that you have to cover and they're Eurocentric. There is no cultural relevance. It's like you are actually teaching to a test. When the kids don't do well, you're the blame. So, too much anxiety and too much pressure. This is why I stay away from U.S. History."

The Griots shared 19 stories about teacher autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration Teacher autonomy has changed over time. As curriculum and testing became more standardized, so had teachers' ability to professionally regulate what works for the students in their classrooms. If the principal trusts the knowledge and expertise of the teachers, they have autonomy over their classrooms. If not, standardization was required. Additionally, district mandates also affect standardized classroom expectations.

Teacher camaraderie was a theme for most of the Griots. It was particularly relevant when teachers' working conditions were less favorable. The camaraderie was necessary for coping with the struggles of teaching. These communities of co-workers provided safe spaces for reflection and reflexivity on their "why."

Teacher collaboration and planning was a reminder that this work does not have to be in isolation. When teachers can collaborate with their content communities, they can collectively impact their students. They share ideas, resources, and thinking about specific lessons. When there was no protected time for collaboration and planning, teachers may be disconnected from what their peers are doing in the classroom.

District Directives (Curriculum and Pedagogy)

Table 4.13 provides examples of what Griots said about district directives on curriculum and pedagogy.

Table 4.13

Sample Stories About District Directives

GRIOT	QUOTES ABOUT DISTRICT DIRECTIVES
GRIOT 2	Story 14—"[The district] had a good thing where they gave you, for each subject except for AMDM, the units of study. So, within the units of study, they had everything. Honestly, you could have taught the whole year through the [district's] unit of study because they gave you openings; they gave you pretests; they gave you posters; they gave you PowerPoints; they gave you supplemental materials to use for reteach; they gave you everything that you needed, but just because they gave it doesn't mean it went over well with your students. That's when the administration really focused on the units of study from the district. They were like, 'you use these materials out of the unit of study but if you come up with something else, then y'all [the math department] got to use that. Whatever you come up with, yall all got to use it at the same time.' We don't necessarily have a physical book, but we have an online book. So there is a book that you can use but the units of study materials aren't necessarily coming from that book. It's stuff that, I guess, the team complied and came up with over the summer. They find different resources and stuff and basically put it together for you. But, I mean, I think the last time I had a physical book for students, and myself with teacher's copy was 2013. We got to the point were we asked . . . we can't physically by them . . . let us have an online version that we can . . . that the students can access. For the class I teach, AMDM, there is no book. It was something adopted from a Texas curriculum. I basically put the curriculum together. that's why I was tasked with doing the PL [professional learning] for the entire district."
GRIOT 3	Story 22—*Spending on programs not teachers*. "Truth be told, if you're not dealing with kids now, certain decisions you can't make because we're dealing with a post-COVID kid as well as a technology kid. I know it's a lot of money in education, but we know that the money's not coming to us. It's going to all these programs and these programs which are not necessarily bad, but we have to do better... making those things effective and we got to story trying to . . . we have to let stuff sit. We have to stop changing programs every two, three, every year when we know it takes two or three years for anything to stick in the first place. Five really. We'll talk about this initiative and within two years it's not working . . . we don't see results and then we put in another initiative when if we would've waited a little longer or we would have looked to the teachers because the teachers, most of the time, could tell you this ain't gonna work. But on the flip side, it's working; it's just gonna take time."

GRIOT	QUOTES ABOUT DISTRICT DIRECTIVES
GRIOT 4	Story 8—*School mandates like the penal system*. "[One school] was such a rewarding time in teaching. As for the scholar population that they said could not [long pause] . . . it was still a [Black] population [with] controls and mandates. They wanted to control children, which I feel they wouldn't have done to a Caucasian population. They wouldn't put such hard mandates as if [long pause] it was like a penal system. But the scholars soared during that time. You had [more] time and a lot of time at work. The model allowed the children who couldn't do a lot of travel, to see different places and we even went overseas. I still respect the principal for the opportunities, I don't respect the [one school] model as much."
	Story 10—*Dumping ground.* "I feel I was sent here. One of the most challenging places I've ever worked when I came here four years ago. It was wild. But one of the best principals that I ever worked under . . . that loved the kids like they were his and wanted them to experience things that his kids did. And I have to be transparent, this school was a dumping ground. My last school, prior to this one, was also a dumping ground. I said, does [title of school] stand for Collector of Manure School? They would always send the children that would do the worst things to that school. It had nothing to do with their ability. It was just the actions that they would take. and we were mandated to instruct them. Many times, not with administrative support. When I came here it was the same population with a similar population. But the administrative support was extremely different. He was on it. But the conditions of having children fight all day . . . all day. Smoke weed all day in the hallways and curse the teachers out . . . and curse the area superintendent. This is all stuff that I saw for myself, not heard, and you're still expected to teach them. It was difficult. But I've found with this population, being constant and consistent with these babies and always addressing them with the utmost respect as if you would want to be addressed. This has never been an issue that I had. I'm matter of fact and extremely firm but respect is always due. I always model what I want to see, and I'd never assume that they had the [support system] I had."
	Story 19—*Mismanaging funds for ESOL students*. "I'm always for the underdog. They were getting funding. I remember telling them [county school district] how did this baby fail this test and get retained but they didn't get the service that he was supposed to get? Nobody was looking at the paperwork. And I always look at the paperwork after I meet the child. I never looked at the paperwork before because that child might have totally changed. Not being served . . . a little girl said if I do not pass this test, my family gonna send me back to Mexico. I have to pass. This test is everything. You're not serving them or making them comfortable. It's all about the test not about the barriers that the scholars came with. Some parents couldn't support students because of the language barrier. The only thing that helped me was that numbers are universal in mathematics. The [county school district] would get the funding at that time but not serving the people. I even reached out to the Latino Association of the county for support, but they were brand new at the time."
GRIOT 7	Story 17—*Equity in practice*. "I say this with caution because I know that there's still huge inequities across the district, but it feels like there is more effort and more people are realizing or the big people realize, hey, we've got to find ways to fill these gaps. Your gap may look different from my gap but it still needs to be filled. First, the amount of resources have definitely increased and it's not a blanket rollout. More

GRIOT	QUOTES ABOUT DISTRICT DIRECTIVES
	people are getting resources based on need. Second, the level of partnership and community support has increased. Again, it's needs-based because there are different programs in different parts of the district. Third, the diversity in the adults, the people who work in the district has definitely changed and that's a plus...different backgrounds, different experiences, different cultures, orientation, all of that. No matter who you are, you can see someone that looks like you, who believes in what you believe in, who celebrates the same holidays as you celebrate, or have the same orientation or identifying measures. It's out and not a secret. That's beneficial to children because they need to see somebody who looks like them . . . who made it . . . who is accomplished. Fourth, I remember one State of the District [report], there was a Spanish-speaking speaker and the speaker did the whole presentation in Spanish. I could just imagine being a child who saw that and could connect and relate. Now of course the speaker came back and translated it in English. But as a child, I heard someone deliver a message to a whole group of people in my language and it meant . . . it mattered . . . it resonated with me. Fifth, documents are translated before sent home. I can't imagine as a parent not being able to read anything from my child's school. Now, there's a solid plan or system in place that allows for that to be possible."

The Griots shared 15 stories about district directives. The school district provided the curriculum and teaching materials for the schools to use. They also set the pacing through the scope and sequence for courses of study. Griots mentioned problems with implementation, partial resources, and the mismatch curriculum levels with student levels. It complicated teaching. District leaders theorize curriculum and pedagogy without consideration of the practice in classrooms with students that struggle academically.

Career Crossroads/Pushout

The Griots shared nine stories about their career crossroads. An example of their perspectives is shown in Table 4.14.

Table 4.14

Sample Story of Crossroads

GRIOT	QUOTE ABOUT CAREER CROSROADS/PUSHOUT
Griot 5	Story 22—*Put me out to pasture*. "Why is it March and you just now passing out the teacher editions to the reading series [that was to be implemented this year]. It's that kind of stuff. So I'm just tired of it. I asked my principal, go on and put me out pasture. Put me in one of those, what do you call it, connection classed with remediated kids because I move low [performing] kids. They work on the computer the majority of the time; the lesson plans are already done. Yeah, I'm tired. I can't keep doing this."

Most of the Griots are at the crossroads in their career. Through the years, they had experienced a decline in value and respect as veteran teachers. They were overlooked for growth opportunities outside of the classroom. There is no pathway of classroom teachers that want to advance but not as a principal. Principal toxic behaviors and increased teacher workload are key factors for pre-retirement attrition and teachers wrestling with staying in the profession.

Student Behaviors

Table 4.15 presents several examples of the Griots' experience with student behaviors.

Table 4.15

Sample Stories of Student Behaviors

GRIOT	EXAMPLES OF STORIES ABOUT STUDENT BEHAVIORS
GRIOT 1	Story 3—"The principal had a sexual harassment case open when he started working at the school. Unfortunately, one of the complaints, an assistant principal, had been working there two years before he got there. Shortly after his arrival, "they moved her" to another school. "That caused a lot of friction because a lot of female teachers in the building felt uncomfortable around him. The students got a hold to the story . . . what was going on, and a lot of the kids really liked this particular assistant principal . . . they came up with a plan to do a walk out of school. Can you imagine 650 students walking out of school chanting, excuse my language, lock his ass up? 650 students protesting and chanting that chant." Story 4—"One of the students set the tissue in the bathroom on fire. Like burnt the bathroom." While they were waiting for the fire department to put the fire out, the students became hungry and restless. The fire happened before lunch was served. "They can't go back in the building . The kids are split between the gymn and the auditorium and when I tell you Miss Devoe, like fights broke out like you ain't seen

GRIOT	EXAMPLES OF STORIES ABOUT STUDENT BEHAVIORS
	ever in your life. I mean, when I tell you brawls, we had brawls. There were five or six going on at the same time." The fights were in pockets in various locations and there was not enough staff to contain them. "It was just like, 'why is somebody not calling downtown and tell these people to get these buses here ASAP. Bump giving these kids lunch, put them on a bus and send them home now.'"
GRIOT 5	Story 11—A*dult behavior but childish consequences*. "In middle school, kids want to act like adults. They [receive] childish consequences for their adult behaviors and actions. I'll give you a prime example. About six or seven years ago, I had a male student have his cousin ask me, what you gonna do if I slap you? I very calmly looked at him and leaned over his face. I said, you mean hypothetically speaking, if you slapped me, what am I going to do? I said, hypothetically speaking, you know when I hit you back, I'm going to lose my job. I'm not going to lose my job and a fight too. Oh, his mama came up there 38-hot. 'Let me catch you outside around the corner.' The AP, who was conducting the meeting told me to get up and leave. She was just that serious. She was ready to fight. I was real calm and I got up and walked out. I went right to the courthouse and did a restraining order against her and her husband, who was on parole from prison. The mother came up to the school and wanted the principal to tell me to take it back. The principal, who wrote me up for saying it, told her 'That's the law and he ain't got nothing to do with it.'"

The Griots shared 19 stories about student behaviors. In 2023, student behaviors have become more nuanced. Student fights have been a part of schooling for ages. However, COVID the shift to teaching the whole child requires new considerations. COVID highlighted an awareness of depression and anxiety among students as well as, student efficacy, effort, and mindset; self-management and socialization; the influences of social media; student rebellion and rejection of formal education.

Parents and Families

Table 4.16 shows several stories from the Griots on the theme of parents and families.

Table 4.16

Sample Stories of Parents and Families

GRIOT	QUOTE ABOUT PARENTS AND FAMILIES
GRIOT 1	Story 9—She works with the band as a booster and auxiliary coach. She said, "Parent involvement could and should be a lot better. Parent involvement has fluctuated. We've had years where we've had really good parent involvement and then we've had years where we've had little to no one." There was a time when they only had one band-booster parent. "One time we only had one parent for the entire year. She was there every Friday to help us with, you know, food, and getting the kids on the bus when we went on field trips or to parades. She was the one parent that we knew we could count on that would be there. There has to be some kind of accountability somewhere for parents to show up. Maybe some parents feel like we don't ask them or maybe they don't know." She also said "We need to make sure that we get the information out to parents in a timely fashion."
GRIOT 2	Story 7— "In my school, we don't have a lot of parent participation. They don't really care. Instead of trying to assist me and make sure their child gets where they need , what they need . . . if I call and say, Oh, your child has missed four or five days of class . . . [response] Oh, he was sick, just send him his make-up work and it's like . . . (sigh) That makes it hard too because it's like you're fighting the battle on your own. You know you can't want it more for somebody than they want for themselves. And if you don't have a parent backing you up . . . you know and in my school, we have a lot of kids that are working and actually taking care of their households. The parents are not concerned about them trying to graduate. They [parents] are more concerned about them [students] going to get this check because we don't know if these lights are going to come on tomorrow. That's hard to balance too because as an educator, my first job is to educate you. At the same time, I have to have compassion because I can't tell you to ask your manager not to schedule you during school time. If that is gonna make the difference between you having a roof over your head or not. It's hard to do more than just the teaching aspect. It's just a hard time."
GRIOT 6	Story 17—*Parent support for student support*. "Currently, [there is] very little parent support. We have a lot of parents where life is taking place. You have a lot of parents that don't have the resources . . . don't have the know-how . . . just don't know what to do. And I think that's a big issue, especially in your Black schools where you have Black administrators and Black teachers. I feel like we have the resources but we don't know how to tell the parents how to use them. For example, if a child is failing in my class, I understand as a school you want documentation, but as a teacher to call [a parent] to let them know that the child is failing . . . that's all I'm doing. What type of support . . . what type of resources . . . what type of solutions am I providing them to help their child to succeed and pass the class. You have parents that don't know how to read and write. You have parents who were thrown into this position, meaning grandmamas taking care of the children. I don't think parents don't want to [support]; they just don't know how to and I keep saying we need parenting classes. You need to show parents how to raise successful kids."

The Griots shared 16 stories about parents and families. Griots were empathetic to the struggles of parents and families especially during and post-COVID—loss of life, homes, and jobs caused more hardship. Some parents depended on the income of their child during those trying times. Education had to take a backseat for many. In other instances, Griots spoke about providing parents with resources so they can support their students. This included changing parent mindsets about math so students will think differently about math.

ESOL Students

The Griots shared five stories about ESOL students. The language barrier for students and their families created inequitable education opportunities. If parents do not speak English, children often must translate them. ESOL students include African diasporic peoples; the assumption that Black students are not ESOL is problematic. National immigration issues have local effects on students and families. Finally, the standardize testing of ESOL students in English. See Profile 2 of Griot 2 and Griot 7.

Testing

Table 4.17 provides examples of stories Griots told on the theme of testing.

Table 4.17

Sample Story About Testing

GRIOT	QUOTE FROM STORY OF TESTING
GRIOT 6	Story 14—*Teaching tested subjects.* “The pressure, the pressure that comes along with the testing subject, that constant coming into your classroom and then the school has their way of thinking, how you should teach it. But if you don’t have a social studies background, you don’t understand . . . you have 28 standards and because we are on a four-by-four [Instead of a traditional two semesters for each course the course is taught in one semester]. That means from August to December, I have to teach from Colonial America, better yet the exploration of America, all the way up to President Obama. The kids don’t have the background knowledge like that. They [administration] don’t want to see the lecturing but you have to understand the kids have to take notes. I have to explain to make sure that they understand because like I said, they don’t have the background knowledge. Many times, they [administration] wants you to group them together or give them this and give them that. That's the issue that we are having in

	social studies at this time. When it comes to U.S. History, there are so many standards that you have to cover and they're Eurocentric. There is no cultural relevance. It's like you are actually teaching to a test. When the kids don't do well, you're the blame. So, too much anxiety and too much pressure. This is why I stay away from U.S. History."

In the Griots' stories about testing, they spoke about the pressures of teaching tested subjects, the rise of testing, and the mismatch of learning styles, teaching styles, and test requirements.

Black Feminist Thought

The Griots shared 16 stories about Black feminist thought in education. These included ones about spiritual beliefs, teaching as a calling, and how the think about and do their work. Table 4.18 provides quotes from the Griots illustrative of their reflections pertaining to Black feminist thought.

Table 4.18

Stories Pertaining to Black Feminist Thought

GRIOT	QUOTES FROM STORES ABOUT *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT*
GRIOT 3	Story 1—*Roles and responsibilities (pacing).* "I'm the chair as well as a teacher and I have a tested subject. It's already high stress [teaching] the tested subject because of the pacing. The kids don't have prior knowledge. We don't have time to really teach the material because we have to worry so much about pacing. I'm basically showing it to you . . . it's the stress of that. And being the chair, I have other duties and responsibilities as well. It's never enough time to get anything done. I tell my new teachers, make your to do list and [from] the most important to the least, work your way through. Once you get through that day, fine. You can pick up again tomorrow. You have to practice that because a lot of the expectations, realistically . . . everything's not going to be done or it's not going to be done with fidelity. It's so much. And then, they want that turnaround time, that second. It's especially different when you're in the classroom with kids all day versus when you might have a chance to sneak off to an office or have some downtime. Teachers don't have that. For example, in the week, you might have a meeting during your planning period, let's say Tuesday, but then Wednesday you're expected to stay after school for something else. And then you still have to turn the lesson plans in on Thursday . . . it's a lot."
GRIOT 7	Story 23—*Being a Black female teacher.* "Saying these things out loud is a reminder that this is where you're supposed to be . . . this is what you're supposed to be doing. Where you do it . . . that's the back and forth . . . as an educator, I'm [understanding] that it doesn't matter where you do [the work] just so long as you do it somewhere and it's impactful. As a Black female educator, I know a lot of Black female educators who

are in situations where a schoolhouse setting may not be the place, but you're still committed to the work. We just have this thing of nurturing and caring and I think, it's just in our DNA. Caregiving and nurturing and supporting and supplying and making a way where there's no way . . . all the things that are stereotypical of Black women [pause] it is possible to do those things somewhere else . . . in a different capacity. That's a struggle. The more I read or look deeper into it, it's a real thing. But it's not an isolated situation which is a bit reaffirming. You're not giving up on education or giving up on children or you're not giving up on the advocacy work or equity work or the engagement work. It just may be done from a different place or a different standpoint. And I didn't know how real it was [pause] until I started looking more into it."

The Griots shared 16 stories about Black feminist thought in education. These included ones about spiritual beliefs, teaching as a calling, and how the think about and do their work.

COVID

The Griots shared four stories about COVID. They included post-pandemic frustration and burnout; ESOL online learning; student fragility; and losses. See Profile 2 for examples from Griot 3, Griot 5, and Griot 7.

Other Stories

Table 4.19 provides examples of quotes about stories of other stories.

Table 4.19

Samples of Other Stories

GRIOT	QUOTES ABOUT OTHER STORIES
GRIOT 5	Story 13—Teachers injured breaking up fights. "I actually broke up a fight and broke my bone in my hand and had to have surgery. I remember my principal called my doctor and asked the doctor why I could not come back to work. The doctor called me and Human Resources because that was not protocol. The doctor literally gave me a documented excuse because it was my dominant hand. He was like, "she can't dress herself . . . she might be in a situation where she can't do hygienic things at work." However, we had a White teacher who broke her hand, and she was still coming to work. It's like they give kids ropes to keep jumping and extending and extending yet they keep tightening ours [teachers]."
GRIOT 7	Story 24—Teacher self-care and wellness. "One other thing, as a Black female educator, that I am in the process of learning is self-care. I'm just getting to the point where I realized how important that is. If I had to say anything to other Black female educators, no matter how long they've been in . . . self-care is a must. It's a real thing. It didn't kick in for me until after we came back from the pandemic. Even within this last year, a light bulb

> went off. You've got to do something different, or you are not going to be here to do all the things that you are capable and gifted in grace to do if you are not well . . . physically, mentally, emotionally . . . all these things matter. I think the pandemic showed us all that you got to take care of yourself. That’s it.”

The Griots shared 12 one-off stories that did not fit into the other categories which I have referred to here simply as “other stories.” They included stories of teacher self-care, Black teachers who have more degrees than White teachers, moving from school to school, and the shift of teacher union strength and support.

CHAPTER V: I AM GRIOT 8—REFLECTIONS AS A SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER

> If I didn't define myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.
>
> –Audre Lorde

My teaching career started at the dawn of "No Child Left Behind." It was a time when standardized testing had not taken on its current punitive form. In all my years of teaching only three principals have made a positive impact on my life as an educator. They were seasoned educators that believed in children and teachers by creating a culture and climate that was conducive to teaching and learning. They understood the power of community and community relations making them grounded leaders. The lessons I learned shaped my expectation of principal leaders. These are:

1. Trust your teachers and give them autonomy to do their jobs.
2. Grow them by sharing the latest research.
3. Listen to them.

I am grateful for those experiences of being respected for what I do. Sadly, that was only four years out of the 20 that I have been in education. Working conditions have become increasingly unbearable as the years have passed.

The first time I quit teaching was in 2015. I was teaching freshman English, and I was the chair for the ninth-grade academy. That year I had to fight the counselor to stop adding students to my classroom. I think that state capacity was 34 and I had 40 students on my roll. On three different occasions, they removed students—but then added more. This left me with twice (or more) than the common "best practices" teacher-to-student ratio. Years later, I found out that parents wanted their children in my class. I am not sure whether that was a compliment or a

curse. In education, it seems the better you are, the more workload increases, instead of growing other people. I enjoyed my work in the academy. This, however, was not the reason I quit.

That same year, the state began piloting a new teacher evaluation system. It was a messy implementation at our school because the only people to have access to it should be the principal and assistant principals. However, the department chair was allowed to evaluate me and document it in the state evaluation system. Anything that she put in the system, I had to refute it in writing. This was the beginning of the culture of write-ups that can cost you your job and/or your state teacher certification. Unfortunately, it is also a modern way to push teachers out. Teacher evaluations are supposedly designed for teacher growth but too often, in my experience, I have seen it used punitively. This was the major reason why I quit teaching after 14 years in the classroom.

After a year and a half in non-profit as the Director of Youth and Family Education, I returned to the classroom in 2017. In this chapter, I share data from my journals about some of those experiences. In 2021, I quit teaching again. That time, I was promoted to an equity position in the central office. I was sure that position would allow me to disrupt inequity in schools. However, my experiences there only proved to me that I worked for a toxic organization not just a toxic school. I also share data from my journals about my central office experiences (Appendix B). After two years there, I was pushed out. I returned to the classroom. These experiences give my empathy to speak about Black women teachers working conditions while adding to the collective narrative of the Griots in this research. Here, I introduce three short vignettes in my voice about my most recent teaching experiences. These are about unrealistic expectations, working conditions and student behavior, and emotional labor and burnout.

Vignette 1: My Return to Teaching—An Example of Unrealistic Expectations

I returned to the classroom for school year 2023–24. I chose to go to another alternative, non-traditional school. Typically, students attend due to a major infraction at their home school, however it is a temporary assignment. Students may stay for a semester or a year before returning to their traditional school setting.

Preplanning is a time for teachers to return to school and prepare before students return. It typically includes lesson planning, data review, classroom decoration, and various district and school level trainings. The afternoon before district training, the English department was notified that we would be using a new curriculum. That was three days before school started. During the summer, I emailed the instructional coach for the curriculum so I would be knowledgeable and able to write my lesson plans. I reviewed the curriculum and teacher materials that were sent to me, only to be informed that we would not be using it. I was frustrated but I pivoted. I quickly registered for what I thought was the training for the new curriculum.

Upon arrival, we found out that the startup training we needed was the previous week and the teacher materials (scope and sequence and the unit plans) were given out at that training. What a waste of time. The syllabus and two weeks of lesson plans were due, and we did not have the teaching manual nor the student books. It was a Thursday and school starts on Tuesday. At that moment, I was beyond frustrated mainly because I was not surprised. This was how "we do school" in this district. As much as I expected better, incidents like this were never surprising. Welcome back Gina.

Vignette 2: Homophobic Slurs—Working Conditions and Student Behavior

I have endured two incidents of verbal abuse from students using homophobic slurs. The first time was shortly after I returned to the classroom in 2017. A student was upset with me, I do

not remember why but whatever the reason, I put him out of my classroom. In the midst of his anger, he started saying, “you’re a bulldagger . . . bulldagger . . . you’re a bulldagger“ in a hateful, taunting voice. I told him to keep walking. This was problematic in many ways. First, he was a child, maybe 16 years old. Second, “bulldagger” is an old homophobic slur that I had not heard since the 1970s so this obviously was a learned behavior. Third, I was triggered because I remember the way my mother used such words when I was a child. And fourth, it hurt, and I wanted to hit him. I found the assistant principal and I told him, “either he goes, or I will.” I was shocked that he immediately permanently removed the student from my class.

The second instance of homophobic slurs came a few weeks into this school year 2023–24. Currently, I work in an alternative school. Most students are placed here for major behavior infractions at their home school. This student was a middle schooler, about 13.

Nowadays, students are issued computers and as a teacher, I must somewhat control what they do during my class. There is a program that teachers use to block websites and monitor what they are viewing. I allow students to have three website tabs: one for music and the other two for my work. As an English teacher, I know that all my students are struggling readers, and they hate my class. I also know that music can help students stay on task. It is my compromise with them, as long it does not disturb the class and they are working.

Well, once I started the program, after I explained my thinking to them, this student got angry. He started cussing and throw the computer on the floor. Before he walked out of the classroom, he looked me in the eye and said, “you’re a bulldagger . . . you’re a bulldagger.” I told him to leave, and I called for the assistant principal. This student was a little more aggressive than in the previous example, and he walked up on me in a threatening manner as if he was going to hit me. As in the first incident, I felt threatened and vulnerable. I also found it

interesting again, that again this word in coming out of the mouth of a child. It was not so easy to have him permanently removed because this is an alternative school. However, when I had a parent conference with his mother and other school personnel, she was initially supportive of me. She chastised his behavior and demanded that he apologize and change his behavior. The assistant principal in this case put him on a behavioral contract that is the beginning of the tribunal process. He read the infractions to the student's mom including threats and sexual harassment. Both the student and his mother, who was on the phone, became irate. She said that this was not sexual harassment, and we were just adding charges to the student. The assistant principal was firm in saying it was sexual harassment according to the district handbook. The mother was furious and hung up the phone.

Vignette 3: I Can't Do It All—Emotional Labor and Burnout

The workload of a teacher post-COVID intensified in low-performing schools with struggling readers. The losses are too great for public schools. Academic loss is the most obvious one, but there were many losses that were not so obvious. School also teaches children social skills with peers and adults other than their families. Student anxiety and depression increased leaving the loss of confidence and hope. I think the worst thing we have done since returning to face-to-face classrooms is not addressing student social skills with fidelity. We have social emotional learning (SEL), but it has not been implemented well—and it shows.

I teach middle grades in an alternative school. These students were in elementary school during COVID. They missed academic and SEL skills. Although they are 7th and 8th graders on paper, their behavior is immature. The expectations of the teachers—of me—is to teach them on-level at the district curriculum pacing as if I am a superhero. One cannot teach curriculum to

students until the behaviors are addressed. I chose to go back to the classroom because I thought it would be an easier transition while I finished my dissertation.

I know teaching, and the learning curve, I thought, would not be too great. I chose to go to the alternative school because there are less students and I know that they have the greatest need. They deserve a veteran teacher that understands more than content but understands young people in their context. What I did not expect were unrealistic demands to teach as if these students did not have nuanced situations. And I did not expect a culture of accountability for teachers but not for students and their parents.

I taught at an alternative school before, and children were held accountable for their behaviors. Granted that was many years ago but fundamentally, this is a school and students need to learn. In this environment however, they need support in social skills: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These are the tenets of SEL, and they need this first and foremost because we should be preparing them to go back to their home schools. If they do not have these skills, they will return to the alternative school. Our mission includes SEL and restorative practices, but we do not implement either with fidelity. This is not good for students or teachers.

My Reflexive Reflections

I chose these experiences to discuss because I have worked on the frontline as a teacher, at the central office as a leader of change, and back in the classroom again. As an insider, I have many similar experiences as the Griots of this work. I have worked long enough to see how the testing culture has intensified the working conditions of teachers through the years. I too reminisce about the few good principals I have had in these two decades. It saddened me to admit that I have only had three principals who created a culture and climate of teaching and

learning for teachers and students. As I look back and compare the differences between past principals and current ones, I think they used to be confident, self-aware, and socially award. They had the emotional intelligence to do their jobs without the need to micromanage. They also understood that education is a long game not a turnaround.

With testing increasingly central, the turnaround model is privileged particularly in low-performing schools. This failed business model is also failing as an educational leadership model. There is too much expectation for teachers (blame and shame) and not enough support from principals and their leadership teams which include assistant principals and instructional coaches. Furthermore, there is no room for adaptive leadership from teachers or leaders. There is a difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges in public education. A technical challenge can be a bell schedule or lesson plan. It can also be the operating procedures of the school. An adaptive challenge is nuanced. It is more than checking the boxes. It requires deep reflection and reflexiveness. One must consider social, cultural, and political norms. It is a true understanding of the past, the present and a hope for the future.

As I reflect on who I was when I started teaching in 2001, months after being fired from the police department, I know that who I must be in 2023 is much different. Here is the historical context of my life as a teacher. See Table 13. When I began this career, it was a month after the 9-11 catastrophe. It was also but a few months before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. A year later I became a parent of my first child. About seven years later, the United States had its first Black president. During Obama's second term as president, Trayvon Martin was murdered, and the Black Lives Matter Movement was born. I quit teaching a year before the election of Trump. When I returned to the classroom, he had signed executive orders that began a deeper divide promoting exclusion and xenophobia against all that were not White, male, hetero, and

married. In the words of bell hooks, the "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" was front row and center strategically reclaiming its position after the Black president. By the time I made it to the central office, I was theorizing and practicing ways to that teachers could teach "controversial issues" in their classrooms, specifically race, religion, and sexuality in the name of equity and social justice. Each socio-political marker mentioned above affected my work and how I thought about it. Table 5.1 outlines my life as an educator in relation to both personal and global events.

Table 5.1

My Educator Life History Timeline

YEAR	EVENTS (PERSONAL, HISTORICAL, SOCIOPOLITICAL, etc.)
2001	Began teaching a month after 9-11
2002	No Child Left Behind Act
2002	Gave birth to first child
2005	Gave birth to second child
2008	The Great Recession
2009	1st Black President
2012	Murder of Trayvon Martin
2013	Black Lives Matter Movement began
2015	Quit teaching
2016	Became Director of Youth & Family Education at a Settlement House
2017	Trump Presidency Anti-CRT, Anti-Immigration, Anti-LGBTQ legislation codified Federal & State Levels Returned to the classroom
2019	Begin dissertation
2020	COVID-19 Pandemic Murder of Breonna Taylor Murder of George Floyd
2021	Truth Be Told Campaign and other Teach Truth Movement
2021	Started at central office
2023	Returned to the classroom again

With almost 20 years in the classroom, nine years of doctorial research, and two years of equity work at the district level, I have accepted the challenge of change as both a teacher and a

leader. There are some fundamental truths about teaching in an urban school district that has not changed through the years, but the complexities over time require me to be authentically me, including all my intersections, and mandate a social-political awareness to adapt and shift with the times. What urban low-performing public schools need is partnership of adaptive teacher leadership and adaptive principal leadership at a school level and a commitment from the district level to include teacher voices in decision making that affect teachers and students.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARIES, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore Black women's lived experiences as teachers in urban schools during the era of 21st century education reform. The criteria for participants, the Griots, was a minimum of seven years as a teacher, taught tested subjects of literacy or numeracy in one school district, one school cluster, and/or one school. The data showed that the tenure of most of these veteran teachers was not in one district, one school cluster, or one school although they were working as such during this study. The data also showed that some years they taught tested subjects and some years they did not. This made for a richer discussion because teachers where able to compare and contrast their experiences within different schools, districts, and states. The major findings were on leadership, student behaviors, and on teacher autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration.

Summary of Study Findings

Working Conditions

There were nine themes that emerged from the data with leadership being most prominent. Twenty-five percent of the 160 Griot stories mentioned leadership in some form. The second most mentioned theme were a tie between teacher autonomy, camaraderie, and collaboration (12%) and student behaviors (12%).

The leadership theme included principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. The data from this research showed a deeper understanding of what research and education scholars found about the importance of leadership (Balow, 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Murphy, 2008). The assumption that administrator support meant the principal only, was not the outcome here. School leadership structures, according to the Griots, included the three levels of leadership. The school-level hierarchy,

particularly relating to teachers and students include principal, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. The principals' behaviors, beliefs, and biases set the culture and climate for teachers and students (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023; Liu, 2020; Mette & Scribner, 2014). When a principal is the instructional leader that is experienced in relationship building, trusts teachers' professional skills, and supports growth the school climate is psychologically safe for teachers and students. This creates a thriving environment where the love of learning can be fostered for all stakeholders. It does not necessarily mean that the school produces the highest test scores but growth, both academically and emotionally, is present. The principal must be visible and involved. On the contrary, when a principal has limited emotional intelligence and no respect for teachers or other stakeholders, they inevitably created a hostile work environment; punitive, threatening, and stagnate. Black women teachers are not able to do the work that they are passionate about, and they reimage what a career in education could look like or plan their exit.

According to the findings of this study, Black women struggle with leaders that are incompetent and inexperienced especially when little or no teaching experience, yet they are responsible for teacher evaluations (Grant, 2015; Murphy, 2008). This speaks to the shift of school leadership. Today's school leaders are more concerned about driving test scores and less about creating a culture and climate conducive for teaching and learning (Grant, 2015; Johnson, 2013; Mette, 2013; Mette & Scribner, 2014). They have adopted a corporate philosophy, turnaround leadership, that in practice looks like getting rid of teachers instead of growing them. No matter the tenure, teachers need support and training relevant to their workplace. Compliance is not relative. The idea of products over people does not resonate with humans that teach humans.

The themes of teacher autonomy (Sutcher et al., 2016), camaraderie (Griot data), and collaboration (Balow, 2021) elevated curriculum programs that are scripted for on-level students, the teacher sub-culture camaraderie, and professional collaboration (Balow, 2021). Veteran teachers have lots of experience with content and its relationship to the students that they teach. That said, Black women teachers struggle and push back on packaged curriculum programs that were not designed for the students that they teach (Hinnant-Crawford, 2023). It makes no sense to teach, for example, Algebra concepts to students that have not mastered multiplication tables or grade-level reading to students that are reading on an elementary level. Black women teachers are asked to fill in the academic gap while teaching on required pacing grade-level content (Liu, 2020). Even when they try to, it is nearly impossible and extremely stressful to teach four grade levels of foundational content along with grade level material. They are forced to teach to the test. Students are exposed to content but do not master it before going on to the next grade level. This practice eventually takes a toll on teachers.

According to my findings in this study, camaraderie showed up in the data as a subculture— as also in Balow (2021). Despite the difficulties of teaching in low-performing and hostile working environments, teachers found strength with colleagues. It is like a sub-culture to the toxic school culture. It could be preserved as trauma bonding, but I would like to think of it as village support. Culturally, Black people are communal, and they find strength in the collective. Black women teachers too, find multiple levels of support with co-workers. That bond is on and off duty. It includes thought-partnering, eating lunch together, celebrating personal and family successes as well as supporting one through grief. These work relationships help sustain teachers throughout the school year.

Collaboration (Balow, 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Sutcher et al., 2016) and planning showed up in the data as desirable but not protected. Black women teachers want to collaborate and plan with their colleagues, but that time is taken for other meetings, training, or professional development. The expectation then (spoken or unspoken) is that teachers plan on their personal time outside of work hours. This is not respectful of teachers' time or lives outside of work. Too much is asked of teachers and when they fall short of these impossible expectations, they are bullied, and their evaluations become weaponized.

Student behaviors (Balow, 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde et al., 2016) in 2023 are more nuanced than ever before. There is evolved language that explains what the root cause of student behavior is. Since this research was conducted post-COVID, we now know that students' losses were not only academic but socio-emotionally. In other words, many of these students were academically behind before the pandemic. The isolation of online learning also affected their social skills and their mental health. Other losses, in some cases, included housing and financial stability and/or the loss of loved ones. Instead of school districts addressing social emotional learning and restorative practices as necessary pedagogy they regained the focus on testing and added intervention blocks to the school day. They failed to acknowledge that there is no success when the mental and emotional well-being of teachers and students are overlooked. This is not to say that schools did not theorize mental and emotional wellbeing for students and teachers, it is to say that the implementation was ineffective which has caused more problems than it solved. Therefore, student behaviors included verbal and physical aggression and/or mental and emotional struggles. All of this affected the school culture and climate and how teachers had to navigate their classrooms. COVID had demanded adaptive change that many were not ready for. Business as usual is not working in this current climate.

Black Feminist Thought in Education

Veteran Black women teachers constantly navigate their situations in schools. They are required to teach with the test in mind. That is extremely nuanced and stressful. The data showed that they are required to teach the students that they are given, regardless of student ability. In other words, Black teachers are required to teach their content, paced according to distract standards, no matter the academic level of the students. It is a disheartening reality when teachers are passionate about student learning and success. Consequently, veteran Black women teachers theorize and conceptualize how they can both teach according to expectations and build foundational skills and background knowledge of below level students. These teachers challenge the system by teaching what they know is sound pedagogy for their population of students.

Critical Race Theory in Education

The election of Trump and his subsequent behaviors triggered many systemically minoritized communities including Black people. His campaign to rewrite history and continue the national narrative of "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 1994, p. 26) was codified in his 2020 Executive Order 13950 about divisive concepts. This became the cornerstone of many states anti-CRT laws. It was a direct response to the Black Lives Matter protests following the murders of Taylor and Floyd. These anti-CRT laws assumed that K-12 teachers were teaching CRT in their classrooms. This rhetoric misled the public about what teachers were teaching and popularized the notion that young people should not discuss racism and other oppressive forms in public schools. Book bans were used to stop teachers from teaching about race and LGBTQ folx. School boards had to write policies in response to state anti-CRT laws. Counter-campaigns like Teach Truth by teacher unions, the Zinn Project, and the African American Policy Forum supported teachers during this highly political time. There was

no mention of anti-CRT laws or book bans in this data although it may have had an indirect effect on the Griots' teaching.

Implications for Leadership and Change

The education leadership that is required post-COVID must include adaptive leadership and social justice leadership. I am not suggesting exclusivity with these leadership styles, but they need to be foundational for public schools which mirror societal ills. Education leaders at all levels "must be constantly sensitive to emerging changes in the external environment that call for nimble, deft, rapid responses by the organization" (R. G. Owens & Valesky, 2007, p. 270). To do that, senior leaders must be open to hearing and understanding the current challenges of classroom teachers. Where solving technical problems is best suited for top-down or authoritative leadership, adaptive challenges require collaboration. "Instead of looking for saviors, we should be calling for leadership that will challenge us to face problems for which there are no simple, painless solutions—problems that require us to learn new ways" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 2). COVID exposed many inequities in public education and created greater challenges for educators.

The anti-CRT, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-immigration laws along with book bans require educational leaders to have social-political awareness and activism. "Educational leaders must be able to discern pattern of exclusion and segregation as perpetuated through administrative policies and practices. They must analyze policies and practices" (Jean-Marie & Dancy, 2014, p. 55) to determine who is benefited and who is burdened by them. Black and Brown students should not matriculate through school without curriculum that reflects who they are and appreciates their culture and existence.

Now, more than ever, teacher burnout, wellness, and workload must be addressed (Farinde et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2023; Taskforce on Teacher Burnout in Georgia, 2022). State Superintendent Robert Woods stated in the opening letter for the report, *Teacher Burnout in Georgia: Voices from the Classroom*, stated:

> The most important thing you can provide in the classroom, if you want students to be successful, is an excellent teacher. That is where success happens- not through off-the-shelf programs or silver bullet initiatives, not through high-stakes testing and rigid accountability, but through the efforts of our highly skilled and knowledgeable classroom teachers. (Task Force on Teacher Burnout in Georgia, 2022, p. 3)

Many scholars and educators have spoken about burnout as an effect of teacher working conditions. Therefore, school leaders, at all levels, must regard teacher burnout as a threat to the profession and to student success.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Practice

1. Respect the work and expertise of Black women teachers.
2. Create a clean line that distinguishes responsibility of Black women teachers from family, community, and society.
3. Black women teachers need to be at the decision table regarding the work they are expected to do including autonomy, pedagogy, and curriculum.
4. Retain Black women teachers. Ask them what they need and create pathways for it.
5. Recruit the next generation of Black women teachers.
6. There should be a bridge between K-12 educators and education researchers, particularly Black women's research that supports Back women teachers and predominately Black schools.

7. Support Black women teachers wellness. They better they are, the better they will be for students.

Recommendations for Policy

1. Rescind education policies that shame, blame, and defund public education using standardized testing and teacher evaluations as punitive measures, including turnaround policies.
2. Corporate publishing companies and politicians should not have more power over pedagogy than educators.
3. Corporate publishing companies and politicians should not be in control over curriculum and standardized testing.
4. Teachers should have teacher unions that have bargaining power regarding their working conditions in all states and territories within the United States.

Recommendations on Educational Leadership

1. Educational leadership preparation must include leadership styles created for humanistic practices.
2. Educational leaders should be aware and practice multiply leadership styles as needed for the context of their work.
3. Turnaround Leadership must be replaced with leadership that works including but not limited to Adaptive Leadership and Social Justice Leadership to support the everchanging landscape of public schools.

Recommendations on Professional Development

1. Develop teachers on
    a. the craft of teaching (content, curriculum, and pedagogy)

   b. latest research that is relevant to their work and environment
   c. strengths-based coaching and mentoring
   d. pathways to leadership (principal and non-principal) roles

2. Develop leaders on
   a. the craft of leadership (approaches, culture, relationship-building, and strategy)
   b. latest research that is relevant to their work and environment including human relations literature
   c. strengths-based coaching and mentoring

Recommendations for Future Research

1. More qualitative data from Black woman teachers such as life history, narrative inquiry, and Black Feminist Thought in Education.
2. More first-person accounts of Black women teachers' working conditions and experiences within the context of 21-century education reform through the lenses of critical race theory and Black Feminist Thought in Education.
3. Autoethnography research, the insider/outsider, about Black women teachers.
4. More research about Black women teachers lived experiences teaching pre-, during, and post- COVID.
5. The next generation of Black woman teachers specifically (and teachers in general) must study the successes and struggles of Black women teachers as a foundation to their own work.

6. Exploration and practice of leadership approaches that replace Turnaround Leadership, including but not limited to Adaptive Leadership and Social Justice Leadership.

Conclusions

The research questions were:

1. What are the working experiences of Black women teachers of tested subjects in low-performing urban public schools and
2. How do socio-political factors affect their working conditions?

The data showed that leadership had the greatest effect on Black Women teachers' negative or positive working experiences. The data also showed that the weight of standardized testing affects Black women teachers' autonomy, curriculum, pedagogy, and joy of teaching.

Conducting this research was the most challenging and most rewarding experience of my life. I laughed and I cried. I struggled with my biases and had to unlearn some things. Most importantly, I learned to listen whole heartedly to Black women and their experiences. Not to add my stories and experiences but to learn a little about who they are, what they think, and how they make meaning of it all. I am eternally grateful to the Griots for the time we shared during the interviews. I am a better teacher because of it. I am also a more entuned leader because of it. I hope that I represented them well. I am thankful that they have remained in education this long and I honor whatever decision that they make about the direction of their careers. I understand.

Black woman teachers are leaving the profession because of working conditions (Farinde et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). If this continues, Black woman teachers will be extinct and public school children will not have the cultural responsiveness that

these educators bring to the classroom. Therefore, with urgency, Black woman teachers must be respected, recruited, and retained if public education will survive.

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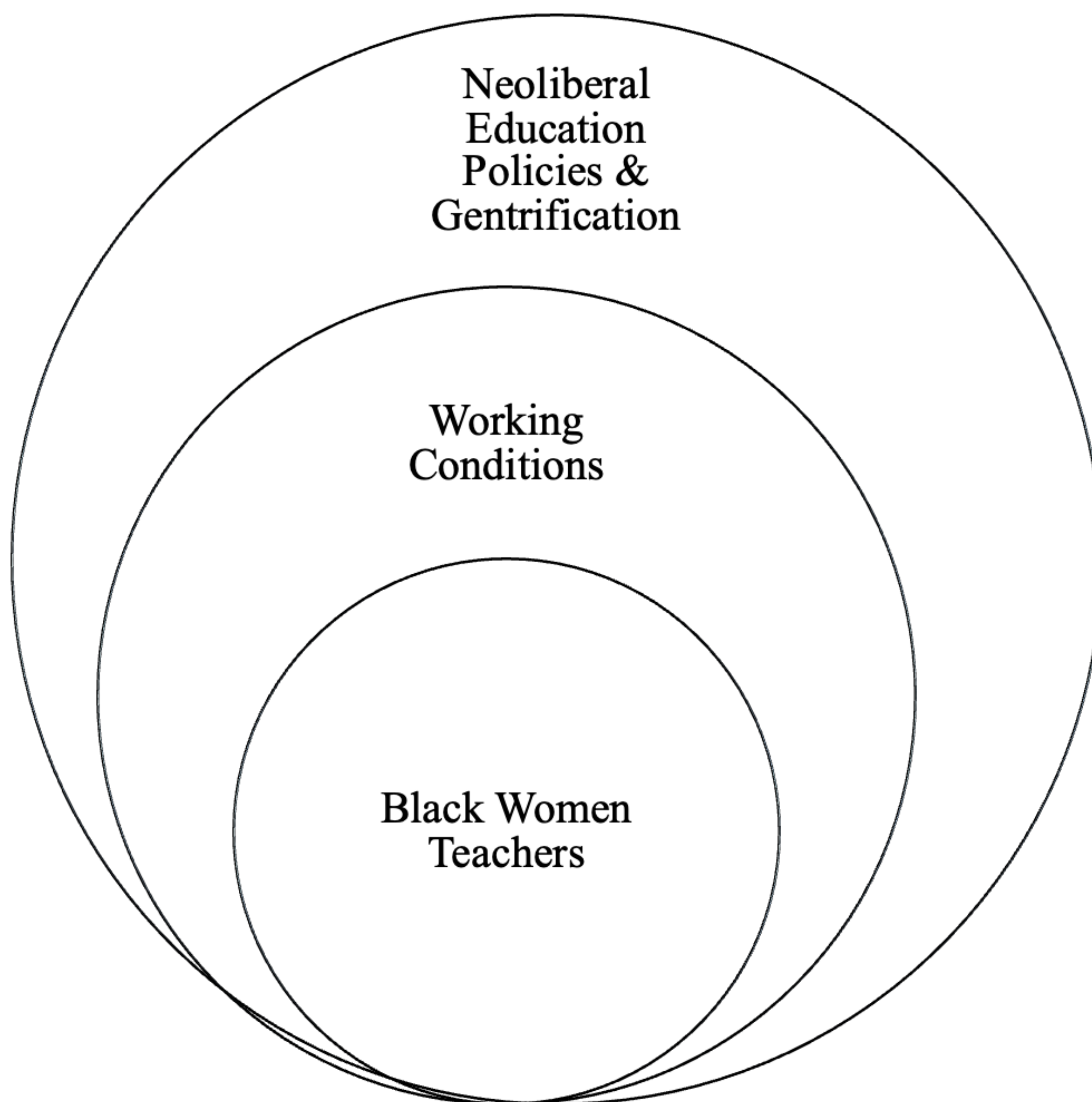
Appendix A: Diagram of Micro, Mesa, Macro Dimensions for Black Women Teachers

Figure A.1

Macro, Mesa, and Micro Levels Situating Black Women Teachers



Appendix B: Personal Journal Entries

I AM GRIOT 8: REFLECTIONS AS A SCHOLAR PRACTIONER

> If I didn't define myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive
>
> –Audre Lorde

My teaching career started at the dawn of No Child Left Behind. It was a time when standardized testing had not taken on its current punitive form. In all my years of teaching only three principals have made a positive impact on my life as an educator. They were seasoned educators that believed in children and teachers by creating a culture and climate that was conducive to teaching and learning. They understood the power of community and community relations making them grounded leaders. The lessons I learned have shaped my expectation of principal leaders.

1. Trust your teachers and give them autonomy to do their jobs.
2. Grow them by sharing the latest research.
3. Listen to them. I am grateful for those experiences of being respected for what I do.

Sadly, that was only four years out of the 20 that I have been in education. Working conditions have become increasingly unbearable as the years have passed.

The first time I quit teaching was in 2015. I was teaching freshman English, and I was the chair for the ninth grade academy. That year I had to fight the counselor to stop adding students to my classroom. I think that state capacity was 34 and I had 40 students on my roll. On three different occasions, they removed students and added more. Either way, 34 or 40 kids in a classroom is double best-practices, which I had 15 to 20. Years later, I found out that parents wanted their children in my class. I am not sure whether that was a compliment or a curse. In

education, it seems the better you are, the more workload increases, instead of growing other people. I enjoyed my work in the academy. This, however, was not the reason I quit.

That same year, the state began piloting a new teacher evaluation system. It was a messy implementation at our school because the only people to have access to it should be the principal and assistant principals. However, the department chair was allowed to evaluate me and document it in the state evaluation system. Anything that she put in the system, I had to refute it in writing. This was the beginning of the culture of write ups that can cost you your job and/or you state teacher certification. Unfortunately, it is also a modern way to pushout teachers. Teacher evaluations are supposedly designed for teacher growth but too often, in my experience, I’ve seen it used punitively. This was the major reason why I quit teaching after 14 years in the classroom.

After a year and a half in non-profit as the Director of Youth and Family Education, I returned to the classroom in 2017. In this chapter, I share data from my journals about some of those experiences. In 2021, I quit teaching again. That time, I was promoted to an equity position in the central office. I was sure that position would allow me to disrupt inequity in schools, however, my experiences there only proved to me that I worked for a toxic organization not just a toxic school. In this chapter, I also share data from my journals about my central office experiences. After two years there, I was pushed out. I returned to the classroom. These experiences give my empathy to speak about Black women teachers working conditions while adding to the collective narrative of the Griots in this research. Here, I introduce three short vignettes in my voice about my most recent teaching experiences: unrealistic expectations; working conditions and student behavior; and emotional labor and burnout.

Vignette 1: My Return to Teaching

I returned to the classroom for school year 2023–24. I chose to go to another alternative, non-traditional school. Typically, students attend due to a major infraction at their home school, however it is a temporary assignment. Students may stay for a semester or a year before returning to their traditional school setting. Preplanning is a time for teachers to return to school and prepare before students return. It typically includes lesson planning, data review, classroom decoration, and various district and school level trainings. The afternoon before district training, the English department was notified that we will be using a new curriculum. This is three days before school starts. During the summer, I emailed the instructional coach for the curriculum so I would be knowledgeable and able to write my lesson plans. I reviewed the curriculum and teacher materials that were sent to me, only to be informed that we would not be using it. I was frustrated but I pivoted. I quickly registered for what I thought was the training for the new curriculum. Upon arrival, we find out that the startup training we needed was the previous week and the teacher materials (scope and sequence and the unit plans) were given out at that training. What a waste of time. The syllabus and two weeks of lesson plans are due, and we do not have the teaching manual nor the student books. It was a Thursday and school starts on Tuesday. At that moment, I was beyond frustrated mainly because I was not surprised. This was how "we do school" in this district. As much as I expect better, incidents like this were never surprising. Welcome back Gina.

School year 2018–2019 was, what I thought, my hardest year as an educator. It was my sixteenth year in the classroom, and it was far from sweet. I had also completed my coursework and residencies in my doctoral program at Antioch. My mindset of "just" a teacher had shifted to reflective practitioner and my lens of urban education had broadened beyond my own lived

experiences. It was this school year that I exercised my critical thinking skills around my work as an educator and the conditions that challenge it. My dissertation work began to seed, and my scholarship became focused on Black teacher working conditions in urban low-performing schools. Is it me? Am I the only Black teacher experiencing these working conditions in low-performing schools? What is the experience of other Black teachers. I started thinking about this work as a classroom teacher, but I began dissertating in the district central office. Now, however, I am back in the classroom as write this chapter.

My personal data was documented in my work journals between 2018 and 2023. The following excepts include my working conditions in the classroom during 2018–2019 and in central office during 2022–2023. This chapter is organized in the fashion of the Griot data in Chapter IV. It will include excepts from my classroom and central office experiences. Then it will show a plot analysis of both working experiences. The three vignettes are examples of my current experiences back in the classroom. In conclusion, I will show the full circle of in the classroom, out of the classroom, and back again.

Plotting My Experiences in the Classroom and Central Office

Table B.1 shows a high-level overview of my experiences within a five-year period in one school district. I started in a high school. It was the worst experience I have had in my 22 years in education. I still need therapy to process the trauma in that workplace. I then went to the central office as an equity worker. It was an optimistic start, but the honeymoon was quickly over as the turnover of staff began. I enjoyed the work and the experiences, but the toxicity was unbearable. Once my job was abolished, I decided to intensely focus on my dissertation. I choose to stay with the district and teach again. Ultimately, I am preparing for my final exit.

Table B.1

Plot of My Stories

PLOT ELEMENTS	CLASSROOM	CENTRAL OFFICE
WHO	teachers, students, assistant principals, principals	head of department, co-workers, executive director
WHERE	urban school	urban school district office
HER BEGINNINGS	student reading levels, tested subject	high staff turnover, toxic leadership
HER STRUGGLES	teacher workload, curriculum pacing, testing schedule, no support from administration, no support from instructional coach, no planning time,	no direction, strategy, and vision not clear, no support from head of department
HER TIPPING POINT	data walks, write-up for failure rate, punitive evaluation, abolishment, hostile work environment	executive director resigned, two teammates on leave, third teammate moved to another team, I was a team of one- isolated with no support, abolishment
HER BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT	implement reading program, camaraderie with ELA team, file complaint with teacher union	expand my networks within the district office and community, filed a grievance, sought help from employee wellness, sought help from my Gallup Strengths coach, started therapy
IT IS WHAT IT IS	teacher contract renewed, principal replaced, assistant principal replaced, workplace trauma	returned to the classroom, head of department removed, department dismantled
BLACK FEMINIST RESEARCHER	teaching is hard work, and it is harder in a toxic workplace	toxic leaders thrive in toxic organizations, good people leave horrible working conditions
HER STANCE	Do right by kids	We can do better

Profile 1: My Classroom Excerpts

I began my career in education in 2001. I have taught 6th through 12th grade: middle school reading for nine years and high school English Language Arts (ELA) for nine years.

Every grade in middle school, 6th, 7th, and 8th is connected to a standardized test. In high school, 9th and 11th grade ELA are tested subjects too. Most of my teaching career centered standardized testing with struggling readers in low-performing schools. Through the years, my working conditions have intensified with complexities within the school and outside of it. Society's ills and political will has shaped the narrative around classroom teachers and students, particularly Black teachers, and Black students in urban public schools. The stories that follow are excerpts from my classroom experiences.

August 13, 2018

> *Today is the 9th day of the school year, with students that is. I've been here 13 days because of teacher pre-planning. By the 7th day of me working, three days with kids, I realized I hated this place. I began questioning myself. Why did I come back into the classroom? What the hell was I thinking? I love the kids, that is my first struggle. This is probably year 16 for me. I've always taught in the urban inner-city schools, Dallas, TX, and Atlanta Metropolitan Area (first the county then the city). Four years of a PhD program in leadership and change has given me a lens that this place is intolerable.*
>
> *The box checkers. Clearly there is much management and not enough leadership. Is this the core problem of educational leadership in the urban schools being constantly under the microscope: academic gap, [students with disabilities], graduation rate, dropout rate, and ESOL. We spend more time justifying teaching than teaching. This is not the first school system where I have to put a list of "stuff" on the board but it's too much stuff: the standard, focus question, vocabulary, what I'm going to teach, what the kids are going to do together, and what they do independently. I spend more time posting things in my room for visitors and evaluators and not the students. I can barely put up the daily agenda because of this random structured shit. It's a dog and pony show. And today, when I finally had a planning period, I spoke to my PLC [professional learning community] and we agreed to meet Wednesday so we could get work done. I still, nine days later, four days on block schedule, haven't made my lesson plan for the English elective. I'm excited because I want to teach Public Speaking. I'm angry because I can't be the "best self" teacher when I'm spinning around trying to check boxes. I'm probably about to get two write ups. I don't care. I haven't had time to complete my preparation for class and I didn't do my hall duty because it is smack in the middle of my planning. I love the kids I don't like the box checking therefore I'm out after dissertation.*

September 13, 2018

> *Today, we gave a mid-unit test. When we vetted the test a few days ago, I knew there would be problems. Simply, my students most of them are not reading on 11th grade level*

or high school level for that matter. The test is always on grade level therefore they can't comprehend what they are reading, they aren't reading fluently, and they give up because this is one more example of what they can't do. Long before my class they felt defeated. Now they just have coping skills. Not necessarily good ones either. There was a few pages of reading and some questions about word meaning and context. A recipe for disaster. Now, as a teacher, I look as if 1) I'm an ineffective teacher 2) I don't teach at all and 3) all blame pretty much goes to the teacher. When scores come out, it's interpreted without consideration to the multiple barriers. So, my data walk will look a hot mess. For that, I'm both pissed and saddened. The numbers don't tell the whole story. Even to pull out the special education kids or the English language learners, it still finds a way to fault somebody. The fact that I'm expected to differentiate instruction, but the test is never differentiated is a problem. Sigh! 16 years. That leads to professional change at this point, 5th year PhD two projects away from candidacy, I want to start prepping for the pathway. I forgot to talk about my ESOL baby. So, I knew this in Texas . . . I hated it then too. Laws that demand folks to learn the language in two years or so then test them on grade level. WTH! Americans, U.S., don't know the damn language, yet this is legal? If you read on a second grade or lower level how the hell are you successful in an 11th grade English class. Come on U.S., really? I have a student now, new to the U.S. that is in my 11th grade class. She can't speak English. She slightly understands it. Yet she's in an 11th grade class. Just for kicks, here is her schedule: Chorus, Communication Skills for Science, Algebra 2, U.S. History, Anatomy and Physiology, American Literature, Graphic Design and Production, and the Language of Science (ESOL). Really? I'm embarrassed. How is this culturally sensitive? How are we making her schooling effective? A great experience? She has ESOL technically for science not English. Institutionalized racism. That legal bullshit that creates laws that are punitive to Brown students.

May 19, 2019

I'm preparing for the meeting with Employee Relations. I've been traumatized this year. By August 3rd, I knew it wasn't going to be a good year. So here is the recap . . . the Year of the Spin.

1) *Too much time for homeroom. In the beginning of the year, we lost time from 30 minutes to more than an hour in homeroom. School-wide implementation of homeroom was ineffective because teachers had not been notified of the plan. Random PowerPoints. It trained kids to waste more time in the mornings. When we finally got to a norm, we'd lost the kids.*
2) *Lost time for planning. The constant interruptions of homeroom and controlled PLC requirements . . . as a teacher we were unable to plan for the kids because we lost time planning for administration, data, what to put on the walls, and lesson plan trivia.*
3) *Because we lost time . . . it affected teaching time. Students didn't get lessons because of mandatory testing . . . formative, summative, pre-test, diagnostic, benchmark, Write Score [writing test platform].*
4) *Mandated to teach a curriculum that other English Departments in the district were using loosely or not at all. Because of interruptions . . . we were always behind in progressions [pacing]*

5) *Data talks, we showed little progress because . . . not enough time to teach and . . . kids not on reading level.*
6) *I complained about reclaiming our time several times and each time it fell on deaf ears and was treated like this is the nature of the beast. Because of my complaints and the data to prove reading levels, [standardized test scores], I became a target.*
7) *I was told to do as I'm told by the AP and instructional coach.*
8) *When the AP had a meeting with us, he said that he was going to only give 4's for professionalism if we are doing things outside of the classroom, building. That's when I gave him a paper I wrote about turnaround principalship not being effective and the need for Adaptive Leadership, Social Justice Leadership, and Full Range Leadership.*
9) *I was promised an extra planning for being the content lead. I especially needed it as lead of a [standardized test] course. Finally, I was told it wasn't happening.*
10) *I was given a class with no curriculum and no time to create one. When I challenged that, I was sent some random stuff from the internet from the instructional coach.*
11) *I never received support from the instructional coach or AP. I begin to feel more targeted and set up to fail.*
12) *I was given a horrible Mid-Year Review the day before Thanksgiving and supposedly put on a PDP [Professional Development Plan]. It wasn't until sometime in January that I met with the AP. His first question to me was, how do you feel about the PDP/ evaluation? I told him it was unfounded and inaccurate. High failure rates didn't mean all responsibility was on the teacher. The students don't do the work, or they did it months later.*
13) *I was made to feel like I was the enemy to children and their parents because I required them to work and held them accountable.*
14) *In November, I complained to [the principal. I spoke to him twice. Once before Thanksgiving, once after. I also had a meeting with [the area superintendent]. We began to question whether [this school] was a good fit for me.*
15) *By January, we got a huge calendar with mandatory PLC and what to talk about and a testing schedule. I challenged that. I guess that's why I'm unprofessional. Everything was prescription and the teachers could not hardly teach with fidelity . . . meaning so many interruptions from AP and instructional coach requirements that teaching was hit or miss.*
16) *I've never had a conference with the AP regarding my [evaluation]. I've never signed it. I've never had coaching, just emails. I've never had modeled instruction of the expectations. Therefore, every time I saw either of them [AP or the instructional coach], it was punitive. They'd walk in my room with clipboards and take pictures with no feedback. Yet my [evaluation] was full of things without explanations. This last time, [the evaluation portal] was closed/finalized. I didn't get a chance to respond—upload documentation. The first time I uploaded about 45 pages or so. Maybe that's why it was locked this time.*
17) *On March 8th, I received an email from the principal's assistant. She said it was about my travel to a conference. When I get there, it turned out to be notification that my position was being abolished. Out of curiosity, I asked a rhetorical question. Of all people in the building, how did you choose me? He said it was my [evaluation]. I said the same thing I've been complaining about all year. Unbelievable.*

18) I called HR and went downtown because I was going to start the grievance process. I spoke to someone that me the forms. I also spoke with [another HR employee] about being abolished. She said 1) the deadline was March 1st and 2) give her a few days to look into it.

19) About a week later, I got a contract. The principal called me in again and said I still had a job. Why do I want to work here with such terrorism to my career and my life.

Outcomes . . . what I want. 1) [evaluation] invalidated and 2) the district to pay for therapy for me for the trauma I've endured.

Summary of My Working Conditions

I have documented my working conditions as a teacher for years. The excerpts above are examples of lived experiences during the school year 2018–2019. This year was important to highlight because it was the events of this year that lead me this dissertation focus on Black teachers' working conditions in an urban low-performing school.

Profile 2: My Central Office Excerpts

I was promoted to an equity position at the central office June 2021. I left the classroom after teaching one-year post0COVID. My goal in this new position was to bring the voice of teachers to the decision table. The job was filled with opportunities to practice leadership and change; what I had be learning in my doctoral studies. I was excited for the shift in roles: the ability to continue to support not only students but teachers and leaders. There was a learning curve for the first year, but I learned a lot about diversity, equity, and inclusion. I made wonderful connections and built networks inside and outside of the district. My work was not only with schools throughout the district and academics department it evolved into LGBTQ advocacy. I begin to solidify my passion work in the job I was doing. While my love for the work and confidence in my skills developed, so did a horrible toxic workplace subculture.

December 19, 2022

As I am wrapping up for this year, 2022, I will say it's been a lot of ebb and flow. I'm sure, to say more ebbs than flows are more accurate than I'd hoped. In February, I was excited to have [my new executive director] join our team. Then [new teammate]. This summer we started the work with our Strengths coaching sessions. They were super

awesome and very helpful. Our team was healing and coming into a new phase. And just when I thought it was all good, [teammate] went out on leave and shortly afterwards [another teammate] went out on leave. Then [the executive director] resigned and [last teammate] was moved to another team. We went from a team of 5 to a team of me! I was numb. Still am. [Teammates] have been out for a least 90 days at this point. That's not cool. I know it took me a cool month to get back to some form of normal . . . acceptance that they are all gone. I do still work with [teammate] but for all intents and purposes, I'm a team of me with "support" from the [head of department]. My first 1:1 with her was a disaster. I've begun to think very differently about her and my role here at [the district]. I'm super focused on finishing this PhD. And I'm almost there. I'm also looking at becoming a Gallup's Strength Coach. Very excited about that. My next thing will be Project Management Certification. I'm moving in my professional goals. I just wish I didn't have the growing pains and learning curves that have come with it. It's been hurtful and exhausting at times. My two joys however, the student advisory council (SAC) and the LGBTQIA stuff. I got a leadership training for SAC and we were in the Pride parade. I think I'm doing so much work . . . good work that I don't even notice or celebrate like I should. I need to really work this [LGBTQIA] committee when I come back. And really build out the media and branding, etc. I'm also excited about the EIA [equity impact assessment] leadership that I'm doing with the math coordinators as they work on their textbook adoption.
And I'm really exhausted right now. Ready to stop for a bit [holiday break].

June 28, 2023 [excerpt from filed grievance]

On June 14, 2023, as committee chair, I sent an email to the LGBTQIA+ Advisory Committee regarding the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) National State of Emergency for All LGBTQIA+ people. I included their resources and shared my wondering of what the committee could do to support our students, staff, and district particularly as more Anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation is particularly harmful to these youth. While I know that my last day in the office is June 30th, I wanted to ensure that a meeting was on the calendar to continue the work that I started. This work will live in the Organizational Ombuds Office as part of their advocacy work. The entire team was included in the calendar invite and the email to the committee, that way they could continue this work. At the time of the email, I also thought, if I found another position in the district, then I hoped to still be part of the committee.

I was first alarmed by the email response that I received from my current direct supervisor. She forwarded the email to her direct supervisor, who is the head of the department. The email felt like she was "telling on me" although she stated she wanted to get clarification. My biggest issue with her response was she didn't talk to me before sending it to the [head of the department] along with the overall tone and syntax. However, we had a scheduled 1:1 and I planned to address her concerns then.

On June 15, 2023, I met with [supervisor] and provided the clarification that she asked for. I felt like we had a good meeting and were both on the same page. However, about 30 minutes after our meeting, I received an email from [head of department]. The communication, both tone and syntax, was arrogant, belittling, demeaning, and

derogatory. This incivility is an example of the larger culture and climate issue in the equity office that has become a toxic workplace. For context, I will situate this incident in the research of [the districts] Human Resources Exit Interview Data and the research of Dr. M. Kusy & Dr. E. Holloway in their book, Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power.

The toxic behaviors exhibited by [head of department] in this written communication directed to me, [my supervisor], and [director of employee relations], is merely the tip of the greater toxic workplace iceberg. It points to abuse of power, undermining subordinates, lack of a "caring culture", and the ultimate dismantling of the team. Her outward commitment to equity and belonging is merely cliché in the 8th-floor office climate and culture. These behaviors have already led to 10 people leaving. "The longer the toxic behaviors are tolerated and accommodated, the more widespread the impact" (Kusy & Holloway, 2009, p. 86). In this case, there was no direct response to the purpose of my initial email to the Advisory Committee. How will we address the HRC's National State of Emergency for All LGBTQIA+ People as it relates to our students and staff and the district?

Summary

The great resignation began within the first few months that I started in the department. I realized the honeymoon was over very early. The morale of my co-workers began to fade, and I too was trying to find meaning about what was happening. The turning point for me was the loss of my team. It started with two members going on leave then my immediate supervisor resigned and finally, the last member was reassigned to another team. I was alone and isolated. I continued the work by expanding my networks. In the end however, my position was abolished, and I was reassigned to another team and supervisor until the end of the fiscal year. As I was preparing my transition from the office, I received a disturbing email from the head of the department. I immediately filed an official grievance. It was problematic because Level 1 of the process required sending the complaint to my immediate supervisor. I felt it was a conflict of interest because my complaint was against the head of the department who was my supervisor's immediate supervisor. It was no surprise that the grievance was denied, although how can you

deny a grievance. In the end, after I left, that supervisor resigned, the head of the department was removed, and the department was dismantled.

Vignette 2: Homophobic Slurs—Working Conditions and Student Behavior

I have endured two incidents of verbal abuse from students using homophobic slurs. The first time was shortly after I returned to the classroom in 2017. A student was upset with me, I do not remember why but whatever the reason, I put him out of my classroom. In the mist of his anger, he starts saying, "you're a bulldagger . . . bulldagger . . . you're a bulldagger" in a hateful yet taunting voice. I told him to keep walking. This was problematic in many ways: 1) you are child, maybe sixteen years old, 2) bulldagger is an old homophobic slur that I had not heard since the seventies so this obviously is a learned behavior, 3) I was triggered because I remember the way my mother used such words when I was a child, and 4) it hurt and I wanted to hit him. I found the assistant principal and I told him, "either he goes, or I will." I was shocked that he permanently removed him from my class immediately.

The second time was a few weeks into this school year 2023–24. Currently, I work in an alternative school. Most students are placed here for major behavior infractions at their home school. This student is a middle schooler, so he is about thirteen. Nowadays, students are issued computers and as a teacher, I must somewhat control what they do during my class. There is a program that teachers use to block websites and monitor what they are viewing. I allow students to have three website tabs: one for music and the other two for my work. As an English teacher, I know that all my students are struggling readers, and they hate my class. I also know that music can help students stay on task. It is my compromise with them, as long it does not disturb the class and they are working. Well, once I started the program, after I explained my thinking to them, this student got angry. He started cussing and throw the computer on the floor. Before he walked out of the classroom, he looked me in the eye and said, "you're a bulldagger . . . you're a bulldagger." I told him to leave, and I called for the assistant principal. This student was a little more aggressive and he walked up on me in a threatening manner, as if he was going to hit me. Like the first incident, I felt threatened and vulnerable. I also found it interesting again, that this word in coming out of the mouth of a child. It was not so easy to have him permanently removed because this is an alternative school. However, when I had a parent conference with his mother and other school personnel, she was initially supportive of me. She chastised his behavior and demanded that he apologize and change his behavior. The assistant principal in this case, put him on a behavioral contract that is the beginning of the tribunal process. He read the infractions to the student's mom including threats and sexual harassment. Both the student and his mother, who was on the phone, became irate. She said that this was not sexual harassment, and we were just adding charges to the student. The assistant principal was firm in saying it was sexual harassment according to the district handbook. She was furious and hung up the phone.

Vignette 3: I Can't Do It All—Emotional Labor and Burnout

The workload of a teacher post-COVID intensified in low-performing schools with struggling readers. The losses are too great for public schools. Academic loss is the most obvious one, but there were many losses that were not so obvious. School also teaches children

social skills with peers and adults other than their families. Student anxiety and depression increased leaving the losses of confidence and hope. I think the worst thing we have done since returning to face-to-face is not addressing with fidelity student social skills. We have Social Emotional Learning (SEL), but it has not been implemented well and it shows.

I teach middle grades in an alternative school. These students were in elementary school during COVID. They missed academic and SEL skills. Although they are 7th and 8th graders on paper, their behavior is immature. The expectations of the teachers, me, is to teach them on-level at the district curriculum pacing as if I am a superhero. You cannot teach curriculum to students until the behaviors are addressed. I chose to go back to the classroom because I thought it would be an easier transition while I finished my dissertation.

I know teaching and the learning curve, I thought, would not be too great. I chose to go to the alternative school because there are less students and I know that they have the greatest need. They deserve a veteran teacher that understands more than content but understands young people in their context. What I did not expect was unrealistic demands to teach as if these students did not have nuanced situations. And I did not expect a culture of accountability for teachers and not for students and their parents.

I taught at an alternative school before, and children were held accountable for their behaviors. Granted that was many years ago but fundamentally, this is a school and students need to learn. In this environment however, they need support in social skills: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These are the tenets of SEL, and they need this first and foremost because we should be preparing them to go back to their home schools. If they do not have these skills, they will return to the alternative school. Our mission includes SEL and restorative practices, but we do not implement either with fidelity. This is not good for students or teachers.

Table 12 is a sample of my workload. It is not an exhaustive list because of the caveat in the teacher job description: "performs other duties as assigned by an appropriate administrator or their representative."

Table B.2

My Workload

EXPECTATIONS		
DATA	TEACH	ACTUAL CONDITIONS
document student behavior	6th grade ELA	no lunch break
call parents and document	7th grade ELA	no windows in my classroom
document interventions made for students	8th grade ELA	cussed out daily by students

	EXPECTATIONS	
DATA	TEACH	ACTUAL CONDITIONS
continuous testing created by school, district, and state (diagnostic, formative, summative, growth, standardized)	Read 180 (reading program)	homophobic slurs by students
	System 44 (reading program)	no cafeteria: students eat in classrooms
	SEL	planning period interruptions
	whole child/differentiate instruction	limited or no support from leadership team
	supervised content planning	constant observations with no feedback from instructional coach and leadership team
	Started new curriculum in October	no curriculum training (6th, 7th , 8th, or reading programs)
	supervised department meetings	no behavioral management training
	staff meetings	no behavioral consequences for students
	manage student website access while teaching online content	no training or review of restorative practices
	curriculum pacing	no team building for staff or students
		no mentors for new teachers (neither for those experienced and new to the building nor those new to the profession)
		Denied a much needed Wellness Day because it was a Friday and my pay was docked. (Principal made every Monday and Friday a “critical day“ for the entire school year. That means, no one will have an approved day off and their pay will be docked if they take off.)

My Reflexive Reflections

I chose these experiences because I have worked on the frontline as a teacher, at the central office as a leader of change, and back in the classroom again. As an insider, I have many

similar experiences as the Griots of this work. I have worked long enough to see how the testing culture has intensified the working conditions of teachers through the years. I too reminisce about the few good principals I have had in these two decades. It saddened me to admit that I have only had three principals that created a culture and climate of teaching and learning for teachers and students. As I look back and compare the differences between past principals and current ones, I think they were confident, self-aware, and socially award. They had the emotional intelligence to do their jobs without the need to micromanage. They also understood that education is a long game not a turnaround.

With testing increasingly at the center, the turnaround model is privileged particularly in low-performing schools. This failed business model is also failing as an educational leadership model. There is too much expectation for teachers (blame and shame) and not enough support from principals and their leadership teams which include assistant principals and instructional coaches. Furthermore, there is no room for adaptive leadership from teachers or leaders. There is a difference between technical challenges and adaptive challenges in public education. A technical challenge can be a bell schedule or lesson plan. It can also be the operating procedures of the school. An adaptive challenge is nuanced. It is more than checking the boxes. It requires deep reflection and reflexiveness. One must consider social, cultural, and political norms. It is a true understanding of the past, the present and a hope for the future.

As I reflect on who I was when I started teaching in 2001, months after being fired from the police department, I know that who I must be in 2023 is much different. Here is the historical context of my life as a teacher (Table B.3). When I began this career, it was a month after 9-11. It was a few months before the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. A year later I became a parent of my first child. About seven years later, we had our first Black president. During Obama’s

second term as president, Trayvon Martin was murdered, and the Black Lives Matter Movement was born. I quit teaching a year before the election of Trump. When I returned to the classroom, he had signed executive orders that begin a deeper divide promoting exclusion and xenophobia against all that were not White, male, hetero, and married. In the words of bell hooks, the "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" was front row and center strategically reclaiming its position after the Black president. By the time I made it to the central office, I was theorizing and practicing ways to that teachers could teach "controversial issues" in their classrooms, specifically race, religion, and sexuality in the name of equity and social justice. Each socio-political marker mentioned above affected my work and how I thought about it.

Table B.3

My Educator Life History Timeline

YEAR	EVENTS (PERSONAL, HISTORICAL, SOCIOPOLITICAL, ETC.)
2001	Began teaching a month after 9-11.
2002	No Child Left Behind Act.
2002	Gave birth to first child.
2005	Gave birth to second child.
2008	The Great Recession.
2009	First Black President.
2012	Murder of Trayvon Martin.
2013	Black Lives Matter Movement began.
2015	Quit teaching, Became Director of Youth & Family Education at a Settlement House.
2017	Trump Presidency begins.
	Anti-CRT, Anti-Immigration, Anti-LGBTQ legislation codified Federal & State Levels.
	Returned to the classroom
2019	Began dissertation.
2020	COVID-19 Pandemic.
	Murder of Breonna Taylor.
	Murder of George Floyd.
2021	Truth Be Told Campaign and other Teach Truth Movement.
2021	Started at central office.
2023	Returned to the classroom again.

With almost 20 years in the classroom, nine years of doctorial research, and two years of equity work at the district level, I have accepted the challenge of change as both a teacher and a leader. There are some fundamental truths about teaching in an urban school district that has not changed through the years, but the complexities over time require me to be authentically me, including all my intersections, and mandate a social-political awareness to adapt and shift with the times. What urban low-performing public schools need is partnership of adaptive teacher leadership and adaptive principal leadership at a school level and a commitment from the district level to include teacher voices in decision making that affect teachers and students.

Appendix C: U.S. Socio-Political Context Timeline 1998–2023

(This is the collective timeline during the Griots' teaching years)

YEAR	EVENT
1998	Charter School Expansion Act
2001	No Child Left Behind
2005	Hurricane Katrina
2007	Great Recession
2008	First Black President Elected in U. S., Barack Obama
2009	American Reinvestment & Recovery Act
	Common Core State Standards Initiative
2010	U.S. Department of Education's Blueprint for Reform
2012	Race to the Top
	Murder of Travon Martin
2013	Black Lives Matter Movement
2015	#SayHerName Movement after Murder of Sandra Bland
	Every Student Succeeds Act
2017	Trump Presidency
	Betsy DeVos—U.S. Secretary, Department of Education
	Women's March on Washington
	#Metoo Movement gone Viral (inception 2006 by Tarana Burke)
2020	Trump signs Executive Order 13950: Combating Race and Sex Stereotypes
	COVID-19 Pandemic hits U.S.
	Public schools throughout the country closed and began online teaching & learning
	Summer of Racial Reckoning- #BLM response to Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks
2021	Georgia Teacher Pipeline Package/Legislation signed by Governor Kemp
	January 6th Insurrection on the U. S. Capitol
	First Black Woman Vice President of U.S. Kamala Harris
	Biden Presidency- Revoked Trump Ex. Order 13950
	#TruthBeTold Movement (Kimbrelé Crenshaw) supporting teachers teaching truth about race in U.S.
2022	Various states introduce/adopt anti-CRT and teaching true history legislation (copy-cat laws of Ex. Order 13950)
	U.S. Supreme Court reversed Roe v. Wade
	Florida House Bill 1557 passed by Governor Ron DeSantis ("Don't Say Gay" Bill)
2023	Former-president Trump faced 91 Federal and State Criminal Charges
	U.S. Supreme Court reversed Affirmative Action