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I, Alicia R Boards, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:

Context matters: An exploration of identity at the intersection of education and relationships

Student's name: **Alicia R Boards**

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Lisa Vaughn, Ph.D.

Committee member: Farrah Jacquez, Ph.D.

Committee member: Antar Tichavakunda, Ph.D.

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Context matters: An Exploration of Identity at the Intersection of Education and Relationships

A dissertation submitted to the

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by

Alicia Boards

M.A. Western Kentucky University

B.S. Western Kentucky University

University of Cincinnati

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Committee: Lisa Vaughn, PhD (Chair)

Farrah Jacquez, PhD

Antar Tichavakunda, PhD

Abstract

This dissertation aims to understand how opportunities in the classroom and the relationships students are engaged in might deepen educational experience and decision-making for future trajectories. The impetus for this study was experiential knowledge, existing theory, and exploratory research (Maxwell, 2013). A qualitative research approach was used to explore social and contextual influences and the impact of significant events on students (Polit & Hungler, 2003). This three-paper dissertation emphasizes the local and situated nature of the intersectional influences on student experiences and identities. Paper one is a qualitative interview study highlighting a school-embedded youth-engaged program and how a youth participatory action research approach shapes noncognitive college-readiness constructs in high school students. Paper two is a narrative inquiry study that explores the different relational influences on students' postsecondary decision-making. Paper three is a reflective essay that provides a glimpse into my doctoral journey amid crisis and how Audre Lorde's work motivated the dissertation process.

Keywords: postsecondary decision making, figured worlds, youth participatory action research, relationships, Audre Lorde

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Dedication

My doctoral journey, my dissertation, and my entire educational trajectory is dedicated to my mom, "Nonnie", Sandee Hart (1951-2018), my very first teacher, my best friend, my partner, my co-parent, my roommate, my confidant, my PERSON. But above all she was my mom. The one to comfort me in time of pain. The one to hold my hand when I felt alone. The one to encourage me when I felt defeated. She was my rock, my anchor, my everything.

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I'll never forget our final words. I said to her, "Mama, we'll be alright." She looks at me and says "Honey, I know you will." Well today mama, I'm alright. I made it. I completed what we started together. You may be gone from this earth, but I know you have never left me.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

The introduction (Chapter 1) will provide an overview of the dissertation. Next, the positionality and underlying philosophical assumptions are presented. The introduction will conclude with an outline of the three-paper dissertation and the significance of this body of work.

Identity Approach to Postsecondary Educational Experiences

The high school years are a significant period for students' identity development including skills, interests, future trajectories, and goal achievement. However, a dearth of research addresses young people's identity development in their K-12 academic settings. The school environment plays a valuable role in students' social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development (Milner, 2012). Therefore, identity development should be the cornerstone for teaching and learning practices due to the reality that "students learn more than facts, concepts, and skills in school, that schooling is a constituent process through which students come to understand the world and define their place within it" (Rubin, 2007, p. 220). Our educational practices and policies currently lack this identity approach to learning. The importance of studying identity development in our schools is highlighted by Browne (2012):

> Our identity is the very core of who we are as human beings. From birth, we are subject to how we are thought about, treated, and cared for by the significant persons in our lives and others in multiple environments. Our ideas about self are largely a reflection of others' ideas about us, good and bad or in between. Schools have an enormous influence on how we come to see ourselves, the hopes and dreams we acquire, and our achievement motivation (p. 12).

Many influences shape students' learning, such as their home environments, cultures, life experiences, prior knowledge, and cognitive and social development (Tienken & Zhao, 2013). Milner (2012) challenges researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to:

> Think more carefully about how to bridge the realities of people, policies, and practices across the outside and inside of the school landscape and boundaries of experiences. The permeating questions of policymakers, researchers, and practitioners, though, is how? (p. 1023).

Participatory Action Research

Baum, MacDougall, and Smith (2006) define participatory action research (PAR) as a way "to understand and improve the world by changing it (p. 854)." At the core, PAR is a reflective process that seeks to explore and improve the surrounding social relationships by linking action to research by understanding the historical, cultural, and local context (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Fundamental principles critical to PAR consist of participatory, democratic, and action-oriented practices (Krumer-Nevo, 2009). PAR emphasizes developing knowledge and skills to identify and confront challenges in individuals/communities while building on Freire's notions of critical consciousness and liberation (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a research approach that involves youth in the research process while also increasing their opportunities for leadership development, which enhances their "voice" for creating social change in their schools and communities. Qualitative research with a YPAR approach increases an adolescent's sense of purpose and supports a more positive attitude toward education and school (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). YPAR is an opportunity for youth to explore social issues that affect their lives and participate as a co-researcher to develop actions to help resolve the problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Figured Worlds

Figured worlds is a sociocultural framework that emphasizes the importance of social contexts and how the feedback and demands by society and those in power are critical in shaping one's figured world over time (Kroger, 2016). Adapted from the work of Bakhtin and Vygotsky, Holland et al. (1998) attest that individuals are constantly forming and grappling with contradictory understandings of self and identities across their social environments. People "figure" out whom they are based on their social interpretations within their social worlds and interactions with others around them (Rubin, 2007). Figured worlds support the value of interactions and relationships experienced across social, environmental, cultural, and political environments.

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Positionality and Assumptions

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Positionality

My story begins with my parents. I am the daughter of a white mother and a black father. I come from grandparents who could not read and did not make it past the 7th grade. I come from a father who never went to college because his parents told him that "black folks around here do not go to college." I come from a mother who was disowned and separated from her family because she chose a man with a different color than her own. Above all and most importantly, I come from two parents brave enough to stand against the norm and resist what society told them was right and moral. I will tell the story of innovation, initiative, perseverance, determination, love, and support.

For this dissertation, the research questions came from my own belief that fostering connection as an approach to learning in academic settings is creative, stimulating, meaningful, and relevant for students. Learning is a way for students to understand themselves and their place

in society better because it is "not just an accumulation of skills and information but a process of becoming" (Wenger, 1998, p. 215); therefore, as an educational researcher, my focus on youth affirms practices and relationships that foster student development in education and for a larger society and social movements.

Values and Ethical Considerations

My guiding values focused on relationships, respect, and responsibility and are embodied throughout the research process. My research interests and curiosity derive from an innate obligation and responsibility to give back to communities and build relationships that respect the knowledge found within communities and disempowered groups which is why an action research approach is used throughout this dissertation. Brydon-Miller (2009) states, "action research is defined by its unapologetic ethical and political engagement and its commitment to working with community partners to achieve positive social change (p. 243)."

Philosophical Assumption

This dissertation aligns with a constructivist-interpretivism philosophical view because it seeks to explore postsecondary identity development while adding a nuanced look at how students' environments and access to innovative learning opportunities impact their identity development. A constructivist-interpretivist's central purpose is to make sense of human experiences and to develop a shared meaning within a given context (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010). Constructivism-Interpretivism affirms that multiple socially constructed realities are valid and discovered through the participant-researcher relationship (Ponterotto, 2013). As a researcher, I affirm that what we know is socially constructed and involves the practice of questioning and deconstructing norms (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010). This study upheld my assumptions as a researcher in that it explored lived experiences to understand better how

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educational experiences and social and cultural contexts contribute to how students experience education and make decisions about their futures.

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter one provides context for this three-paper dissertation by outlining the impetus, my positionality, and the cornerstones of this work. Chapter two is a qualitative interview study that highlights a school-embedded youth-engaged program and how it shapes noncognitive college-ready constructs in high school students. Chapter 3 is a narrative inquiry study that explores the different relational influences on students' postsecondary decision-making using figured worlds as the guiding framework. The reflective essay for chapter four explores my own personal discoveries through the work of Audre Lorde and how her work supported motivation to finish the dissertation. The final chapter (5) will summarize the connection of findings from the three papers and the overall significance and contributions from this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Exploring Noncognitive Factors of College Readiness in a School-Embedded Youth Participatory Action Research Program

This study used a qualitative research approach to gain insight from high school seniors regarding their experience in a YPAR program over the course of one academic school year. Findings from this interview study suggest that through active participation in a YPAR program within the classroom environment, students begin to shape their community, researcher, and college identities. This study also supports YPAR as an educational practice that can foster the development of noncognitive factors of college readiness within high school students. This paper highlights a school-embedded youth-engaged program and how does a school-embedded youth-engaged program shape postsecondary decision-making, and how does it support college readiness noncognitive constructs.

Chapter 3: Figured Worlds and Postsecondary Decision-Making

The aim of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of postsecondary decision-making of high school seniors as it pertains to understanding how their decisions are influenced by intersecting figured worlds through a narrative inquiry research design. This paper will focus on how figured worlds have been used in educational research to explore the intersections of students' figured worlds within various educational and sociocultural contexts. Thus, the overarching research question for this paper is to explore how students' interaction in their 'figured worlds' shapes their postsecondary decisions.

Chapter 4: A Path to HEALing: Balancing Intersections and the Journey to Completion as a Mother and Doctoral Candidate Amid the Covid-19 and Civil Unrest Pandemics

This essay reflects my experiences as a doctoral candidate working toward completing my dissertation amid two pandemics—Covid-19 and racial unrest. This essay highlights how the work of Audre Lorde led me to progress toward completing my dissertation and helped me to reconnect to my purpose, reject internalized oppressions of myself, accept my journey as it was unfolding, and become reenergized through language and sharing my story. Throughout the essay, I share my discoveries of identity and self-care. In addition, I describe how the work of Lorde informed my own work and motivated me to HEAL. This essay shares an experience of choosing to affirm the practice of 'voice,' in hopes of reimagining not only education for women of color, mothers, educators, scholars, and researchers but reimagine the value that lived experiences and intersectionality have overall on education and research.

Significance

Supporting innovative ways to learn and develop holistically throughout the educational journey is valuable to creating social change. As supported throughout this dissertation, a

student's postsecondary experience is mediated through the many intersections of students' social environments. This dissertation is a compilation of qualitative research evidence, reflective practices, and discoveries to encourage the P-20 educational system to tap into students' backgrounds and communities as valuable academic and supportive resources. Understanding the influence of various educational experiences and interactions can be critical to delineating how educational systems can better support student postsecondary decision-making and development of noncognitive constructs that are academically and socially beneficial to students' future development. Thus, turning the focus away from seeing students as having to fit into a one-size-fits-all educational experience and, instead, begin to address the need for alternative learning spaces as a way to shift academic cultures to a space that celebrates students' local knowledge and assets.

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Chapter 2

Exploring Noncognitive Factors of College Readiness in a School Embedded Youth

Participatory Action Research Program

Abstract

One way for schools to improve college readiness in high school students is to saturate the learning environment with noncognitive skill opportunities. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) can be an intentional pedagogical practice to nurture noncognitive factors of college readiness while also using real world contexts to explore problems through the use of active learning, critical thinking, and innovative teaching approaches. This study used a qualitative research approach to gain insight from high school seniors regarding their experience in a YPAR program over the course of one academic school year. Findings from this study suggest that through active participation in a YPAR program within the classroom environment, students begin to shape their community, researcher, and college identities. This study also supports YPAR as an educational practice that can foster the development of noncognitive factors of college readiness within high school students.

Keywords: youth participatory action research, noncognitive factors, college readiness, high school students, identity development

With more than 90% of today's youth aspiring to attend college (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011), the push for postsecondary educational attainment is at an all-time high. In recent decades, the desire for every child to attend college has become increasingly complex and highly relevant in educational research and policymaking. Furthermore, it has become increasingly crucial for the high school curriculum to play a role in students' college readiness.

The postsecondary conversation is typically paired with a discussion about the constructs of college readiness (CR). Most research emphasizes CR as measurable skills and outcomes such as grade point average (GPA) and standardized test scores (Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016). The focus on increasing student achievement through cognitive factors has set an educational climate where other important student development constructs, such as motivation, self-confidence, and perseverance, are often ignored and discredited (Barnes & Slate, 2013).

One way to combat a cognitive-only approach to CR is to emphasize an identity approach that supports an intentional shift of focus toward developing noncognitive factors. Duncheon and Relles (2018) describe an identity perspective as a complementary viewpoint to CR that accounts for how social and cultural experiences also play a role in preparing students for their postsecondary educational experiences. Within an identity approach to CR, noncognitive factors such as social awareness, resilience, self-confidence, and motivation are just as critical to educational attainment as traditional cognitive constructs of student success as measured by test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dynmnick, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg et al., 2003). Schools and educational curricula often fail to support strategies within the school context to "nurture" noncognitive skills (Garcia, 2016). Approaching CR through an identity perspective does not discredit cognitive skills but instead supports that noncognitive factors also foster CR.

Schools can address the disproportionate nurturing of cognitive over noncognitive skills by practicing more intentional pedagogical practices focused on identity development and, in return, will saturate the learning environment with noncognitive skill development. Learners' identities are developed and nurtured through learning new skills and using their new knowledge to demonstrate a new and more critical understanding. Wenger (1998) makes sense of identity formation through three modes of belonging to social learning systems--engagement, imagination, and alignment. For example, engagement is "doing" things together, imagination is "constructing" ways to view ourselves, our communities, and the larger world around us, and alignment is seeing that local activities align with more significant social issues that surpass engagement.

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is an educational practice that can nurture noncognitive skills while using real-world contexts to explore problems through active learning, critical thinking, and innovative teaching approaches (McDonald, 2016). Using YPAR, schools can create learning environments with more intentional ways to build a student-engaged and well-rounded education curriculum that supports the development of critical noncognitive skills. Integrating ways to develop noncognitive skills places value on students' cultural and social experiences, making identity formation a valued approach for CR.

A YPAR approach has been studied in community and classroom settings (Anyon et al., 2018; Buttimer, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Caraballo et al., 2017; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Ozer et al., 2020). While using YPAR in classrooms and youth organizations is not uncommon, little research has explored specific ways YPAR can be used as an educational approach in high school classrooms to develop noncognitive college readiness factors. The current study explored the potential of Youth Built Change (YBC), a YPAR school-embedded program, as an

educational approach that can aid in supporting noncognitive factors of college readiness in high school youth. YBC is a school-embedded youth-engaged program that embodies a YPAR approach to help youth connect their local knowledge and expertise through research that addresses substance abuse in their community (Jacquez et al., 2020; Watts-Taffe, Vaughn, & Jacquez, 2021). YBC seeks to engage youth in both the content and process of research to evoke research knowledge, provide a space where their lived experiences are valued, and provide insider knowledge back into their communities (Jacquez et al., 2020). YBC supports a classroom space where students are actively engaged in a research project from start to finish and are encouraged to find solutions to substance abuse issues in their communities. The goal of YBC is to impact community social change by engaging youth in civic engagement, highlighting social inequities in their communities, and promoting critical and democratic thinking in the classroom (Watts-Taffe et al., 2021).

The purpose of this paper is not simply to explore YBC as a YPAR approach to learning but rather to describe the experience and identity formation that occurs from participation in a YPAR program and how the qualities of noncognitive factors of CR emerge as fundamental constructs essential to student's identity formation. Therefore, the aim of this study was twofold: (a) to explore how students' identities are shaped by their YBC experience and (b) to examine how YPAR supports noncognitive factors of CR.

Literature Review

College Readiness Framework

Currently, our nation assumes that college readiness is a one-size-fits-all model (Barnes & Slate, 2013), and the skills outlook on college readiness is the "gold standard" in thinking about the preparedness for college in high school students. According to Conley (2007), college

readiness represents a student's skills and preparation to transition and succeed in higher education. Conley has operationalized college readiness as "the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed without remediation in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution (p. 5)." The cognitive factors of college readiness are skills that can be performed and measured to acknowledge that students have mastered the academic content needed to successfully transition into coursework at the collegiate level (Conley, 2007; Wiley, Wyatt, & Camara, 2010). Most research and scholarly literature view college readiness through cognitive factors measured as skills, such as a student's grade point average and scores on standardized exams.

Noncognitive factors include problem-solving, critical thinking, social, and creativity skills. These skills " allow them [students] to contribute meaningfully to society and to succeed in their public lives, workplaces, homes, and other social contexts" (Garcia, 2016, p. 31). Placing value on noncognitive factors is often left out of the college readiness conversation. Placing a "measure" on noncognitive factors is perceived as more challenging and difficult to assess due to the nature of trying to measure things such as behaviors, mindsets, and motivation, even though these constructs are also needed to be successful in higher education (Farrington et al., 2012).

However, precisely, these noncognitive factors emerge as essential factors in academic performance and can be just as crucial to CR. According to Farrington et al. (2012), there are five ways to categorize noncognitive factors of college readiness:

1.) Academic behaviors include attending class, organizing tasks, and completing assignments.

2.) Academic perseverance, including staying engaged in a school-related activity and goal even if there are challenges and often referred to as "grit."

3.) Academic mindsets, including beliefs one has about themselves regarding their capability to do their schoolwork and often referred to as "self-efficacy."

4.) Learning strategies, including skills such as time management, study skills, and goal setting.

5.) Social skills include the behaviors needed to build relationships with individuals around them (peers, professors, administrators, and advisors).

YPAR in High School Settings

YPAR is an educational approach where youth are trained as co-researchers to conduct research, take leadership roles in a research project, and identify significant problems within their communities (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). YPAR lends itself to improving schools, communities, and community groups while developing personal and academic benefits for the youth who participate (Ozer & Douglas, 2013). Youth benefit from the increased knowledge about and the practice of research skills. The integration of research that leads to action in their communities and the practice of critical problem-solving, communication skills, teamwork, and collaboration leads to increased social support networks via school, teachers, and community stakeholders and then ultimately to community transformation (Ozer, 2015; Irby et al., 2001; Minkler, 2000).

Youth-engaged research grounded in shared leadership and decision-making can significantly impact youth (Ozer & Wright, 2012; Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Anderson, 2020; Jacquez et al., 2020; Watts-Taffe, Vaughn & Jacquez, 2021). Through the development of practical skills and community awareness, YPAR programs implemented in high school classroom spaces can help to develop critical noncognitive factors of college readiness. YPAR complements an identity approach to college readiness because it supports noncognitive

outcomes in students, such as leadership skills and academic performance (Anyon, Bender, Kennedy, & Dechants, 2018), therefore, exposing students to relevant skills and giving them motivating ways to practice these skills. High school is an ideal setting for YPAR projects because high school students often push toward independence and personal agency. YPAR is an approach that can support this developmental need by providing a positive outlet for independence and an opportunity to develop learning and critical thinking (Eccles et al., 1993; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

Anderson (2020) conducted a systematic review of YPAR projects in high school settings in the United States and found 38 peer-reviewed articles. Projects were implemented in various community contexts, such as rural and suburban school settings, and in various capacities within the high school setting. For example, Anderson (2020) reported on studies using YPAR within academic content areas such as literacy, STEM, social studies, and various elective courses (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016; Cammarota, 2007, 2017; Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Yang, 2009; Zaal & Terry, 2013). Anderson (2020) found that YPAR can meet students' socio-emotional needs and "validate youth researcher's knowledge in the face of different forms of marginalization within a school setting (p. 250)."

Research studies on YPAR conducted in the high school setting have suggested that such programs have had positive outcomes across many contexts (after-school programs, core content subjects, underrepresented students, and so on) on youth who participate (Anyon et al., 2008). Positive outcomes for students participating in YPAR projects include agency, social competency, critical consciousness, leadership, and interpersonal skills. Another systematic review conducted by Shamova and Cummings (2017) shed light on YPAR projects to improve

relationships with significant adults such as teachers or school administrators and to allow students to gain an increased sense of belonging to their communities.

Method

This study employed qualitative research methods within a school-embedded YPAR program to explore college readiness and identity development through a student-centered lens. The major benefit of qualitative data in this study is the opportunity for close examination of personal encounters and experiences over time that aids in constructing identity development (Bamberg, 2011). Data presented here were part of a more extensive, ongoing case study about postsecondary decision-making for high school students. The current study focuses only on interview questions regarding students' experience in YBC. Data collection took place between August 2019 and June 2020. A unique aspect of this study is that students were interviewed throughout their senior year and at different points in the program and could capture the essence of how they experienced YBC over time. The longitudinal interviews allowed for student reflection on the entire process. Perceptions of experiences can shift or change over time; therefore, exploring the year-long program at different times helped to capture the true essence of the phenomena as the students are experiencing it with time to reflect on their experiences.

Program Description- Youth Built Change

YBC is a program facilitated in partnership with two public high schools in Ohio, Princeton High School and Manchester High School, and a Research 1 four-year public university (Jacquez et al., 2020). Both schools serve many economically disadvantaged students but are vastly different in their geographical location and the socioeconomic status of their surrounding communities (Jacquez et al., 2020). Princeton High School (PHS) is a large public

high school in Cincinnati. Manchester High School (MHS) is a small public high school located in a rural Appalachian area of Cincinnati.

YBC students are selected through an application process during their sophomore year to participate in YBC during their junior year of high school. As YBC participants, they also have the opportunity to stay involved with the project during their senior year as a peer leader. Each school implements the program for one academic year (August-May) and has an assigned class for YBC with an assigned teacher to assist in facilitating the process alongside researchers from the university.

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Suri, 2011) was used to recruit participants participating in YBC at two public high schools. Data were collected from five students at both schools (10 total) who were seniors participating in the program (See Table 1). Each student participated in YBC for their junior and senior high school years.

Table 1

Characteristics of Student Participants

Participant	Self-Identified Gender	School	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity
1	Female	PHS	Black
2	Female	PHS	Black
3	Female	PHS	More than one race
4	Male	PHS	More than one race
5	Male	PHS	Asian Pacific Islander
6	Female	MHS	White
7	Female	MHS	White
8	Female	MHS	White
9	Female	MHS	White
10	Female	MHS	White

Note. Students are from two different schools

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow the researcher to enter the world of the other person's perspective, knowing that the perspectives of others are indeed meaningful and can be made explicit (Patton, 2002). Interview questions focused on their current and past experiences with YBC regarding relationships, content knowledge, skill development, and overall perception of the program (challenges and assets). Interviews were conducted throughout the academic year and allowed for documentation of change over time in how each participant understood their YBC experience. The original data collection plan was to interview all student participants at least three times throughout the school year (October, March, and May). The first round of interviews was conducted with each student, and they took place at school during school hours. For the second round of interviews, six were conducted in school with the students prior to the COVID-19 shutdown and one was able to take place virtually via zoom. Five participants completed all three planned interviews. After schools closed due to COVID-19, I contacted each student to gauge whether they wanted to continue. While all students initially agreed, as time passed, it became difficult to contact students and for them to keep their scheduled zoom call times with the researcher. Because of the major disruption in the lives of everyone, after multiple attempts, it was accepted that all students would not be able to continue in the research process and this was supported by the research team. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with student participants, and each interview lasted between 25-45 minutes. For this paper, only the questions asking the students about their YBC experience were coded and analyzed.

Table 2

Overview of interviews

Participant	# Of interviews	Month of interview	Mode of interview
1	3	October	In school
		March	In school
		May	Virtual via Zoom
2	2	October	In school
		March	Virtual via Zoom
3	3	October	In school
		March	In school
		May	Virtual via Zoom
4	1	October	In school
5	3	October	In school
		March	In school
		May	Virtual via Zoom
6	3	October	In school
		March	In school
		May	Virtual via Zoom
7	3	October	In school
		March	In school
		May	Virtual via Zoom
8	1	October	In school
9	1	October	In school
		March	In school
10	1	October	In school

Note. There was a total of 21 interviews conducted

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyze and report patterns in rich detail within the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A hybrid approach to thematic coding was used to balance deductive coding of noncognitive factors of CR with inductive coding of themes

that emerged across participant discussions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A thematic analysis process generated themes from the interview data that also uncovered how noncognitive factors of CR were an integral part of student development concerning the student's participation in YBC. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to become familiar with the data. The researcher immersed themself in the data by reading and re-reading data to search for patterns of commonalities (Polit & Beck, 2003) that existed across all interviews to present findings as a nuanced account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After generating initial codes across the entire data, codes were combined and assembled in a way that moved toward developing specific themes.

Following interviews, transcripts and notes were entered into the MAXQDA data management program. MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2019) was used to manage the data coding process and identify themes in the analysis. The study findings describe the essence of participant experiences across all participants based on an ongoing, ongoing, and reflexive analysis throughout the interviews. MAXQDA was used to develop codes from the transcribed data.

After codes were produced, a review of the codes took place by reading back through the gathered data in MAXQDA. Themes developed after ensuring a fit of the themes related to the codes found across data. Next, the ongoing analysis continued as the overall story unfolded and generated more explicit definitions and representative names for each theme. Finally, compelling and representative examples for each theme related to the research question and literature were chosen.

Findings

Study participants positively viewed their experiences with YBC and partaking in a YPAR process. Students' yearlong participation in YBC reflected the value of community awareness, relationship development, and academic exposure. The themes listed below highlight findings from this study that pertain to community awareness, social development, and academic growth, with supporting evidence of various noncognitive factors of college readiness that came through as coding took place. There were also supporting noncognitive factors of college readiness from Farrington (2012) that also became an essential part of untangling the experience students had within their participation in YBC—academic behaviors, academic perseverance, academic mindsets, learning strategies, and social skills.

Awareness and Acceptance of Community Through YPAR

Participants viewed their experience in YBC as a way to gain a deeper exposure to others' personal lives and a genuine interest in their well-being. Student participants expressed how they gained new knowledge and broader awareness about themselves, the issues affecting their communities, and the individuals living in their communities. Student participants viewed their experience with YBC as a way to learn something new about their community and a chance to "view the world differently." Student participants mentioned that due to the active engagement with the community while working on their projects, they became "more aware of what is going on around [me]."

During interviews, students reflected on their experience with YBC and how this experience exposed them to their communities differently and shed light on individuals within their community. Student participants repeatedly stated how they gained awareness and acceptance of the individuals that lived in their communities. One student participant recognized the unique opportunity through participation in YBC, "I have gotten to broaden my horizons, in a

sense, because I get to learn more about my community, which is a thing most people do not get to do even if they do try." Through participation in YBC, student participants were able to connect with the community and become motivated "to try and learn more about people" and to "hear their story and be there for them." Valuable lessons regarding empathy occurred; as one student suggested, "[You should] never judge someone without knowing their story," and "there is no reason to judge them [community member] based on their decisions or where they are at in their life." Participating in such a unique and innovative approach to research gave students a chance to "learn more about [our] community that not a whole lot of people knew."

YPAR as a "Space" to Build Relationships and Social Development

The relationship developed between student and teacher in the YBC space was a unique way for students to engage with adults that humanized their experience and carried over into the classroom space and academic performance. Different classroom spaces and environments were helpful. On a different level, the relationship with the teacher in the classroom became necessary and was very different from other classes they may have had. Working closely with peers, teachers, and university partners on research projects led to the development of meaningful relationships and a more profound sense of connection to their work. They emphasized the importance of the YBC classroom space as different from other classes they have taken, calling it—"an interactive learning space" with many opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations and relationships with different people. Some of the comments they made during interviews included, "this is an experience I will cherish forever" and "[I'm] eternally grateful for this experience."

Building a community of peers and new friends was essential to student satisfaction with the program. All ten student participants discussed the value of interactions among peers and

how this was an integral part of the program and one of the biggest takeaways. Students

expressed how YBC allowed them to engage with peers not only from their school but also from

another school that was very different from their own. Students frequently discussed the

importance of friendships they made throughout the program with other students. One student

said, "[I was able to] make a lot of really good friends in YBC because I've been doing projects

with them all year." Another student also stated:

> Just meeting all kinds of new friends and new people. I think that that has not only helped
>
> everyone in this school and who's a part of the program kind of look forward to what they
>
> want to do after school and what they want to do to help people in the program.

Students also discussed how interacting with teachers in the YBC classroom space was different

from any other class they may have had with them prior to this experience. The direct experience

with college personnel also stood out to students because "you get to talk to college professors

and meet with substance abuse counselors, and just see the other parts of the world that you don't

normally get to see." Students used words such as "collaboration," "motivation,"

"encouragement," and "understanding" to describe their feelings from working so closely with

their peers, teachers, and university constituents. The relational development is not only among

their peers but also with the adults working with them in the program. The constant interaction

with peers, teachers, and community members was a valuable takeaway from the program.

YPAR as a "Space" for New Ideas of Self and Own Capabilities leads to Student

Motivation for Social Change.

Students experienced YBC as a program that helped them to overcome some of their

insecurities and "a chance to open [my] shell." Students appreciated having a small group of

peers to help them through other unanticipated academic and personal challenges (i.e., the

college application process), which was an unexpected, yet very welcomed benefit. One student expressed:

> Like we really help each other with a lot cause like when days that we aren't specifically doing something or the other kids are just reading or something. And during the college application process, that was a big time for everybody, we'd be like, "Hey can you look over this letter for me?" And just like ask opinions. So it's like I have a group of friends that there is one school that I definitely know we're all strongly considering, so we talked to each other about those things. We help each other out through the thought process.

Because of their overall satisfaction with their connection in YBC and undertaking such an important role in community change, several students described wanting to give back some of what they gained from the program to other students. One student stated:

> Definitely just knowing that I'm in the process of making change. That's my main thing, and I'm just encouraging others and the people below me just really giving the credit to YBC that it deserves because there's so much hard work and effort that's put into it. And I think that putting that word out to everyone is just so important because for the younger people, it gives them something to look forward to. I feel very encouraged by everyone else, and it also makes me want to encourage other people. I feel like it's built me as a person to really focus more on the importance of things, but also more in the depth of things.

One student noted they were "constantly being pushed, and that's what we need." Because students felt more connected to the teacher and peers, they felt more engaged in the work and accountable for completing tasks. The opportunities for students to practice autonomy and activate an authoritative voice stood out in student interviews. One student stated:

I just think that YBC has helped me in a lot of ways, not only with school but me

personally because I never thought that I'd work with a bunch of people on something

and love it. So I just think that YBC has opened a lot more interest for me and has helped

me build a lot more skills than what I had said before I even did this junior year.

Students gained confidence and self-motivation because YBC "gives you a lot of

opportunities to branch out and do different things. And you're not always supervised; you have

your own leniency, so you can choose what you want, the different topic, and choose how you

want to pursue that."

Students gained knowledge about planning and conducting research, and their

engagement with the research process influenced the student's motivation to pursue further

research opportunities. Several students mentioned how they are now inspired to continue

gaining more research experience, even potentially in their future careers. For example, one

student participant noted, "So it [research] just made me think about what I really want to do in

the future. And now research is in the question." During the final interview, another student

participant said:

It [research] definitely gave me the idea to want to maybe do something more with

research in college because I didn't know ... I used to think before I ever did YBC

research, I did research for my paper or something like that, and I didn't really like it, but

then after I got into it and started to learn the processes and stuff for it, I started to love it.

Learning and Implementing the Research Process can be "Cool"

The knowledge gained about conducting and implementing the research process played a

crucial role in students' confidence in understanding the research process and seeing themselves

as researchers in the future. Some student participants could even envision themselves

participating in research in college and in future careers because they viewed their experience in YBC as transformative.

When asked about their biggest takeaways, students often referred to the experiences they gained throughout the research process and learning more about the logistics of conducting social science research. The opportunity to partake in a research process allowed students to gain practical research experience. It proved to be very beneficial in building confidence in "helpful skills" that they deemed necessary with research. Going through the research process and developing interview protocols and surveys was an invaluable experience--"I have gained survey skills, how to write a survey, and I interview people and all of that. I've gained research skills. I can do a lit review just like that." Students gained skills associated with being a researcher, such as a survey design and interview protocols. They also developed a passion for conducting research and saw the benefits to the community through their work. Students appreciated being able to help others through their research. Several students talked about how delving into a research process on something important meant they had to "dig deeper" into an issue. There was satisfaction in knowing it helped people. Furthermore, one student said, "researching something influential is cool."

YPAR as a "Space" to Develop and Enhance Noncognitive Factors

Throughout the interviews, students reflected on the joys of the program, and many of those centered around the growth and development of noncognitive factors of college readiness (Farmington). Several students expressed that they could carry over academic behaviors from YBC, such as organization skills and time management because they had opportunities to "figure out how to delegate my time wisely and how to get stuff done."

Students could connect their experiences in YBC with essential tools needed for college because "it [YBC] helped me but also because I'm going to be doing engineering, I'm going to have to work with people all the time. So, it helped me on that front, the aspect of working with a team. Students also stated they felt as if they learned how to be more "analytical" and " thorough" regarding how they approached their classwork. Because YBC is only for an academic year, students were responsible for all parts of the research process, from developing the research question to disseminating results in a confined time, August-May. Due to the heavy reliance on deadlines and milestones, students said that it helped them to create better schedules so they would not procrastinate and "get things done."

Staying engaged in the research process was often mentioned as a challenge, and one of the "biggest takeaways was that research takes time." Academic perseverance occurs when students realize that "you won't get results quick." Academic perseverance stood out when students encountered unforeseen or uncontrollable circumstances in the research; one student aptly expressed, "you have to be ready for change. You have to be constantly changing your plans and all that stuff. You have to be ready."

Imperative to college readiness is feeling prepared for college. The academic mindset of students after their participation in YBC was that "it [YBC] gives us that experience that we need, especially for college. I feel like it's just preparing us for those college classes". Several participants discussed a direct link between their participation in YBC activities and their ability to succeed in the future since they were "constantly being pushed, and that's exactly what we need."

Several students also talked about their interaction with graduate students on research projects, having an opportunity to stay overnight in a campus residential hall, and being able to

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present their research at the university to people who care about what they are doing were all highlights of the program and ones that allowed them to experience what it might be like attending college while still in high school.

Social skills became a key takeaway for students, who viewed their experience with YBC as a place to improve their public speaking skills. Presenting in front of people was brought up in several interviews and became a significant learning curve for the students. Public speaking intimidated most students; however, they recognized the benefit of having the opportunity to speak as something essential if they were to go to college. Preparing a presentation and then articulating that to a larger audience allowed students to gain more confidence in themselves as public speakers. Engaging in a process that has several aspects of speaking and communicating embedded throughout enabled student participants "leave our comfort zone for a little bit" and "branch out and grow as a person to be able to do public speaking." Several participants stated they recognized how much they had improved their presentation skills and confidence in presenting in front of people. One student mentioned they felt "it [YBC] also helped my grammar a lot, because we have to word things so precise, so it's helped my grammar a lot."

Participants not only believed they gained a valuable experience through their participation in YBC but also in how they developed their knowledge of and social skills by "learning how to work with a team." The transfer of knowledge that occurred among peers in their research groups positively impacted how they viewed group work "because before that [YBC], I didn't really have to unless it was some group project and it was like, 'Oh, you want to do it? Okay, cool.' Due to the collaborative nature of YPAR, students spent much time in their small research groups. The time spent in groups led students to shift how they conceived group work from a mentality of "I'd be stuck with one other person doing the work" to "with YBC, I

had to work with my team, and we had delegated roles, and we had to do this by this date, and we had a set timeline and stuff like that." The practical experience of working in a group proved critical in their positive outlook on YBC. Participants also considered that their experience of working in teams helped them learn how to navigate the research process. They found that instead of relying only on themselves for the answers, it was also essential to have diverse insight from peers with whom they worked in the research group.

Discussion

According to Anderson (2020), schools and educators desire to increase YPAR implementation in the school environment and curriculum because it supports educational initiatives for increased inquiry of students in classrooms, and the outcomes are meaningful for students. YPAR is an approach that emphasizes positive youth development through youth participation as co-researchers and change agents on complex social issues relevant to youth (Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020).

Findings from this study not only support YPAR as an educational initiative for academic outcomes but also for supporting social-emotional outcomes such as agency, identity development, and social development, which are imperative for success beyond high school. YPAR helps to build the capacity for youth to take action within their schools and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) while promoting youth strengths and agency (Lerner, 2004). Including shared leadership and decision-making with youth significantly impacts their awareness of community activism and provides an environment to encourage the development of practical skills that can lead to positive change. In a YPAR approach, the research promotes social and emotional development, increases self-efficacy, enhances autonomy, provides

opportunities to explore diverse perspectives, and builds community awareness (Ozer, 2015; Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; DeJonckheere, Vaughn, & Bruck, 2016).

Connecting Research, Community, and Social Change

In YBC, students are engaged in the YPAR process, which helps to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, increased communication skills, and exposure to teamwork and collaboration, which leads to community transformation through the increased social support networks gained within this integrated and collaborative process (Ozer, 2015; Irby et al., 2001; Minkler, 2000). Students in YBC expressed how they became more confident over time and began to see themselves as making meaningful contributions to the community. Through their participation in YBC, students could develop a deeper connection to and broaden their understanding of the world around them, which led to them learning new ways to see themselves as individuals and members of a community.

Reimagining College Readiness Through YPAR

The skills developed during a YPAR process and the identity development that takes place support YPAR as an educational approach that can build noncognitive skills of students and, in return, play a vital role in the continuation of personal and educational growth and development (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & terWeel, 2008; Garcia, 2016). The current study suggests that YPAR can be a meaningful process for students and supports YPAR as a relevant classroom pedagogical approach for developing noncognitive factors of college readiness in high school students.

In this study, there were several ways YBC and the YPAR process acted as a college readiness active learning environment for students to gain skills and knowledge for and about college. Using a YPAR lens as an intentional way to support an identity approach to college

readiness places value on noncognitive constructs, which support positive youth development. YBC provided varied opportunities to develop different noncognitive skills associated with college readiness, such as social skills, academic mindsets, and academic behaviors. Findings from this study suggest that noncognitive constructs support a YPAR process, such as highlighting student assets, academic outcomes, and individual development (Thom & Finkelstein, 2016).

Findings from this study support YPAR as an impactive pedagogical approach for relationship building and developing communication skills for students. How students can practice social awareness and agency through participation in YBC is a powerful practice for students' social-emotional development. Student participants in this study mentioned the importance of the relationships built during their experience and how they were a critical part of their overall experience. For several students, YBC provided them with a space to gain confidence in their public speaking skills and gain valuable insight into working with a team. Students in this study made it clear that they fostered the social skills needed to build strong relationships with peers and adults. In return, they made them feel more confident in themselves and their capability to achieve in school and their future college major.

Throughout their participation in YBC and with a YPAR process, students could partake in activities and experiences that fostered academic perseverance and mindsets. Student participants were able to gain experiences where they had to stay persistent. For example, several students experienced the challenges of scheduling and conducting qualitative interviews with community members during data collection. One student reflected on their experience seeking interview participants and how they learned about persistence in communicating with community members and possessing patience because they did not have control over an

interviewer showing up or needing to reschedule last minute. While students were frustrated at the moment, they could see the value in the experience over time. Academic mindsets were also present throughout the data and suggested that through the YPAR process, students' beliefs about themselves were shaped and impacted throughout their YBC experience. As one student stated, "Overall, I do feel that since we're asking about my personality and how YBC has affected me, I feel like YBC has given me a chance to open my shell."

Furthermore, students were also able to develop both academic behaviors and learning strategies through their participation in designing, conducting, analyzing, and presenting research. Academic behaviors such as organizing tasks for the research project and being present to work through the research process proved valuable to students. Learning strategies built into a YPAR process, such as time management and research skills, also influenced how students perceived their experience with YBC.

Identity Development and Exploration

YPAR can serve as a validation tool for high school students that explore a wide range of identities, contexts, and lived experiences (Bagget & Anderzegewki, 2017). Utilizing a YPAR model within the classroom can help broaden students' perceptions of themselves, their communities, and their potential postsecondary trajectories. YPAR can be an educational approach that actively seeks to develop students' individual, community, college, and researcher identities. The involvement in planned activities guides them toward embodying an authoritative voice and a space where they continue to renegotiate identity as part of an embedded social process of belonging and supporting their role in creating social change within their communities (Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2015).

Participation in YBC allowed students to gain academic behaviors and mindsets that fostered college knowledge, preparation, and aspirations. Students began to envision themselves as college students due to their level of expectation, exposure to research, and motivation. They also spent time at the partnering college campus several times throughout the year. The experience of getting early exposure to a college campus was pivotal in them being able to envision themselves attending college.

The exposure to the research process, college campus visits, relationship-building opportunities with peers and adults both in and outside of their school, and varied interactions with university researchers and graduate students were valuable to students' academic and self-development. Furthermore, researcher identity became a strong identity at the end of their experience because they got through the cycle of learning about research, conducting research, reaping the benefit, and seeing the results from their hard work with research.

Limitations

The study findings suggest that YPAR can assist in developing certain noncognitive factors of college readiness, such as academic perseverance and academic behaviors. However, there are limitations when considering bringing this approach to the classroom. YPAR is a research process; therefore, schools must have access to adult researchers, requiring university-affiliated partnerships or grant funding for YPAR to function within a classroom setting. The relationship adult researchers also have an essential factor, and those relationships can significantly impact the way a YPAR projects in school settings (Anderson, 2020)

The constraints of a K-12 school setting can be a limitation to implementing YPAR in classrooms as an educational practice due to the pressure of covering specific academic material for state requirements such as standardized testing (Anderson, 2020). In this study, experiencing

COVID-19 not only disrupted the data collection plan and how students navigated their participation virtually instead of in person. If undertaking a YPAR process within the core academic subject, there may be less autonomy for the research process versus providing an opportunity for students to participate in YPAR within an elective or advisory course. Engaging students in an after-school approach also provides more freedom and avoids strict curricula restraints (Anderson, 2020).

Conclusion

YPAR ultimately embodies Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy stance: students should be encouraged to take learning deeper beyond the surface to become active contributors to and for knowledge. In recent years, YPAR has emerged as an "alternative and critical paradigm for educational practice" (Scott, Pyne, Means, & 2015, pg. 138). Allowing curriculum and educational practices within the classroom to create safe spaces for students to develop noncognitive skills that account for their social identity and fostering an environment of belonging is imperative to positive youth development and should be given priority in educational contexts.

Reimagining college readiness geared toward identity development approaches allows for education to place value on the nurturing of noncognitive constructs. Garcia (2016) suggests that noncognitive skills should be given priority in education policy and practices. However, educational policy and analysis do not pay close enough attention to holistic development and the importance of noncognitive factors in student success (Garcia, 2016). In this study, students gained valuable experiences from their work with community members and on a community-based topic insofar that it was one of the most profound findings from this study. However, most

YPAR conducted in school settings address specific content areas such as math, literacy/language, and social studies and cannot bring authentic community collaboration.

An unfortunate circumstance of our education system is that students and teachers will probably get the opportunity to engage in participatory learning because our education system is embedded in power and patriarchal political practices. It does not appear that any movements are disrupting this traditional approach to education (Anderson, 2020). Furthermore, reinventing educational practices to include a more structural and procedural outlook that accounts for human interactions could help address inequities (Allen-Ramdial & Campbell, 2014).

YPAR supports the contributions made by youth in research projects as a valued asset to inquiry and social change. Findings from this study support YPAR as a way to build a more rigorous, student-engagement, and well-rounded education curriculum by embracing more sustainable collaborative academic and community partnerships between K-12 and higher education institutions. Using YPAR in educational spaces can be an intentional way to develop noncognitive factors that provide a welcoming space for social development in the educational conversation via researchers, practitioners, and practitioners should be at the center of educational practice and policy. Incorporating emancipatory and visionary practices such as YPAR into the classroom can aid in developing agency, capacity building, and identity for students to imagine better future outcomes.

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Chapter 3

Figured Worlds and Post-Secondary Decision-Making

Messages communicated to high school students regarding their postsecondary plans are often within the realm of "college for all." Messages communicate that students meeting cognitive metrics such as grades, GPA, and ACT scores should attend college. High school students struggle to make informed postsecondary decisions due to a lack of consideration of influences from personal and social contexts that might impact their decision-making process. However, little is known about how students' social contexts can be critical to making postsecondary decisions. Therefore, how students come to make their postsecondary decisions should not be made as isolated individuals but as members of various figured worlds (e.g., school, home, community).

In the current study, I use the sociocultural approach of figured worlds to explore postsecondary decision-making (PSDM). A figured worlds approach helps understand how students leverage their strengths, knowledge, and social relationships to influence their postsecondary decisions. For this study, figured worlds, a sociocultural lens, supports the need to take a nuanced look and perspective into the social and environmental contexts as critical components in the decision-making process. According to Williams, Davis & Black (2007), there is value in taking a sociocultural perspective to understand better how students learn and make decisions in different contexts. Figured worlds is a complementary lens to explore PSDM because it highlights the array of unique experiences a student has during high school that may play a role in helping them make informed postsecondary decisions (Duncheon & Relles, 2018). Untangling the decision-making process through a figured world lens provides a deeper exploration into the PSDM process for students.

Literature Review

Figured Worlds

Figured worlds is a sociocultural view that explores how identities form and shift depending on what is taking place in a person's life—postsecondary decision-making (PDSM)—and situated within the context an individual is living within at any particular time in their life, situation, or environment (Urrieta, 2007). Figured worlds consider the entire social ecology of an individual (e.g., relationships, social, community) (Holland et al., 1998). Iloh (2018) asserts that students are considered social actors embedded within ecosystems and find utility in this view when exploring postsecondary decision-making. Holland et al. (1998) proposed that individuals constantly form and continuously grapple with contradictory understandings of self and identities across their social environments (Holland et al., 1998). People' figure' out whom they are based on their social interpretations within their social worlds and interactions with others around them (Urrieta, 2007; Holland et al., 1998; Rubin, 2007). Figured worlds is a place where individuals can hold capacity, and the people and environment all impact how much space we feel we hold and how those spaces impact our identity development. In figured worlds, identities are constructed by interacting in social activities, and student identities develop because of interactions and experiences in social practices (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Holland et al., 1998). Positioning this study under the guidance of figured worlds sheds light on how an individual's environment and setting interplay, influencing decision-making and development (Iloh, 2018).

Postsecondary Decision-Making

Much of the PSDM exploration in educational research is framed around student choice, emphasizing students not only attending college but also attaining a college degree (McLewis, 2021). The literature primarily focuses on transitioning from high school to a higher education

institution or directly into the workforce (Kim & Schneider, 2005) based on individual-level factors such as ethnicity, gender, and family background (Lee, Almonte, & Youn, 2012). For example, McDonough (1997) examined how socioeconomic status, school, family, and community contexts inform college-going decisions. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) believe the PSDM process begins with activities and interactions with family and friends, school experiences, and exploration of information. According to McLewis (2019), making a postsecondary decision, such as attending college, is a reflective interaction between individuals and their social position within various contexts. Studies on postsecondary pathways have focused on individual, organizational, and ecological influences (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Perna, 2006); however, the consideration of the impact of the intersection of various social and environmental contexts is missing (Tierney, 1983; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perez & McDonough, 2008). While the support of the family, the high school, and social interactions are considered factors that contribute to student choice, they have not considered a complimentary package to help students decide what they would like to do after high school. College choice research tends to focus on how students develop their college choice or consider their college options (Hearn, 1984; Hassle, McDonough, Paulsen, etc.) and minimizes the role that social structures might play in the decision-making process (McLewis, 2019).

While receiving a college education has taken the forefront, studying the decision-making process can better assist educators in helping students make more informed decisions on what they want to do after high school that best meets their needs and identities and create better avenues toward social and economic stability. Critical to understanding how youth make postsecondary decisions that lead to career fulfillment and personal contentment is essential.

Educational research on postsecondary decisions should account for and explore how personal lived experiences, identities, and the interconnection of their environments informs PSDM.

Positioning Figured Worlds in Post-Secondary Decision-Making

Using a figured worlds' lens on PSDM provides a relevant and effective theoretical lens into the role that environmental and social contexts play in students' decision-making processes and postsecondary trajectories, as well as how their decision-making process is mediated and influenced through the many intersections of their social environments. Similar to Iloh (2018), The approach taken to explore PSDM embodies the valuable role that contextual factors at individual, school, and community levels have in making important decisions Seeking to understand more about college-going is not a linear undertaking and is often a fragmented process (Iloh, 2019).

Students often make incomplete postsecondary decisions and lack a more holistic approach that taps into their interests, identities, and support mechanisms. Educational researchers and scholars have found figured worlds useful when studying educational contexts (Rubin, 2007). Education scholars have argued that using Holland's theory to think more deeply regarding identity and agency can be beneficial to better understanding how students produce and continue to reimagine their identities as high school seniors preparing to enter college (Urietta, 2007). For example, Golden and Earp (2012) state that one's academic figured world is influenced by the environmental contexts and the unique beliefs and practices they embody. Price and McNeil (2013) assert that the figured world of a student's home environment, culture, and other outside-of-school experiences shape a student's educational experience. Luttrell and Parker's (2001) article on literacy practices studied high school students to understand how literacy promotes various aspects of school, work, and family.

While the research on college decision-making is extensive, few studies have used a critical lens to explore how interconnected relationships in various contexts might shape a student's postsecondary trajectory (McLewis, 2021). For this study, I argue that there are complex nuances to the college-going decision-making process that are multifaceted and influenced by social and environmental contexts. This study assumes that a better understanding of the decision-making process should include exploring both contextual and individual factors concurrently (Bregman, 2010).

Methods

This study used a narrative inquiry approach to better understand the PSDM process of 10 high school seniors by exploring how their intersection of various figured worlds might shape their postsecondary decision (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). In narrative inquiry, the lives and experiences of participants are honored and viewed as valuable ways to understand a phenomenon (Clandinin, 2016). Using a narrative inquiry approach made it possible to capture a level of richness of the PSDM process (Brandell & Varkas, 2019) that helped to develop a deeper understanding of social and environmental influences on student's postsecondary decisions (Polit & Beck, 2013).

Research Setting and Participants

Participants in this study included ten high school seniors from two different public high schools—Highland High School (HHS) and Ithaca High School (IHS) (school pseudonyms). HHS is a large public high school located in a metropolitan area with a population of 1500 students. HHS serves an ethnically diverse student population and is considered one of the most diverse public high schools in the metropolitan area, with 45% African American, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 22% Latinx, 6% Multiracial, and 22% White (Ohio Department of

Education, 2018a). In addition to being ethnically diverse, HHS is also considered economically

disadvantaged, with 60% of students receiving free or reduced lunch (Ohio Department of

Education, 2018a). IHS is a small public high school located in rural Appalachia. IHS consists of

354 students and is a homogenous population, with 97% of students identifying as White. IHS

also qualifies as economically disadvantaged, with 99.8% receiving free or reduced lunch (Ohio

Department of Education, 2018b).

Table 1

Overview of Participants

Category	
# of participants	10
Gender	2 self-identified male 8 self-identified females
Age (years)	17-18
School	5-HHS 5-IHS
Race/Ethnicity	2 Black/African American 1 Asian Pacific Islander 5 white/non-Hispanic 2-more than one race

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was used to identify, analyze, and

report themes derived from the data collected. Thematic analysis involves five steps: 1) become

familiar with the data; 2) generate data into initial codes; 3) search for themes from codes; 4)

review themes; and 5) name and define themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Interviews were

recorded and transcribed verbatim to become familiar with the data. The researcher immersed

themself in the data by reading and re-reading data to search for patterns of commonalities (Polit

& Beck, 2013) that existed across all interviews to present findings as a nuanced account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was iterative and began by aggregating textual data from the first interview into codes, and those interim findings informed future questions and elicitation with students. After each interview, analytic memos captured thoughts about the interview and any other observations. The analytic memos parsed out any potential codes and emerging themes related to the research question and highlighted any arising questions that might be pertinent to the interview as well as future interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Transcripts and notes were entered into the MAXQDA data management program. MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2019) was used to manage the data coding process and identify themes in the analysis. The study findings describe the essence of participant experiences across all participants based on an ongoing and reflexive analysis throughout the interviews.

After producing codes, a review of the codes took place by reading back through the gathered data in MAXQDA. Themes developed after ensuring a fit of the themes related to the codes found across data. The ongoing analysis continued as the overall story unfolded and generated more explicit definitions and representative names for each theme. Finally, compelling, and representative examples related to the research question and literature were chosen for themes.

Analysis of the data integrated figured worlds as a vital lens that emphasized social relationships as a key foundation in how students made their postsecondary decisions. People form their identities by participating in their figured worlds, often reshaping, and reframing how they understand themselves or their roles as individuals or in a group (Urrieta, 2007; Rubin, 2007). Using figured worlds allowed the researcher to explore better how social relationships

might develop ACROSS social environments and how both outside and inside of school

environments play a vital role in how students come to make their postsecondary decision.

Table 2

Interviews conducted with each Participant

Participant	# Of Interviews
1	3
2	2
3	3
4	1
5	3
6	3
7	3
8	1
9	1
10	1

Note. There was a total of 21 interviews

Findings

Leveraging Peers for Knowledge

Students continuously mentioned how much they valued having peer circles that were

able to give them important information regarding steps in their postsecondary decisions. The

common thread in all student interviews was how students viewed their peers as reliable and

informative resources in the college application process. Most students relied on their peers for

reminders and updates on important deadlines and crucial components of the application process.

From belonging to a peer group, information that might have otherwise been lost was

disseminated, such as deadlines, scholarship information, and application process details.

Because students had a peer group they entrusted and depended on; they could get impromptu

reminders of important deadlines and meet them, which was significant in their application

process. Several students spoke about how engaging in social circles with peers at school who

were also planning their postsecondary path was a very beneficial and informative way to gain

information on the postsecondary process. Through various interactions with peers, students stated they were more aware of deadlines, scholarship opportunities, and assistance in the application process.

> [peers]Definitely, really supportive, cause most of my friends are way more intelligent than I am, and then they pick up on some of the things that I miss, and they are, Oh, JF, have you done this or that? And I was, what? And so I get to pick up things. And then, some of the stuff is like really, really important. I ended up doing it, so...

Leveraging Relationships for Self-Affirmation and Agency

Peer Relationships

Students repeatedly stated how having peers support them was important to their decision to attend college. Several students reflected on how their relationships with peers were a catalyst for self-affirming during this phase in their life. Repeatedly, students mentioned how they would seek out their peer groups, and their friends would be the ones to tell them that they "believe in them," and they "push me" and tell them, "you can do this."

When discussing peers' role in the PSDM process, students appreciated the accountability that came with these relationships by saying things such as "go for it" and "push harder. "Peers were able to serve as a motivation mechanism they would seek out in a time of need. The insight gained from peer relationships in the PSDM process was that when students work together, there is a benefit in a "give and take in relationships" in that it "helps all of us become better."

Teacher Relationships

Similar to what students gained with their peer relationships, they also gained with having a relationship with their teachers. When talking about the role their teachers played in their postsecondary planning, students repeatedly recounted how they had at least one teacher

they felt supported them as a student in the classroom and an individual outside the classroom. Often, students sometimes refer to their teachers as mentors or friends. During personal encounters with teachers, students saw this connection as "super helpful" and a way to gain different "life lessons." One student said her teacher was "always pushing you because wanted you to do your best." Students often referred to the role their teachers played in their own experience but also the value they brought to their community. For example, one student explained:

> So at the beginning of this school year, we lost seven teachers, and those seven teachers were the best teachers that Ithaca has ever had. And part of the reason that they left was because of the pay cut because of the power plants shutting down. And I think also the mentality here is just so... Not all teachers but a lot of teachers and administration don't enforce the rules and the expectations that they want from their students as much as we need it. And it's just little stuff as much as smoking a joint in the bathroom, smoking weed in the bathroom, anything like that, you'll get suspended for three days and then you come back and do it again. And I think that that mentality has spread out to everyone. Even in classes, whether, and I mean I've caught myself doing it sometimes. Getting so off task so easily because I don't have that mentor to kind of push me and, but I've gotten to the place where I'm like, "That's not okay." And now I have to push myself, and that's just part of it, so.

The relationships students had with teachers allowed for a unique sense of security/safety to be themselves and to seek out advice when they needed it. With teachers, having someone to confide in was essential, but also, the safe space they could provide with their classroom space served an essential purpose. For one student, the importance of a teacher giving space to do his

art while also being a person he could "laugh with" served as a great support. Because of their relationship with teachers, they felt comfortable seeking their classroom space to engage with something that gave them joy and helped them get through difficult times. Relationships with teachers also allowed students a safe space for guidance, advice, and life lessons. For one student, she identified her teacher, Mr. Blue as the person she goes to for support:

> If I need help with school, there's this one teacher Mr. Blue, and it's school but also personal things. He just lets me saying anything I need to say. He gives me advice on what I need to do, and so it's just super helpful cause he's known me since ninth grade."

Another student mentioned the value of having a teacher to support them and how their classroom environment served as a desired space:

> Probably Ms. Orange, she was my sophomore English teacher. She just made like her room was like super like chill and laid back. She had like cartoons and memes all over her walls and she was always just like-Yeah. She's a super fun teacher. She, she's just like, she would be like, if you need me for anything, I'm here. Like she was always that one teacher. I think I felt comfortable going to if I had a problem.

Teachers had a strong influence on how students not only performed academically but how they envisioned themselves in the future and their overall satisfaction with their schools:

> Well, right now, it's not a bad school. You learn a lot, unlike some of the other schools around here, but they have to make a lot of cuts because of financial things. So, it mean losing some really good teachers and things that actually help the students learn. So it's not a bad school, but I don't know for the next years coming, how well it's going to go.

Leveraging Stories

While their reasons for holding onto their families lived experiences, one thing was clear, it mattered. Students shared a range of stories of family members' higher education or postsecondary journeys that stuck with students. Some of these stories served as a tool to motivate students to want to follow in those same footsteps, while other stories shared served to motivate students to learn from the lessons/mistakes made. When asked why they wanted to attend college, a student responds, "Well, I wanted to go to college to further my education, especially because neither of my parents graduated nor my siblings, so I'd be the first actually graduate, besides my grandparents."

While the information parents or siblings provided to students may not have been intentional advice, students often held it in high regard. For example, one student described her mother's advice to her by saying "she impacts me more than she thinks she does." Two of the students' relationships with their older siblings directly impacted their college decision. In these cases, both students also described their sisters as their "best friend."

Deciding on the proximity of where one might go to college or any postsecondary training was highly influenced by family. For one student, it was wanting to stay close to home so she could be close to family. For another, it was wanting to explore a new city and state but also going to a school where she had family and could take the time to reconnect with them.

While some students saw their family experience as something they wanted to share, others saw their family's experience as an example of what they did not want to do or how they wanted to do better than witnessed with their family. In some cases, the inspiration came from wanting to follow in their footsteps, and in other cases, it was to not follow in their footsteps.

One student expresses that her mom is the reason she wants to enter a field that helps other people. Having access to the lived experience of her mom, they expressed:

> She is a victim's advocate for the prosecutor's office of Ithaca County. So, she deals with victims and domestic violence and victims of abuse and stuff. So she just really, I don't know. I go in there, and I have an internship there with her so I'll go in there, and I can help with the kids. So, victims who go in there and want to talk to my mom, I can help with their kids. So, it's so much fun.

Another student bluntly said that going to an HBCU was because she wanted to have a similar experience as her mother, stating:

> yeah my mom went to an HBCU so like I felt like part of me was like, I really want to do that because she did. But also part of me was I felt like it would be better for me because I've been around predominantly like white areas a lot of the time. And so I've never really gotten that connection with a lot of black people. And then also I really want to be in a black sorority. Yeah. So that's just why I chose the HBCU. Like I obviously am not bashing it cause I've been applying to PWI. But like I just feel like if I got into like HBCU and got more money from them and I would definitely like want to go to an HBCU.

One student wanted to go to college and study agriculture to "repay" her grandfather for playing an essential role in becoming interested in FFA (Future Farmers of America). Because they wanted to change outcomes other than the ones they witnessed at home, they saw college as their way into a new sense of being and living.

> Because my parents didn't go [to college]. And so I'm like, I want to go because I don't want to just be living off the government or go to the military because I don't want to do that. And my dad, he works on a boat, which is dangerous, and I don't want to have to be in that situation of something dangerous happening.

Students also had a sense of obligation to their parents. Students wanted to appease their parents, even if it came from sacrificing their passion and interest. Students often wanted to make their parents happy/proud by either following in their footsteps or to a major they suggested. For one student, their mother wanted them to go into STEM, but they were not interested in STEM, instead, they wanted to go into business. Another student adopted their parent's mentality and viewed going to college as nonnegotiable as his parents were "huge" into education, and furthering education was always an expectation. For this student, their at home messaging was constant from parents regarding that they needed to attend college fand the necessity for higher education was important because "the things you want to do might not always be what you're meant to do."

Leveraging New Experiences

The opportunity to enter a new world figured into how students arrived at their postsecondary decision. Exposure to new experiences and opportunities shaped how students became future-oriented and inspired them to work toward their postsecondary journey. Introducing a new concept or a new way to approach a skill shifted how they thought about college. In some cases, they could see the benefit of having new experiences compared to other students who did not have the opportunity to participate. One student expressed that their participation in a research program only offered to a select group of students enabled her to "do a lot of research" and:

> that [research] changed the people that were in YBC as a person. As opposed to students
> that didn't do YBC. They're going to go to college and not really know how to do a whole
> lot of research because they didn't get the opportunity to actually be in a research
> program where they could have grad students help them understand how to do it.

New experiences can pertain to a life event that has impacted a worldly view. For example, a student's definition of success shifted in her senior year due to losing a loved one and having her parents go through a divorce. When asked what success means to her, she responded by saying:

> Being happy. I'm not so worried about money or as much as I was. Two years ago I would say, "I don't care what kind of job I have as long as I make good money." And as I get older and you lose people that mean a lot to you, it really narrows down on the truly happiness of life and what that means. So money really doesn't mean anything to me, as long as I'm making people happy doing what I do.

For one student, gaining a new experience fostered a sense of confidence in their social skills:

> I feel like YBC has given me a chance to open my shell because I don't really talk to people unless I'm forced to, unless you're my friend. But I have made a lot of really good friends in YBC because I've been doing projects with them all year, and I've got to broaden my horizons, in a sense, because I get to learn more about my community, which is a thing most people don't get to do even if they do try.

One student shared that their new experience was a way to make connections and have a sense of affirmation that she is capable of "doing" college and states, "I feel like the connections, because even though it was all online, we kind of depended on each other to get through it because we all knew this was new and then we knew it was kind of harder for us." One student spoke on their anticipated summer bridge program, by sharing, "since I did that summer program. I feel like if I didn't do the summer program I wouldn't know how to transition smoothly into college. This student felt that the program's access to and participation in coursework helped with her "work ethic, because it's all on your own and then the fact that they don't tell you what to do." You have to prepare the work on your own and then in class it's like

they just add onto what you're already supposed to know, whereas go over it. Another student states:

> And it's just like we're constantly being pushed, and that's exactly what we need. And I feel like, in a lot of other classes here, it's just so disappointing because we'll get off task on something and then that task is like, two weeks, we're two weeks late. And then there's nothing we can do about it. But I feel with YBC, it gives us that experience that we need, especially for college. I feel like it's just preparing us for those college classes.

Figuring Future Selves Through Acceptance and Rejection

Throughout discussions with the students, they were often conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, how they played a role in their educational experiences, and how it might affect their path into their postsecondary decision. TM feels that she has a positive outlook on things in her life and is "really good at seeing the good in everything, or more so for other people." According to TM, her awareness and acknowledgment of the importance of having a positive attitude towards people and situations are why she overcame the rejection she received from her college of choice:

> Well, with being denied to one of the colleges I really wanted to go to, I think just having that outlook of everything happens for a reason and there's good in everything and things happen just really helps me………I feel like what everyone goes through makes them who they are, but also how you carry yourself I feel like makes you who you are too. So I always feel like it's important to always take care of yourself and make sure that you're okay and to just always encourage other people as well. And I feel like that really shows the kind of person that you are. I feel like it's just who I am, but also I feel like I was

always raised to really be myself and really be that role model for other people. Because there's always someone looking up to you.

Discussion

Interaction within and across various social environments supported how students positioned themselves relative to the PSDM process. Students' interactions within and across various social environments highlighted various perspectives, experiences, and opportunities that influenced their decision and their decision-making process throughout their senior year. Students with support from peers, teachers, and family have a stronger hold/position on their postsecondary trajectory. However, what provided the most potent influence within and across their social settings stemmed from the knowledge and awareness they gained from peer relationships.

The current study sought to explore factors that shaped how high school seniors make their postsecondary decision. Data from this study shed light on relationships, which are often undervalued and underappreciated when supporting students' academic success and future aspirations. The mutually beneficial interactions posited in relationships provide optimal conditions for individual development (Miller & Stiver, 1997). In recent decades, relationships have been viewed as having important implications within various educational settings (Raider-Roth, 2005). Several key relationships from the various social contexts of students appeared to inform the postsecondary decisions of student participants. The collaborative relationships (peers, teachers, family) within their intersecting worlds fostered growth, agency, and knowledge into how students figured themselves into their postsecondary worlds.

The dependability and accountability that teachers served to students provided a level of confidence in the students regarding academic achievement in school and envisioning college as

a possibility. The student-teacher relationship provided students with a person they could confide in, a safe space to embrace their capabilities, and having someone to "always rely on" spoke volumes to students. Students who had a relationship with a teacher at school could use safe spaces such as physical space (e.g., classrooms) and mental space (e.g., mentorship and guidance) for connection. The experiences of family members also influenced how students thought about their postsecondary decision. The lived experiences of parents and the generational passing of information became critical to students deciding what they wanted to do and how that might motivate them to do what they wanted to do.

The relationship this study highlighted the most was how students relied heavily on their peers for personal support in achieving their goals and receiving valuable information critical to their decision-making progress. Students' interactions and personal relationships with their peers were vital assets to the PSDM process. Interactions with peers were critical to the PSDM process regarding the logistics and self-affirming messages students often need as they embark on such a new, exciting, yet scary venture. The figure below highlights the invaluable support peers provide during the PSDM process by providing awareness of various opportunities (scholarship, summer programs) and insight on the logistics of processes such as college applications, motivating and encouraging students with words of affirmation, and serving as an accountability partner by providing deadline reminders and to one another.

Acts of positive encouragement and affirmations geared toward one another helped provide an element of confidence and self-esteem for students as they navigated their PSDM process. Many students from the study stated how important it was to get encouragement from their peers, which helped facilitate their educational aspirations and achievements.

Peers served as a crucial support role, a valuable resource for one another, and an accountability partner when making decisions and understanding processes related to postsecondary plans. Students explained that having peers who are going through a similar experience at the same time serves as a catalyst for the dissemination of critical information needed to make informed decisions. Peers were often able to relay effective and timely information related to postsecondary processes by providing logistical insights such as deadline reminders, scholarship opportunities, application requirements, and overall assistance with the college application process.

The importance of peer relationships allowed students to persist beyond the basic understanding of the postsecondary process. The heightened awareness of a homogenous group (students all pursuing similar paths) proved to be one of the most important resources available to students. Because of the relationships, students had with their peers; they had access to impromptu reminders of important deadlines and opportunities. Having a sense of belonging to peer groups and a group of friends who were also going through the same process allowed students to take advantage of the group's collective knowledge and use it to enhance their experience. The circle of knowledge created when students engaged with their peers was imperative to their knowledge-seeking.

Peer relationships not only served as a resource and support in the postsecondary process itself but also to motivate and encourage. A dedicated peer circle of individuals going through similar experiences provided a newfound sense of accountability and accomplishment that helped the students persevere through times of self-defeat.

Figure 1

Peer Influence on PSDM
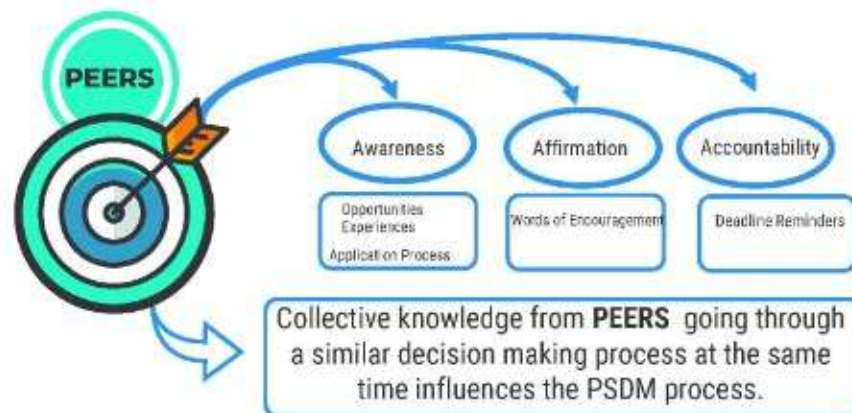
Note. Role peers played in the PSDM of study participants.

Conclusion/Implications

"The lenses we utilize to understand the social world, frame our research, and develop our praxis can either breathe life into the work or suffocate it (Iloh, 2019, p. 9)". By embracing an ecological perspective on PSDM, research can advance how relationships between individuals, experiences, and environments are included in the PSDM process and embedded within the school structure.

There are many things to consider when supporting students in their PSDM process. According to (Rubin, 2007), figured worlds should be implicit in the educational journey and can aid students in making an informed postsecondary decision since "students learn more than facts, concepts, and skills in school, that schooling is a constituent process through which students come to understand the world and define their place within it (p. 220)." A student's environment is multilayered, and institutions such as one's school are embedded within larger social and

economic structures (Golden & Earp, 2012). To support PSDM practices, educators can tap into students' backgrounds and communities as valuable academic resources.

Context plays a critical role in identity and educational research. In education, figured worlds is a valuable lens for identity and agency due to the research conducted in educational settings, how it supports the critical role of identity development for youth, and acknowledging the power held in the classroom environment and teaching practices. Williams, Davis & Black (2007) suggest the "integration of theoretical approaches is essential to our understanding of the sociocultural impact of outside communities on educational practices" (p. 5). Embracing students' backgrounds and narratives as resources support educational practices that embrace student identity development at the cornerstone for a transformative and culturally relevant educational experience.

Feeling valued in this context can promote self-efficacy and allow students to envision themselves as stakeholders in their educational pursuits. It is not enough to say that a student can be provided with access to resources to close the opportunity gap but their lived experiences and situating their opportunities based on their relevance to one's personal experiences.

Enhancing student development connects across family, school, and community settings. Social environments shape students' understanding of themselves and the interactions that take place within them. These two approaches highlight the importance of valuing the intersectionality and complexity that impacts one's identity and academic aspirations. Integrating these two approaches aligns with identity development because they recognize, and value interactions and relationships experienced across social, environmental, cultural, and political environments. A student's figured world exists in each layer of systems in the social-ecological model. Within each level, students create figured worlds by negotiating how power,

relationships, and opportunities for their narratives to be shared provide space to delve deeper into their identity development and where they see themselves at any moment in time. Findings from this study merit further exploration and shed light on the value and critical role peer relationships have on the PSDM process.

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Chapter 4

A Path to HEALing: Reflecting on the Doctoral Journey as a Mother and Doctoral

Candidate Amid Covid-19 and Civil Unrest

Abstract

This essay reflects my experiences as a doctoral candidate working toward completing my dissertation amid two crises—Covid-19 and racial unrest. This essay highlights how the work of Audre Lorde led me to progress toward completing my dissertation and helped me to reconnect to my purpose, reject internalized oppressions of myself, accept my journey as it was unfolding, and become reenergized through language and sharing my story. Throughout, I will share my discoveries of identity and self-care. In addition, I share how the work of Audre Lorde informed my work and motivated me to HEAL, which is my way of using themes from Lorde's work. It is easy to get caught up in the identity politics of academia and lose sight of what is important; therefore, this essay shares an experience of choosing to affirm the practice of 'voice,' in hopes of reimagining not only education for women of color, mothers, educators, scholars, and researchers but reimagine the value that lived experiences and intersectionality have overall on education and research. I conclude by sharing that finding balance and motivation to continue the educational journey to completion takes mindfulness and being attuned to self-reflective practices so there is space in the doctoral journey when students can "transform silence into language and action, a process of self-determination, self-definition and agency is activated (Nayak, 2020, p. 415)."

Keywords: pandemic, doctoral candidate, positionality, intersectionality, Audre Lorde, reflective essay

It only makes sense as an action researcher to close my doctoral journey with a reflective piece of writing that embraces my positionality as a multiracial woman, mother, educator, and researcher. My educational journey in my doctoral program has been challenging and full of support and discouragement, laughter and tears, love and heartbreak, accomplishments and disappointment. As I began to write this essay and reflect on my doctoral journey, I was reminded that my journey was not and is not mine alone. My successes and motivation are because of my village, for everyone who has held me down, for the future generations of change makers, which includes my two daughters, and the youth with whom I have worked and to whom I hope my research and advocacy make an impact.

As a doctoral candidate studying participatory action research (PAR) and embodying the philosophical and epistemological foundations tied to PAR, it seems appropriate and necessary to make intentional space in my dissertation journey to reflect. PAR is an approach to research grounded in reflection, data collection, and action toward social change (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006). Three principles often embraced in PAR studies are reflexivity, reflection, and reciprocity. At the core, PAR is a reflective process that seeks to explore and improve the surrounding social relationships by linking action to research by understanding the historical, cultural, and local context while "the reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by an understanding of historically, and local context and embedded in social relationships" (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p. 854). Therefore, this essay provides a glimpse into my experience as a doctoral candidate working on completing a dissertation while simultaneously trying to mother, research, and survive through two pandemics/crises. The purpose of this essay is to highlight the complexity in holding multiples identities while also navigating a terminal degree by translating my reflective and internal process onto paper and to share how the process

can be self-affirming. When we "transform silence into language and action, a process of self-determination, self-definition and agency is activated (Nayak, 2020, p. 415)."

The Doctoral Journey Begins

After working in higher education for ten years, I entered my doctoral program as a single mother of two daughters, nine years, and two years old. I entered a doctoral program to gain the knowledge and skills to inform educational policies and practices highlighting disenfranchised students' stories and assets that cannot be told simply by numbers and statistics. I did not make this decision lightly, and the stakes were high because I was ultimately not just altering my career trajectory but also interrupting my children's lives. However, I decided to invest in this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pursue my passion and dream– a doctoral degree in education. With the support and promise of my mom to move with me to help raise my two girls while I went back to school full time, we set off to begin this new, scary, and exciting journey together.

In 2015, I began my doctoral journey. In December 2017, my life changed forever, I found out my mom had stage four cancer, and it was only six months later that I found myself delivering the eulogy at her funeral. It took me over a year to bounce back, but I finally mustered up the energy and motivation to continue my journey through my doctoral education yet again. In early 2019 I successfully passed my qualifying exams and moved into doctoral candidacy, all but dissertation (ABD) stage, which was a huge accomplishment. In the fall of 2019, I defended my dissertation proposal. I began unfolding my data collection plan of conducting 30 interviews over one year with ten high school seniors at two different schools.

Disruption

In March 2020, the world shut down in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. However, as a person of color, trauma at another level was experienced with the uproar in civil unrest in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The jolt of distress and sadness I experienced over these two simultaneous events brought my doctoral journey into a state of "stillness." My progress halted, with only my first set of interviews conducted. I watched as the world was on fire with irrational acts such as hoarding toilet paper, the eerie feeling of seeing empty schools, streets, and stores, and internal feeling of guilt on how to show up for my community when also fearful of this "novel virus." Whether it was on the television, cell phone, or email, I was constantly reminded of how much the world was on fire. I received communications constantly throughout the year, such as the one below from my daughter's school nurse:

These are unprecedented times. None of us should apologize for feeling scared, confused, frustrated, or overwhelmed. More than ever, we must rely on each other for compassion, care, support, and understanding. The virus going around is novel, which means that no one has ever had it before and has no immunity. This will change, but this is why isolation is important for now. It is spread hand to face -- for example, if someone sneezes, you touch the droplet's surface and scratch your nose. I am writing to you because we want you safe and healthy, physically and mentally. There is a lot of anxiety and sadness right now. Seniors and other classmates are missing milestones in their lives. You cannot see all your friends like normal. Parents may be stressed and not themselves as well. But we will all get through this, and you will have had an experience that no one in a hundred years has had.

In one way or another, I was reminded of the times I was living and trying to proceed with my education. The unprecedented times and unanticipated transition in highly abnormal

circumstances in an already high-stakes, competitive, and isolated experience made me question my capability and the reality of finishing my dissertation. For a long time, I felt no confidence, made no progress, and stayed stagnant in any work toward my dissertation.

Attempting to Make it Make Sense

I kept telling myself that "it should not be this difficult" and "just finish, just write, just get it done," but these self-talk tactics were not working and did not motivate me to progress on my dissertation. I had lost confidence. I had lost hope. To make sense of my feelings and situation, I turned to the academic literature in search of clarity or evidence of others' experiences that would help me not to feel so alone or as if I was the only one who could not "make it" through my doctoral experience.

The Doctoral Experience

The doctoral experience and associated work are highly complex, especially with other life obligations. Isolation and frustration during the doctoral experience result in individuals questioning academic capabilities and validity (Austin, 2002; Gay, 2004; Golde, 1998). It is no secret that there are barriers to obtaining a Ph.D., including personal and environmental factors (Hwang et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 2017), and many factors can exacerbate stress and self-doubt in a Ph.D. program. There are also mental challenges due to high levels of stress (Barry et al., 2018) that come with the doctoral student experience; however, navigating through two concurring pandemics and the unanticipated, unprecedented transition in 2020 was nothing one could have prepared for.

Doctoral Experience and COVID

Many lives were disrupted and impacted drastically by living, working, and attending school during two pandemics; the doctoral experience did not go unscathed. Research on

doctoral experiences during COVID shows a decline in research productivity (Cui et al., 2021) and decreased hours working on research (Myers et al., 2020). Issues related to mental health, delays, and significant changes to doctoral students' trajectories were monumental and concerning (Zahneis & June 2020).

All But Dissertation

Those doctoral students in the implementing and ABD phase also understood as doctoral candidacy, were in a place of their education where they were directing their learning and managing setbacks and challenges as they arose (Donahue, 2021). Many doctoral candidates had to change their research designs due to COVID protocols and restrictions. Elevated stress levels among Ph.D. candidates stemmed from reduced research productivity and the worry of a delayed or postponed deadline (Camerlink et al., 2021). Increased stress levels due to the pandemic put Ph.D. candidates at higher risk of feeling burnt out, exhausted, and resentful toward the decision to pursue a doctoral degree (Tikkanen et al., 2021).

Holding Multiple Identities

There are increased inequalities as a researcher, a woman, and with caring responsibilities (Minello et al., 2020; Myers et al., 2020). The literature is clear-- doctoral students report feeling abandoned and overwhelmed by multiple roles of parent, teacher, administrator, teacher, and doctoral student (Bal et al., 2020; Donahue et al., 2021). Doctoral student participants in the Bal et al. (2020) study discussed the difficulties in managing children's online schedules, phone calls asking for help, and overall confusion in educational and home settings.

Before the stress and trauma associated with living in two pandemics, doctoral students of color often felt dehumanized and experienced self-doubt due to the innate culture of a doctoral program in how the socialization practices coupled with racialization come to the forefront

(Gildersleeve, 2010). Black women enter their doctoral programs carrying the burden of two historically marginalized groups in higher education. They are often challenged with tackling sexism and racism, which can hinder their success in the field by facing the obstacles of limited accessibility, invisibility, and marginality (Edwards, 2011). For women of color, issues of racism and sexism usually arise during entry into their doctoral program (Grant, 2012), and they constantly have to gain the wherewithal to navigate the educational process and the intersections of race, gender, and class. Gildersleeve (2010) summed up this burden and breaking point as "Am I going crazy." This extreme description of doctoral experiences for students of color existed. No wonder the pressure from the doctoral journey and the pandemics made me question my mental and emotional state of being. The combination of the two extremes shaped how I proceeded, or lack thereof, in the dissertation process, my mothering, and my everyday living.

My Process of HEALing

"healing occurs through testimony…to speak the truth of our reality (hooks, 1993, p. 26)"

After deep reflection and delving into the past four years stemming from the time COVID shut down, I became paralyzed with fear, angst, cumbersome fogginess, and no clarity until now, 2023. Reminiscing on each year and the significant milestones that led me into the following year, I began to reflect on the work of Audre Lorde (1934-1992), a Black, lesbian, poet, and socialist who situated her work in "everyday living and making decisions (Lorde, 1988, p. 60)." As an action researcher studying identity, I was intrigued by Lorde's work and drawn to her ideas centered around the intersectional social justice concerns of the world. Through the time spent sitting with her words, I became comfortable with the multifaceted identities that informed my decisions and the messiness of making such decisions. Below I lay out messages inspired by Lorde's writings that allowed me to truly HEAL from the lack of progress and feelings of failure,

and instead, I enabled myself to accept what has occurred and jump on a path to proceed in my doctoral journey.

H: Help Yourself Find Purpose Within Yourself and Through the Care and Support of Others.

> The women who sustain me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could have not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge – within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior (Lorde, 1977, p. 82).

My educational story is illuminated by the power of support and having someone to believe in you when you do not believe in yourself. Attaining a doctoral degree has only been possible because I have had someone at every venture in my experience support me and believe in me more than myself. Fortunately, in high school, my internship supervisor walked me to my counselor's office and sat with me while I applied for Bill Gates Millennium Scholarship. Receiving the Gates scholarship allowed me to seek a four-year higher education and receive both a bachelor's and master's degree. As an undergraduate student, my student organization advisor encouraged me to apply for graduate school and a scholarship opportunity that provided a paid graduate student position. At the same time, I completed my master's degree while also providing for my daughter with the support of my parents and a host of friends and family.

The village of advisors, mentors, peers, family, friends, and supervisors constantly encouraged me throughout my professional career and pushed me to further my education. Without people standing up for me, being there to lend a listening ear, providing a shoulder to

lean on, and providing solicited and unsolicited advice, I would not have sought a doctoral degree. As stated by Lorde, I have had "Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual" guide me in my path and support me through my journey. I have been guided and supported by my white mother and my Black father, my Black and white aunties, uncles and cousins, Black and white women and men, lesbian and gay educators, mentors, and supervisors.

E: Expose Internalized Oppressions

> our future survival is predicated upon her ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to be on the most superficial aspects of social change (Lorde, 1984, p. 122).

Comstock et al. (2008) believe that focusing on awareness and knowledge of different forms of oppression and oppressive systems directly impacts identity development (social, racial, and cultural). Therefore, those holding multiple oppressive identities experience "various forms of social injustice led to feelings of isolation, shame, and humiliation amongst persons from devalued groups (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280)." Continuously embedded in her work, Lorde speaks on the trauma caused by internalized experiences of oppression by women of color holding intersectional identities. Before entering my program, I knew the odds were stacked against me because of my interlocking oppressive identities. I entered my program as the only woman of color from a historically marginalized group within my cohort. As a mom, I knew that caring for children affects the attrition rates for graduate student mothers (Lynch, 2008) and that Black women experience marginalization and isolation in doctoral programs, especially when there are few women of color (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Dortch, 2016).

A: Accept Your Journey as it Unfolds for You, in Your time, and in Your Way Because Your Unique Experiences and Identities Guide You.

I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living (Lorde, 1984, p.120).

For some doctoral students, coping has meant they had to accept the current situation and put their personal lives first, which may have meant pausing on dissertation progress. While we shifted to survive, we were still unprepared for the transition and emotional and mental distress. Overnight I went from a full-time doctoral student, single mom conducting research for my dissertation to a full-time doctoral student, full-time stay-at-home single mom, full-time kindergarten teacher, and full-time supervisor of a 16-year-old, and a daughter who was scared and worried about widowed and aging father.

In December of 2020, I recall looking across a cold, bare hospital room to see my then 16-year-old daughter struggle to breathe due to a nasty repercussion of a COVID-19-induced asthma attack while still receiving daily updates on my CNN app about the civil unrest that continues to occur because of the extreme inequities toward people of color in the US. Being at the ER with her, my seven-year-old daughter, and myself as all COVID-positive and as a single mother, a full-time doctoral candidate trying to reinvent and recreate a dissertation, I felt lost, discouraged, hopeless, and defeated.

Accepting my journey as my own meant it looked different from many others in my program. Accepting my journey meant that I was not "less than" or "undeserving" but had different and unique challenges that hindered me from meeting a specific deadline. Because I proudly belonged to multiple oppressed identity groups (first-generation college student, single mother of two young children, and multiracial woman), I realized that my experience would not and should not look like anyone else's and that it was not an excuse for me not to finish; instead, it was an acceptance that "there is a unique experience at the intersection of individual's identities, and efforts to isolate the influence of any one social identity fails to capture how membership in multiple identity groups can affect how people are perceived, are treated, and experience college and university environments (Berger 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Museus, 2011 p.7)."

L: Language is Meaningful

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and also spread those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth (Lorde, 1977, p. 43).

I spent many hours grappling with if I should write a piece like this and whether it would be considered "academic" enough. I sat with Lorde's words, "share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us." The conundrum I am experiencing in the "academy" concerns my identity as a researcher/educator/activist/scholar. It has been difficult to feel empowered to stay true to my morals, values, and passions while also seeking to find a sense of belonging within the

elitism of higher education and its definitions of being "worthy," "scholarly," and "accepted." This piece of writing is my way of deciding to recommit, reconnect, and redefine myself as an academic writer.

As a multiracial individual, I have had to live with different identities and learn at a young age to code switch quickly. In this doctoral program, my identity issues have exacerbated my lack of confidence as a writer by the push and pull to embrace creativity and advocate for just issues and policies while at the same time working towards being a respected scholar and researcher by the checkmarks put into play by higher education (rigorous, accepted journal articles, completion of a dissertation, using vocabulary such as epistemology vs. ontology, and meeting the demands of article/research productivity). Using "voice" and "language," I hope to find the optimism in thinking it is possible to improve my craft while also finding some pleasure and evoking curiosity that is important to me.

There is much more to being an academic than just being able to "write intelligibly." Being a successful academic (by the academy standards) also means you have to be "creative enough to produce original research, persuasive enough to convey the significance of your findings to others, prolific enough to feed the tenure and promotion machine, confident enough to withstand the slings and arrows of peer review, strategic enough to pick your way safely through the treacherous terrain of academic politics, well organized enough to juggle multiple roles and commitments, and persistent enough to keep writing and publishing no matter what (Sword, 2017, p. 67)."

"Learning How to Stand Alone"

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definitions of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference — those of us

who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older — know that survival is

not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled,

and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in

order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take

our differences and make them strengths (Lorde, 1979, p. 112).

Reflecting on the disruptions, positionality and intersectionality, regarding my

understanding and belief of what it means to be an educational researcher benefited me as a

caring individual and researcher. In this essay, my intention was not simply to report my

reflections but to illustrate my process as a doctoral candidate and mother of color who overcame

fear and moved past self-doubt to a place of perseverance and HEALing to complete my

dissertation.

Disruption.

Working on a doctoral degree in the ABD stage while living through two global

pandemics, COVID-19 and Civil unrest, became a defining moment in history and my overall

Ph.D. journey. Because I respected research ethics, my values as a researcher, and

epistemological beliefs as an action researcher, the next few years became difficult when

deciding how to move forward with my research, care for my children, and show up in the world

aligned with my morals and values. In the moment of isolation, I had to deeply reflect on how

my personal, academic, and professional lives and identities impact me daily. The events of 2020

forced me to question my values and how they align with me as a future educational activist and

researcher. So I began to ask myself, "what are my values, and how can I become comfortable

aligning values and staying grounded in those through crisis, as a mom, educator, mentor, and

doctoral student?" It took a lot of self-reflection and reading to bring me to space to reject the

negative, accept what has occurred, and continue to succeed by moving forward in my studies.

"The more time we spend reflecting on our values and how they (should) inform our decisions,

the more conscious we will be about how our own academic identities align with our identities

(Carter & Legleitner, 2021, p. 9)."

Positionality and Intersectionality.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, my intentional self-reflective work was done to discover

my decision making guided by the importance of positionality and intersectionality in a research

experience. The intersection of my identities as a mother, researcher, educator, and person of

color constantly overlaps and is directly tied to my positionality and how I appear in the research

process. Highly situated in the work of an action researcher are positionality and

intersectionality. Positionality is necessary when researching because it allows essential

contextual information regarding a person/group to stay at the forefront so that research is

grounded in ethics. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) asserts that intersectionality is

when an individual possesses multiple identities that can simultaneously be interrelated and

contradictory. Intersectionality shapes the decision-making throughout the research process

because the researcher's positional and ethical decision-making, grounded in their positionality,

shapes the research process (Collins, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Herr & Anderson, 2005). Collins

(2015) refers to intersectionality as "critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity,

nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as

reciprocally constructing phenomena (p.1)." This definition embodies how I have viewed my

intersectionality and its place in my educational experiences. I believe my identity as a woman,

bi-racial, and my class status has defined many moments in my education and has been the

leading force behind various lack of opportunities and given opportunities. Intersectionality

means social identities come together and shape experiences (Shields, 2008). Using intersectional lenses and principles in research, educational researchers hope to explore nuance as intersecting identities shape experiences (Museus, 2011).

Closing Thoughts

Reading the works of Black Feminist author Audre Lorde gave me the tools and outlook to push through the final steps into dissertation completion. Writing this reflective essay has been significant in my discovery and finding a sense of becoming, especially as a doctoral student, in search of finding balance and the motivation to continue the educational journey to completion. Taking time to reflect, be mindful, and attune to self-care is valuable to both institutions and individuals in the field because change cannot be possible at an institutional level if its constituents (academic researchers) are not counterbalancing their work with self-care and mindfulness (Carter & Legleitner, 2021). While increasing numbers of women, specifically women of color, enter graduate programs, the intersection of their identities and how that shapes their experiences during an ABD phase has yet to be extensively explored. Few studies have explored the experience of women with intersecting identities and their persistence past the ABD phase in a doctoral program.

So I leave this essay challenging scholars to seek out more studies that embrace intersectionality as the methodology and look more deeply into the experiences of students of color in the ABD phase navigating intersecting identities. I hope this essay encourages other women, researchers, and mothers to continue writing their stories. Furthermore, in higher education, more awareness needs to move to the front regarding ways expression and writing continue to marginalize the most disenfranchised, and the burden is frequently at the student's expense. Becoming an academic and an experienced writer is a process that takes practice,

acceptance, and creativity. To some, this type of writing is not "academic" or "formal." To me,

writing this reflective essay was necessary and energizing as an educational researcher. My

message to anyone who wants to give up or is in the process of self-doubt in their doctoral

journey, I will leave you with the words of Lorde (2020), "I have come to believe over and over

again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk

of having it bruised or misunderstood (p.9)."

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Chapter 5 Conclusion

The concluding chapter of this dissertation will revisit each of the three papers from chapters two, three, and four. Next, the culminating findings and connections from the three papers will be discussed. In the conclusion, the strengths and limitations of the work, future directions, and final thoughts will be presented.

Revisiting Chapter 2:

For youth who participate in YPAR in a high school setting, the learning exudes mutuality and reciprocity through the co-learning experience. The high school experience is complex and unique. Therefore, classroom and teaching practices that call on students to activate prior learning experiences both in and outside the classroom, such as YPAR, encourage students to develop a connection to and broaden their understanding of self and community. Students' learning of novel ways to see themselves by creating new passions and meaningful relationships with teachers and peers through participation in a YPAR program was highlighted as an approach to learning that activates more than cognitive skill development. Social experiences through group work, peer relationships, exposure to educational opportunities, and community interactions were valuable to students' personal and academic development as a result of participating in Youth Built Change, a school embedded YPAR program.

Revisiting Chapter 3:

The findings presented in chapter three's paper demonstrated that peer relationships served as mutually beneficial interactions when figuring out postsecondary decisions and opportunities. The importance of peer relationships allowed students to persist beyond the basic understanding of the postsecondary process by increasing awareness of valuable insight from students all pursuing similar paths. These relationships proved to be among the most important

resources available to students in their postsecondary decision-making. The circle of knowledge created when students engaged with their peers was imperative to their knowledge-seeking. Peer relationships served as a resource and support in the postsecondary process itself and motivated students to persevere through times of self-defeat. The close tie to identity makes using figured worlds as a theoretical lens to approach postsecondary decision-making relevant and meaningful. Figured worlds proved helpful in understanding and conceptualizing postsecondary decision-making while adding a nuanced look at how student relationships and social contexts influence the decision-making process.

Revisiting Chapter 4:

Taking time to reflect, be mindful, and attune to self-care is valuable to the doctoral process. Intersectionality shapes decision-making throughout the research process because the researcher's positional and ethical decision-making is grounded in their positionality. Reflecting on the complexity of holding multiple identities while navigating the doctoral journey was rejuvenating and served as motivation to continue toward dissertation completion. Utilizing the words and works of artists/scholars inspired the process of translating the internal reflective process onto paper and how the process can be self-affirming.

Connections Across Chapters Two, Three, and Four

Tapping into students' backgrounds and communities can serve as valuable academic resources and support alternative learning spaces and practices that celebrate local knowledge as assets. The foci of relationships throughout the research were a way to highlight student assets instead of only barriers to academic success. Throughout all papers, the influence of some transformative relationship, whether with peers, teachers, or scholars, was imperative to a new sense of being and seeing. Relationships fostered within the school and between students and

their teachers and other school administrators play a valuable role in how students navigate their decision-making process and how they might envision their future. Educational opportunities that find connection and create space with others affirm "the idea that education is foundational both to sustaining a healthy democracy and to ensuring the ability of individuals to fulfill their natural personal and productive potentials (Garcia, 2016, p. 34)."

Contributions to the Field

Addressing Gaps

The work presented in the three papers relevant and much needed for both K-12 and higher education to create more effective pathways for students that amplify students' assets and values them as unique individuals. This dissertation addresses the gaps in the literature? by recognizing the centrality of relationships and both in and out-of-school influences on post-secondary decisions. Research conducted in educational contexts to empower social justice for individuals and communities can provide a holistic approach that confronts the usefulness of valuing relationships and connections to improve outcomes. Post-secondary decision-making is inseparable from the educational, relational, and environmental contexts in which students' lives are addressed.

The findings from papers two and three also provided a better understanding of how researchers and practitioners can use YPAR and a theory such as figured worlds to inform educational practices. Youth engaged research grounded in shared leadership and decision-making has the potential to make a profound impact on youth through the development of practical skills and community awareness. In addition, YPAR promotes social and emotional development, increases self-efficacy, enhances autonomy, provides opportunities to explore diverse perspectives, and builds community awareness (Ozer, 2015; Suleiman, 2006;

DeJonckheere et al., 2016). Understanding the role that relationships and contexts play on student decision-making for their post-secondary trajectories support identity practices in the high school setting. The work in this dissertation acknowledges the possible impact of supporting meaningful and relational educational practices that account for students' lived experiences and relationships and seeing their non-cognitive constructs as assets in assisting students in making their future decisions.

Future Directions

Findings from the qualitative studies in papers two and three support the need for P-20 institutions to approach their role in guiding students in their postsecondary pathways and advance the field in thinking more about identity approaches to educational practices. Conducting research that explores how educational policies and practices in the search for meaningful and authentic ways for students to interact, reflect and build social and community relationships.

Relational Practices with a Contextual Lens:

An in-depth understanding of the context in which students operationalize their post-secondary decisions may lead to innovative educational pipeline models and pedagogical approaches that advocate for student success based on student needs to guide students in considering the best post-secondary opportunity. Building their personal and professional identities should be grounded in a relational context, and relationships should be at the core of a personal and professional value system in P-20 spaces. Not only recognizing but implementing policies and practices that recognize the need for transformative learning experiences and opportunities that adhere to and have built-in relational contexts, identity practices, and community social awareness. Therefore, studying the complexity of the influence of community,

family, peers, and schools on students' post-secondary decisions could prove disruptive and a move toward social progress.

Additional research on the contextualized influences that high school students may experience informs their post-secondary trajectory because without understanding the context in which youth operationalize their high school experience, creating practices and policies that help students in their post-secondary decision-making. These policies will not only allow for varying perspectives to shape knowledge, but they will also provide an avenue to facilitate more progressive learning experiences that reflect our ever-changing global society. Relational-enhanced policies and practices' central educational and civic mission would be to foster critical and transformative leaders for a greater society. Critical transformative leaders transform others to become more conscious of human conditions and are oriented towards a social vision and empowering others (Gause, 2011).

Educational Spaces and Classroom Autonomy:

Ladson-Billings (2021) takes the stance that schools should debunk the notion that they need to "get back to normal" because the "normal" way of schools before was harmful, oppressive and institutions of systemic inequalities for Black children who are also socioeconomically disadvantaged. Getting back to normal is detrimental to an entire generation of young people. Instead of pouring money into the testing companies, states would take back their funding to provide it for active learning and supplemental educational resources for the classroom. Teachers should have more autonomy to use their creativity and innovative approaches to learning based on their understanding of the kids in their class and their specific needs. The benefits of this approach would be an increase in the quality of teachers wanting to

enter the profession, therefore, a more significant impact on student learning and institutional structures.

Allowing teachers to create and develop student awareness, agency, and other valuable noncognitive traits could be imperative to the future success of our youth. Therefore, "if we are serious about promoting a hard re-set we must re-deploy the elements of culturally relevant pedagogy—student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness—to better reflect students' lives and cultures, and we must re-think the purpose of education in a society that is starting from the problems of anti-Black racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, and economic inequality. The point of the hard re-set is to reconsider what kind of human beings/citizens we are seeking to produce (Ladson-Billings, 2020, p. 72)." There has not been a massive disruption to education, structure, or policies in many decades. How can change be achieved if we continue to do things the same way and provide the same groups with all the power and influence?

Strengths

No easy route will undo the imperfections of our educational system that has been in place for centuries, however, this dissertation provided a better understanding of the role of relationships in educational practices that could strengthen access and opportunities supported in educational practices. The chance to follow students in their senior year and through a pandemic was a unique, once-in-lifetime opportunity.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this dissertation is that COVID-19 disrupted data collection due to the closing of schools. This unforeseen event put a significant strain on all the participants and the researcher, in terms of completing the research as planned and in the

financial, physical, and mental health impacts on the youth and their families. Another limitation of the research of this dissertation was the absence of teachers and other school personnel in voices.

Final Thoughts

While there is no easy option to undo centuries of injustice and discrimination, educational research must continue to shed light on different perspectives that can vitalize P-20 education. Needed are opportunities to reimagine an educational system that accounts for students' experience, values an identity perspective to postsecondary attainment, and supports innovative educational practices that engage and develop youth beyond the classroom. Education should "facilitate student interaction with diversity and promote a broad-based set of complex thinking and socio-cognitive, and democratic skills (Hurtado, 2007, p. 192)."

Education should be not only a place of learning but also a place that diminishes oppression, combats social problems, and encourages self-determination (Moses, 2002). Finding meaningful relationships that develop over time with a strong ethic of care and value for one another better promotes social progress to advance youth and disenfranchised groups in this country. Learnings from this dissertation support the notion that awareness of complex social problems is addressed through critical pedagogy, dialogue, experiential learning, reflection, social critique, and a commitment to change (Hurtado, 2007) and is influential at the high school level and beyond.

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