Looking For A Solution: Social Justice Education and Its Impact on Adolescent Empowerment

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LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION:
SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION AND ITS IMPACT ON ADOLESCENT EMPOWERMENT

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in Curriculum Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

Schooling can often function as a mechanism of oppression specifically for low-income and minority youth. This study is an exploration of how a social justice education impacts adolescent empowerment. It is an attempt to gain a deeper knowledge into the ways participants were influenced by this form of schooling, a pedagogy derived in response to silenced youth to be agents of social change. In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between social justice education and empowerment, and to investigate their lived experiences during high school and the ways in which empowerment emerged in their lives, I conducted a narrative inquiry research study with five participants who were alumni of a social justice high school. In this study these participants shared their stories of lived experiences before, during and post high school. This study also focused on the impact of the surrounding school community, participants’ neighborhoods, and community organizations on their empowerment during the time participants attended high school.

This theoretical lens, social reconstructionism, enabled an examination of empowerment. The findings were analyzed for commonality and five themes emerged from the data including: personal strength, social connectedness, critical consciousness, action, and hope. The results of this study suggest a more cohesive and multidimensional definition of youth empowerment. Additionally, this study also shows how the unique social justice education experienced by the five participants and the lived experiences in their surrounding community together empowered them and enabled participants to transform their lives and re-envision their identities. The relationship between the individual, community, and the school was integral. In addition, this research makes it
clear that empowerment happens simultaneously and synergistically with individuals and in collective units such as communities (including school communities); empowerment in this sense is overlapping and synergistically linked, a contrast to US based empowerment literature which posits more linear, unidirectional models.
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In Lak’ech

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

-By Luis Valdez
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Do you see the consequence about the way we have chosen to think about success? Because we so profoundly personalize success, we miss opportunities to lift others onto the top rung. We make rules that frustrate achievement. We prematurely write off people as failures. We are too much in awe for those who succeed and far too dismissive of those who fail. And, most of all we have become far too passive. We overlook just how much of a role we all play in determining who makes it and who doesn’t. (Gladwell, 2008, p. 33)

Traditional schooling models have often functioned as mechanisms for oppression specifically for low-income and minority youth. Various researchers and theorist have established how traditional education systems have become central to the dynamics of oppression by instilling behaviors of silence and compliance (Delpit, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 2007), creating a sense of powerlessness (Banks & Banks, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Darder & Miron, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005), and through the underdevelopment of minority students (Banks & Banks, 2005; Anyon, 2006 Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2005. Social justice education is a relatively new form of education that was created in response to this phenomenon. There are many questions surrounding the long-term impact of this form of schooling, and I am very interested in understanding the long-term influence of this schooling pedagogy and its impact on the empowerment on low-income and minority youth.

Gladwell (2008) states in the opening quote above that we often determine and ignore the reasons why students succeed and fail. His words evoke a truth that exists in the field of education. Schools are institutions, and teachers are extensions of this institution that hold a great deal of power. Too often teachers do not critically think about the impact
they have made on students’ lives and students’ learning. As a social justice educator, my curiosity led me to the exploration of how social justice education shapes students’ lives. Through a better understanding of SJE, we can imagine how a SJE experience impacts oppressed youth in their lives. Much of the research in urban and public schooling has illustrated many unique issues that youth in poverty face within school including oppression, discrimination and injustice. SJE is an approach to confronting many of these issues by empowering students to be agents for social change in society and within their own lives. Social justice education is a heavily discussed topic within educational scholarship, but the question remains: Is SJE effectively empowering youth?

In Chapter 2, I first briefly look oppression and its effects on low-income youth as a starting point for understanding the two main concentrations of empowerment and SJE. Next, I review the contested literature on empowerment with an eye to its salience in overcoming oppression. Lastly, I present an overview of SJE as a strategy toward empowerment for youth who experience oppression. In Chapter 3, I present the methodological approach I used to conduct this research study.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the data derived from the narrative inquiry interviews. In chapter 4 I present stories of participants’ childhood experiences as well as my own reflection of these participants as my students in high school. Chapter 5 presents data focusing on participants’ school and community experiences during high school. This chapter is organized thematically based on the larger conceptual ideas that emerged from participant’s stories. Lastly, chapter 6 presents the stories of participants’ post high school experience.
Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the findings derived from the data. In this section I discuss five emerging themes that came out of students stories and lead to a more coherent and multidimensional definition of youth empowerment. I then conclude with Chapter 8, or the conclusions chapter that discusses the way this research informs the already existing scholarship on social justice education and empowerment, how this study speaks towards the theoretical framework of social reconstructionism, limitations that may exist in this study, implications for practice and implications for future research. I conclude this chapter with an epilogue reflecting on my personal experience as an educator at this social justice high school.

Oppression is found in everyday life of minority and low-income youth, embedded in the social norms, beliefs and behaviors that structure society. Oppression relates to the deep injustices experienced by some people throughout their everyday lives, perpetuated unknowingly by people who mean well, and “supported by the media and cultural stereotypes as well as by the structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms” (Deutsch, 2006, p. 10), including schools. Young (1990) has used the term “civilized oppression” to characterize the everyday processes of oppression in normal life. Civilized oppression;

is embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutions and rules, and the collective consequences of following those rules. It refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people (Young, 1990, p. 41.)

Just passing laws or changing leaders cannot eliminate oppression, as it is structured into our social fabric. “While specific privileged groups are the beneficiaries of the results of oppression of other groups, and thus have an interest in the continuation of the status quo, they do not typically understand themselves to be agents of oppression” (Deutsch, 2006, p. 10). 
Challenging or dismantling oppression requires learning about it, critically, and understanding how you are situated within it in order to see your own privilege relative to your students, re-examine your own assumptions and consequences of your actions in and out of school, and learn to position your work to enable students to become empowered. Oppression is the experience of repeated, widespread, systemic injustice. It need not be extreme nor involve the legal system (as in slavery, apartheid, or the lack of a right to vote) and it need not be violent (as in tyrannical societies).

Empowerment, as both a goal and a process, aims to dismantle social structures of oppression and enable the oppressed to more fully and more equitably participate in society. While the notion of empowerment is under-theorized, at its core, it is about enabling people to more freely take charge of their own lives individually and collectively. This is also the goal of SJE.

SJE is a form of education instilling the values of socioeconomic equality through a learning environment that uses a problem posing method of teaching and learning, the development of social critique or critical consciousness, and social change or the dismantling oppressive structures through action. Educators utilize social justice education to promote collective unity, as well as mitigate boundaries to the general curriculum. These boundaries include race, class, ability, language, appearance, sexuality, and gender.

We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid of the rulers or by making some new laws, because oppression is systematically reproduced in the major economic, political, social and cultural institutions. While specific privileged groups are
the beneficiaries of the oppression of other groups, and thus have an interest in the continuation of the status quo, they do not typically understand themselves to be “agents of oppression”.

By engaging in narrative inquiry with participants who experienced four years of SJE from a social justice high school in an urban city, I hope to provide a better understanding of how oppression affects youth and how SJE counters (or has the potential to counter) oppression through individual and collective empowerment. Furthermore I hope to share the stories and experiences of these participants with educators so they too can envision how empowerment and liberation can be fostered through education in their institutions, in their classrooms, and in their students’ lives.

**Research Problem, Purpose, and Research Questions**

In the existing research, the constructs of youth empowerment and social justice education are unclear and often undefined. As vague terms, used inconsistently, our ability to understand is compromised; we cannot adequately illustrate the impact of SJE and its impact on empowerment and liberation. This research will explore how SJE impacts adolescent empowerment in participants’ lives beyond high school through their personal narratives. This study also seeks to understand how these students negotiate oppressive societal conditions.

My study provides insight into the ways empowerment and liberation emerge in students’ lives, and the contextual influences. This clarity is absent in existing research, and it is necessary to provide context of this experience to authentically understand how social justice and empowerment can emerge within education. Through my research, I
will attempt to answer the following research questions.

1) How does a SJE empower students in their life beyond high school?
   a) How do students identify social justice and empowerment within their lives?
   b) What do students identify as outcomes or results of their high school SJE experiences?
   c) What trajectories have their lives post-high school taken, and how are these trajectories related to empowerment?

2) How do social justice students negotiate oppressive societal conditions?
   a) In what ways has individual and community empowerment emerged in these students’ lives?
   b) What kinds of barriers or facilitators condition the ways in which empowerment emerged?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Oppression is the social condition that social justice education or SJE seeks to challenge through supporting the empowerment of students. In this section I will first discuss oppression as the problem concerning youth living in poverty and the role of schooling in perpetuating or dismantling oppression. Next I will outline the current scholarship on empowerment and present this research as a possible solution for overcoming oppression, making note of the inconsistencies and shortcomings within this research. Finally, I will present and synthesize the scholarship on SJE, and present this section as a possible means for youth empowerment. Through this analysis of existing scholarship in these three areas, I will overview the literature in these three domains and expose the gaps in research. I argue that there is very little research showing the impact of SJE from youth voices after experiencing four years of this education, and also quantitative data alone cannot illustrate the true impact of SJE on youth. I also argue that SJE and empowerment are often unclear and undefined throughout the existing research.

Oppression

Oppression is multidimensional and is defined somewhat differently depending on which context this term is connected to. Oppression is a construct that is central to many disciplinary foundations including political theory, sociology, feminist theory, and educational theory to name a few contexts. German revolutionists and social theorists Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels analyze oppression perpetuated through social institution. These theorists argue that the organization of social life enables dominant groups within society to oppress others (Engels, 2001). They argue that social oppression exists within everyday workings of social life and therefore are not easily
recognized. They further blame the state for perpetuating oppression of one class by another through the power that privileged citizens hold within society (Engels, 2001). Antonio Gramsci (1971), the Italian Marxist, developed the concept of hegemony, or the way that the political and social domination of the bourgeois (elite) class in capitalist society is pervasively expressed not only in ideologies but also in all realms of culture and social organization (Apple, 2004, p. 19). Gramsci discusses this subtle, but powerful form of oppression as a means to dominate the consciousness of others by engaging in daily life without an understanding of the nature of injustice embedded within the status quo.

Franz Fanon (1967) explored oppression within the context of politics. Most of his political analysis focuses on the Algerian revolution and liberation. From a political perspective, Fanon defines oppression as the use of power to limit an individual’s freedoms and rights (Fanon, 1967). Similar to Marx and Engels, Fanon also discusses social and economic factors as the elements perpetuating inequality and subsequently the oppression and dominance of certain groups.

bell hooks (2000) describes feminism as the work to end oppression against women, specifically how systematic barriers work together to weaken women’s place in society. Women’s oppression relates to patriarchy and its manifesting in multiple issues such as reproduction, employment, motivation, domestic violence, political voice, body image, pornography and sexuality to clarify how all of these gender manifestations of oppression contribute to the larger societal system of oppression (patriarchy). Patricia Hill Collins (1991) similarly discusses internalized oppression, or the adopting of ideologies that normalize inequality and concepts of inferiority towards dominant groups.
Certain forms of feminist theory build upon Marx’s work on social oppression and further focus on the experience of women and oppression, particularly how women experience barriers and inequities that limit and confine them (Jaggar, 1989).

Prilleltensky (2003), a community psychology researcher, states that oppression, or “the state of asymmetrical power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, whereby the controlling group exercises its power by processes of political exclusion and violence and by psychological dynamics of depreciation,” has a destructive effect on youth (Prilleltensky, 2003, p. 195). To Prilleltensky, the result of institutional oppression causes psychological depreciation. Prilleltensky offers this definition of oppression from the world of community psychology and further states that such conditions of oppression have a profound impact on an individual’s psychological “well being”, for example feelings of powerlessness, feelings of inferiority, silence, drug addiction, mental health issues, poor self-esteem, violent behavior, etc. Van Deburg (2004) states that it is this lack of belief in self, the lack of belief in an alternate future and, further, an alternate identity that are perceptions which enable students to accept oppression (Van Deburg, 2004). A lack of belief is both a cause and a consequence created by oppressive social structures, including schools. Students learn to become complicit in their own oppression. Therefore the impact of societal oppression is internalized and results in an absence of a positive self-belief, an outlook of hopefulness, and the quality of resiliency in difficult circumstances (Prilleltensky, 2003).

Paulo Freire (1970) focused most of his research and theoretical discourse on oppression in the low-income communities of Brazil (Nolet, 2009). Freire argues that traditional education institutions act as systems of oppression by providing a poor
standard of education to low-income groups that hinder empowerment and mobility. He argued that public education, as social institution, functions as a way to reproduce low-income groups within Brazil. He believed in restructuring education as a means of empowering and motivating oppressed groups to actively resist injustice through conscientization and social action. Conscientization is the development of a “critical consciousness,” which encourages the idea that people should question societal norms and institutional practices to understand the true hegemonic structures that exist within society in order to challenge them (p. 56). This critical knowledge should then inform action.

**Power Is At the Core**

Each of these theories about oppression has similarities. Each perspective focuses on power and the ways in which power is used. The owners of this power are the dominant; conscientization could encourage an understanding of who the owners of this power are, and how they attain power. (See also the Empowerment section for a more detailed discussion of power.) Each theorist above discusses inequality and further recognizes the societal conditions encouraging the oppressed to accept a subordinate position and adopt negative images and beliefs attached to their identity by the dominant group. Oppression is structural and arises from inequitable power relations that are created and perpetuated by social structures. Schooling is central to this as schools are social institutions.
The Role of Education in the Discourse of Oppression

Education is central to the dynamics of oppression because schools, as social institutions, are often part of the mechanisms that reproduce oppression. Anyon (2005) states that public schooling in America makes available different types of educational experiences and knowledge to students in different social classes (Anyon, 2005). Today public schools continue to provide a compromised education that does not equip students from low-income communities with adequate opportunities for liberation or mobility from their current circumstance (Giroux, 2005). Although this view of education in urban public schools is a rather hopeless view, Freire’s work enables the world to see that schools are also the space where oppression can be challenged and societal change can begin (Freire, 1970).

Giroux (2005) argues that, “Knowledge is always linked to power; social practices are always embodiments of concrete relations between diverse human beings and traditions; and all interactions contain implicit visions about the role of citizens and the purpose of community” (Giroux, 2005, p. 150). It cannot be denied that poverty is one of the most impairing and oppressive forms of living. Hardina (2004) argues that many of the issues concerning poverty are related to the lack of participation and social bonds among residents of impoverished communities and resource deprivation. The author further states that this is central to the continuous oppression experienced in these communities. Wilson (1996) and Figueira-McDounough (1991) argue that urban poverty, gang affiliation, substance abuse, and mental illness are also highly related to the absence of social ties and informal networks in these neighborhoods. Oppression often creates conditions of silence and isolation that limit individuals from building social bonds.
(Prilletensky, 2003). Low-income youth have unique life experiences and face a plethora of challenges that are different from students who are economically stable. They therefore possess a unique set of educational needs for the process of empowerment to take place.

With a variety of definitions of oppression, a sociological definition of oppression is most useful to understand the unique experiences of youth in poverty. A sociological perspective of oppression focuses on the normal workings of everyday life and how they contribute to the silencing and oppression of certain groups (Apple, 2004). The impact of SJE on oppressed youth is an ambiguous area that needs to be further explored to envision the way empowerment emerges and liberation occurs in low-income youth.

**Multiple Educational Initiatives Addressing Oppression**

In the past few decades several approaches or initiatives intending to empower individuals to challenge oppression and to develop a positive perception of self have been promoted. They use a variety of labels, including anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000), critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003), emancipatory pedagogy (Gordon, 1985), liberatory education (Freire, 1970), pedagogy of resistance (Zinn, 2006), and multicultural SJE (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Although I will not discuss each one of these individually, I listed them to illustrate the many approaches to dismantling oppression through schooling that have been implemented within schools and in educational curriculum. While having subtle differences, these initiatives have a common purpose, which is to educate for the collective struggle to counter oppression, promote active social critique, and enable liberation and empowerment to occur. Each of these educational initiatives, including SJE, aims to dismantle oppression through the
 recognition of societal inequalities. In addition to this, a vital component of SJE is active participation as both a means and an outcome of the educational process for the purpose of liberation and empowerment.

I have chosen to focus on SJE in this study because this approach was created for the purpose of refocusing educational curriculum and instructional practice to counter oppression and liberate youth. Additionally, SJE recently has become a focus for many educational institutions and spaces (North, 2006). North argues that SJE has been a term that used widely, and a term that has come to be a buzz-word (phrase) that is often incorporated without any discussion of its meaning or implications (North, 2008, p. 1). The meaning of SJE has often become an empty, ambiguous, and somewhat meaningless term in some settings because of the lack of knowledge of the core principles that drive the teaching and learning in SJE. I chose to focus on SJE to clarify what this initiative and its intended goals are. SJE has been widely adopted as a means to address societal issues that affect low-income youth. Furthermore Greene (1998), Banks and Banks (2007, 2007), Darling-Hammond (2004), Sleeter and Grant (2007), Ayers and Ayers (2011), argue that SJE is the most effective way to educate, liberate and mobilize low-income communities. I chose to focus on SJE to build upon the work of Sleeter and Grant (2007) and their recommendation that SJE is the best approach in education to empower low-income youth. We now turn to empowerment: What is it? How does it work? How can empowerment function as means towards liberation?
Empowerment

Social Justice Education and Empowerment

The main intention of SJE is to enable youth to live better lives while contributing to the establishment of a better society. One way we might see this outcome emerge in youth is through the lens of empowerment. I argue that empowerment is both a central process and desired outcome within SJE, and also empowerment can counter oppression and enable youth to overcome the adversity presented by conditions of oppression.

Empowerment is a possible solution towards the problem of oppression. Empowerment is something individuals do as well as a goal or state of being. Freire (1970) argues that empowerment for under served communities is both vital and necessary for justice, especially for low-income communities to change their circumstance and overcome oppression.

There is very little research showing the way SJE impacts youth empowerment. The literature about empowerment that does exist spans a plethora of domains in which the construct of empowerment is described in many different ways. Empowerment is discussed as both a theoretical approach for fixing social problems and a desired outcome that can foster individual betterment. The various ways empowerment has been interpreted has proved that no real definition exists of what is meant by empowerment within this context. Due to the various meanings and ways of discussing empowerment, this term is unclear. This is a limitation in all of the studies. Often in educational scholarship the meaning of this term is assumed, and this has created confusion. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the many ways empowerment is
discussed and defined. In addition to this, I will discuss the many ways the emergence of empowerment has been recognized and interpreted in different contexts.

**Empowerment: Lots of Literature and No Clear Definition**

Empowerment is a construct that is multidimensional and discussed within many disciplines including education, community psychology, politics, economics, gender studies, and domestic and international human rights to name a few. This term is used often, yet there is no solid research on the concept (Czuba & Page, 1999), and there is very little research and discussion concerning the definition of empowerment in youth. The many layers of empowerment and the social contexts in which the empowering processes take place for young people have been ignored in educational research (Russell, 2005; Herdt, Russel, Sweat, & Marzulo, 2007). Bailey (1992) argues that there is no clear definition of empowerment because the context in which empowerment emerges defines both the process and outcome (Bailey, 1992).

Empowerment at its root is about power. Power is often perceived as the ability to have influence or control over others (Weber, 1946). Weber (1946) describes the construct of power as something that cannot exist in isolation, but rather amongst individuals and contextualized within relationships. There are holders of power and those who are powerless, and traditional social science emphasizes this dominant and subordinate power construct as influence and control, often treating power as a commodity that is unrelated to human actions (Lips, 1991). SJE is a critical perspective of both education and educational institutions which recognizes how power can expand, change, be shared, and used for positive ends. Understanding the impact of this power
on youth can provide insight into how oppressed groups can use, develop or acquire power to positively change their lives.

**Ways of Understanding Power**

Marx (2005) discusses the “variable sum” and “zero sum” models of power. The “zero sum” model is described as the access of power that serves the needs of the privileged at the expense of the working class (Marx, 2005). This view of power envisions any gain in power as resulting in a loss or reduction of power in others. The “variable sum” model of power stems from socialist perspectives of power as something that is shared. This take on power counters the “zero sum” perspective of power by arguing that power is and can be shared. This shared outlook on power has also been called “relational power” (Lappe & Dubois, 1994). Kreisberg (1992) defines this construct as “integrative power.” Rowlands (1997) discusses four ways in which power manifests. Rowlands (1997) summarizes these four categorizations of power as power over (the power to manipulate), power to (creating new possibilities), power with (increased power from collective action and agency), and power from within (increased power from individual action)” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 134). Most empirical models reject power over as a goal.

Czuba and Page (1999) discuss shared power as transformational. The power with definition provides a view of power that can change, and therefore enables individuals to have the capacity of being empowered (Rowlands, 1997; Kreisberg, 1992; Lappe & Dubois, 1994; Czuba & Page, 1999). Empowerment therefore can be defined as a process of social and individual change (Czuba & Page, 1999). Empowerment is about
being able to move from a place of powerlessness to a place of power (Zimmerman 1984, 2000).

**Empowerment as a Theoretical Approach to Fixing Problems**

Freire (1970), Solomon (1975, 1985), Berger and Newhaus (1977), and Rappaport (1984) are four authors who establish empowerment as a theoretical construct capable of fixing social problems. Freire’s empowerment theory acknowledges empowerment as a key mechanism for the active engagement of low-income students in their education, and more so their daily life. Solomon (1975, 1985) explores empowerment as a form of social work with oppressed African Americans. Berger and Newhaus (1977) explore empowerment as a way of improving social institutions, mainly welfare services, by mediating social institutions and the resources they provide to oppressed groups. Rappaport (1984) developed a theoretical view of empowerment and presents it as a view that includes social policy and a means to fixing social problems. I will show how the discussion on empowerment has evolved tremendously after the 1980’s. To discuss the evolution of the ways empowerment has developed, branched out, and been implemented, I feel the best way to organize this information is by discussing where empowerment takes place.

**Locus of Empowerment: Individual or Community**

In the international gender scholarship, it is clear that both individuals and collectivities (or communities) must be empowered: without one the other cannot be empowered (Rowlands, 1997; Stromquist, 1995; Monkman 1998 & 2011). Throughout the empowerment research these two domains are discussed, but one is usually privileged over the other and most likely influenced by the field from which it
originates. The body of literature discussing individual empowerment describes empowerment as a process and as an approach that begins inside and moves out, or occurring within the individual and enabling the individual to then further their empowered state through participation and involvement with the community. The community empowerment body of literature discusses empowerment as a process that occurs outside the individual and moves inward; it begins through community participation, which then allows for individual empowerment to occur within the individual. These two ways of viewing empowerment are at times juxtaposed, but a clear relationship between the individual and community forms of empowerment exists, but the way in which empowerment manifests or is evoked is conceived differently. The US-based research, unlike the international literature, continues to reify one domain over the other.

Individual Empowerment

Individual notions of empowerment (Kieffer, 1984) are also referred to as psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) and internal empowerment (Parsons, 1988). The central focus within these perspectives of empowerment surround processes within the individual that enable their outward power over their lives to emerge. Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988) discuss the process of empowerment as an individual’s change from a passive state to an active one (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Some psychological dimensions of empowerment are self-confidence, self-acceptance, political understanding (or civic and political knowledge), personal ability to take a significant role in decision-making, and control over resources and environments (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988).
Kieffer (1984) discusses empowerment as interactions with one’s environment and seen through the outcome of skills, insights, abilities, critical political consciousness, ability to participate with others, a capacity to cope with frustrations, and a struggle for influence over environments (Kieffer, 1984). Rap, Shera and Kishardt (1993) similarly define the construct of empowerment broadly as “confidence, control, decision authority, influence, autonomy, and self-trust” (Rap, Shera & Kishardt, 1993, p. 733). Some argue that one necessary component of individual empowerment is to become conscientized because conscientization enables groups in low-income communities to effectively negotiate through adversity and ultimately resist and overcome oppression (Freire, 1970; Zimmerman, 2000). These authors also argue that conscientization is necessary, but alone is not sufficient in enabling individuals to engage in action. Parsons (1991) discusses empowerment at the personal level as the ability to make decisions and have belief in one’s abilities to solve his/her own problems (Parsons, 1991).

Rotter (1966), Bandura (1989), Zimmerman (2000) and Freire (1970) are just a few theorists who have tried to use specific constructs to define what individual empowerment is and the manner in which it can emerge in individuals. Although Freire is not a psychological theorist like the others, I include Freire in this segment because his theory of empowerment was intended to inform and provide plausible solutions to fix social issues; an important component involves the individual. Three major constructs that explore psychological empowerment are the Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966), Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1989), and conscientization (Freire, 1970).
Locus of control (Rotter, 1966) relates to the internal realization of empowerment. This construct is based on one’s own belief in their capability to control events that may have an impact on their lives. A weak locus of control is one that negatively impacts one’s own advancement or attainment of the goals they set. This construct fails to acknowledge external factors that contribute to powerlessness and individuals who do not have control over their lives because it is based on the assumption that attainment of goals is the result of an internal desire and motivation (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Sue and Zane, 1980).

Self-efficacy refers to a person’s belief in their ability to achieve an outcome (Bandura, 1989). Bandura connects this to thinking patterns and to what extent these patterns foster or limit achieving goals. Self-efficacy takes into account individual judgment, the ability for one to endure stress and vulnerability, the degree of motivation one has within different tasks, and the activities in which one chooses to engage in their environments (Bandura, 1989; 1997).

Freire (1970), as a foundational theorist of empowerment theory within his well-known work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, describes the approach of conscientization—the fostering of critical consciousness—as a method which enables youth to critique the structural basis of inequity in their communities, use the strategy of “problem posing” to actively engage in understanding global and local issues, and organize for collective action to make change. This strategy requires students to critically question their world in order to uncover knowledge about inequities and their structural underpinnings. This stimulates critical consciousness where students analyze how power functions in society (especially in connection to social inequalities). Critical consciousness is about
developing deep and nuanced knowledge that is “critical,” about power and understanding the roots and social dynamics of oppression. Social change is the ultimate goal because this is where individuals engage in action necessary to dismantle oppressive structures. This process enables students to gain a greater understanding of the conditions that shape their lives; this understanding provides a focus for where social change efforts can be focused. This construct is based on the assumption that revealing the structural basis for the ills of society will motivate students to question, learn and engage in action for social change rather maintain a continued sense of hopelessness that is so common in low-income youth (Banks & Banks, 2007).

Some forms of psychological empowerment discussed focus on self-perception as a vital mechanism within empowerment process, which enables individuals to re-envision and redefine themselves (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Various ideas related to empowerment suggest that change is possible merely by changing one’s view of themselves and their life. Other forms of psychological empowerment focus on knowledge and self-awareness as vital to psychological empowerment (Freire, 1970). The common thread that each form of individual empowerment has is the belief that individuals can have control of their environment and their life. The need for powerless groups to be individually empowered is based on the assumption that many social problems exist because of larger structural inequalities, and the silent acceptance of these conditions enable oppression to remain constant. Zimmerman (2000) argues that the psychological dimension of empowerment enables individuals to confront inequality within their life experiences and enter the realm of community empowerment.
Community Empowerment

Zimmerman (2000) indicates that community empowerment initiatives were initially introduced during the 1980’s as an alternative to prevention-based approaches (for example drug prevention, crime prevention, abuse prevention) within schools (Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1981). Community empowerment is often linked to political empowerment (Huebner, 1998; Prilletensky, 2003) and organizational empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000). Community empowerment is discussed within a number of disciplines including community psychology (Wandersman & Florin, 1988, Zimmerman, 2000; Rappaport, 1981), community work (Rubin & Rubin, 1992), urban studies and planning (Friedman, 1992), social action (Boyte, 1984), and social policy (Page, Adams & Sheraddan, 1997). Within these bodies of knowledge there are various definitions for community empowerment.

Research concerning empowerment has mostly focused on psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992) and has rarely addressed social action, including social and political participation in community organizations and activities. Community empowerment is based on the idea of fostering empowerment through community participation and involvement, therefore using community as a vehicle for empowerment rather than empowering the community (Russel, Muraco, Subramaniam & Laub, 2009). The term “community” in this body of knowledge is defined in two ways. The first, as local neighborhoods within which individuals reside, and the other as communities created based on a common set of interests, beliefs or characteristics. Some examples of such groups are ethnic minorities, women, and the disabled. Rose (1972; 2000), in his discussions in community
psychology, argues that various forms of citizen participation are strongly connected to the emergence of empowerment for oppressed groups. He argues that community engagement fosters skills of collaboration and group decision-making that enable oppressed individuals to think beyond individual self-interest. By shifting to a collective interest, individuals focus more on the betterment of all (Rose, 2000).

Many argue that collective participation and support among individuals sharing the same state of powerlessness is one way of accessing a shared power. This collective effort, often supported by others, can be characterized as power with, suggesting horizontal power relations (Rowlands, 1997; Wilson, 1996; Stromquist, 1995; Rose & Black, 1985; Berger & Newhaus, 1977). Wilson (1996) in his discussions of community planning and economic development argues that an emphasis on the creation of social networks and strengthening social bonds between local residents and institutions that serve impoverished communities is the best way to mobilize underserved communities. Wilson (1996) states that informal help is an effective mechanism for coping with economic deprivation. The author defines informal help as collective action that constituents of communities actively engage in for the purpose of bettering their community, such as volunteerism, community action, as well as any action that contributes to the building of social bonds. Informal support is an integral part of empowerment-oriented community practice.

Rose and Black (1985), whose research lies in the areas of community psychology and counseling, argue that engagement with problem solving activities and confrontation of oppressive institutions helps members of oppressed groups overcome

\footnote{Freire argues for problem-posing rather than problem solving as problem solving is not always critical.}
internalized negative self-perceptions and shows how integral relationships within the collective dynamic contribute to overcoming these negative views of the self (Rose & Black, 1985). Rappaport (1981) argues that the involvement of low-income communities in decision making helps residents develop a sense of community while supplying them with opportunity to acquire skills needed to confront local problems. Gutierrez (1990) states that skill attainment, resource acquisition, participation in organizations, decision making, creation of self-help groups, and political activism provide vehicles that will enhance an individual’s sense of personal empowerment or mastery of his or her environment (Gutierrez, 1990). Consequently, Delgado (1998) also indicates that such opportunities are scarce because decision-making opportunities are usually privy to those individuals who are affiliated with community, organization, institutions, boards and/or administration. Individuals in these roles are not usually the most powerless or the individuals who need exposure to this (Delgado, 1998).

Friedman (1987) discusses community empowerment as detaching from the larger society by fostering a local self-reliance through systematic organizing for protection, education, and vital resources. Friedman (1987) states that a stronger and more connected local focus can enable individuals to have voice and make noticeable impacts on the betterment of communities, whereas on the societal level fewer opportunities exist (Friedman, 1987). Berger and Newhaus (1977) define community empowerment differently and advocate for the community to offer oppressed groups resources and services to sustain a quality of life (Berger & Newhaus, 1977). This suggests a hierarchy and dependency that misses the point of empowerment all together. In Boyte’s (1984) discussion on social action, he argues that the organized community must respond to
issues that directly impact them through a network of community organizations, but not be dependent upon community leaders to provide resources alone (Boyte, 1984).

Friedman (1987) discusses how important it is to not provoke a sense of dependency, but rather encourage active participation in political and community life; he states that is a necessary component for the empowerment of individuals who are oppressed. When individuals join together for a common purpose, together they share an experience, provide support, and remove themselves from an isolated point of view that often reinforces hopelessness (Friedman, 1987). Wandersman and Florin (1988) argue that participation in social action encourages individual empowerment processes to occur in the form of perceived self-efficacy, expectations for successful group solutions, and increased civic commitments by providing opportunities for individuals to have a valued place and voice within a group setting (Wandersman & Florin, 1988).

Although community engagement is argued to be an effective way to foster individual empowerment, many state that community empowerment is not always possible. Davis (1991) argues that individualism and divisiveness within communities both affect the development of collective solidarity within communities struggling with oppression. Additionally, empowerment is difficult to attain for those neighborhoods or communities which lack a critical consciousness about the issues impacting their quality of life, or lack of resources and skills to oppose dangerous conditions (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994). This is a shortcoming of community empowerment projects themselves.

I must point out that empowerment at both individual and community levels are necessary for either to become empowered. An individual within a disempowered
community will have a hard time becoming empowered. A community is made up of individuals, and if they, individually, are not empowered or working towards this goal, there is no way that community empowerment is possible. The relationship of individual empowerment and community empowerment is synergistically linked and extremely pertinent within the discussion of empowerment. Furthermore, “community” within this body of empowerment research is discussed as both a space within which individuals collectively develop skills, practice, etc. to become empowered. “Community” is also discussed as something, in its own right, that should become empowered. Much of this literature focuses on adults yet we see some important distinctions related to youth; therefore empowerment in youth must be studied separately. Yates and Youniss (1998) describe adolescence as the time in which major character and ethical developmental changes begin in most youth. This is also the beginning for many to become involved more with peers and in the community for empowerment and individual development if given the support and opportunities to do so (Yates & Youniss, 1998).

**Youth Empowerment Programs**

First and foremost youth empowerment is an area of scholarship that is underdeveloped. The development of youth empowerment and the social contexts in which empowering processes take place for young people have been ignored in educational research (Russell, 2005; Herdt et al., 2007). It is clear that societal oppression affects the mental well-being of minority youth. Therefore, empowerment as a means to counter oppression and powerlessness specifically with youth is a critical area in which research is needed. After an extensive search for research regarding this subject, I found only a handful of resources discussing research on youth empowerment. One thing in
common with all of the literature concerning youth empowerment: they all view empowerment as both a process and an outcome for participants.

In the existing literature, different models, theories and frameworks concerning youth empowerment emerged. Each of these articles discusses empowerment and the ways in which youth can engage in empowerment processes for different outcomes. Some authors discuss the goal of youth empowerment as developing self, collective, and political efficacy (Kim, Crutchfield, Williams & Hepler, 1998; Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linny, 1998) while others define the goal as finding voice and building competency, skills, and the ability to enhance individual life opportunities (Walerstine, Sanchez-Merki & Velarde, 2005).

One empowerment model created by Chinman and Linny (1998) is the Adolescent Empowerment Cycle (AEC). The cycle refers to how adolescents help empower themselves by engaging in mentorship programs that seek to empower younger students. This program was created within a school context to provide leadership opportunities to youth, primarily low-income and minority youth. This model seeks to engage youth in meaningful activities to contribute to their overall development in high school while providing a sense of purpose or direction for adolescents (Chinman & Linny, 1998). The authors discuss this peer-mentoring programs as an effective program for youth empowerment because it provides youth who are the mentors with a purpose, positive acknowledgment from adults, and leadership opportunities to help shape the journey of younger students. The primary issue with the AEC model is that it does not address oppression directly and ignores ideas of power and oppression. With service projects as the focus of this model, the knowledge necessary to understand how these
projects impact an individual’s life, community, or the world is forgotten. Additionally, youth responsibilities and roles are not clearly discussed or defined. It can be implied that empowerment is defined in this model as acquiring a sense of purpose and direction for youth, providing opportunities for leadership, and acquiring a more positive view of self.

Kim et al. (1998) developed the Youth Development and Empowerment (YD&E) model, and this model was established in the context of substance abuse prevention programs targeting adolescents. Youth participated in this program to provide knowledge and awareness to their community regarding the negative impact of substance abuse (Kim et al., 1998). This model is based on the participation of youth in community service projects in order to foster leadership, autonomy and empowerment among the participants (Kim et al., 1998). Through youth participation in educating their community about the harm of drugs, the authors argue that empowerment emerged in many ways including positive self-esteem, social bonding, and preparation of youth to participate in activism related to social issues (Kim et al., 1998). This model requires strong social support from caring and supportive adults who place high expectations on youth participants and reinforce youth achievements resulting in their involvement and participation within the program. In this model students were trained to lead and teach, but did not heavily engage in discussion and inquiry regarding the way in which substance abuse is linked to low-income communities, powerlessness, and oppression. This model was described as a training program for youth to adequately convey and engage their community in drug prevention. Drug abuse in this study is understood as an individual and societal issue resulting from poor choice and the authors define empowerment as the acquisition of knowledge for the purpose of leadership and teaching (Kim et al., 1998).
Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward and Green (2003) created the Transaction Partnering (TP) model based on a qualitative study looking at inner-city community-health promotion programs. These social programs are aimed at getting youth engaged in research projects concerning how to improve their quality of life, and then presenting this research to educate their community about their findings and suggestions. The TP model is based on the assumption that exposing youth to opportunities and challenges in a safe supportive environment and then reflecting on this experience can result in learning and empowerment (Cargo et al., 2003, p. S70). This study examined the process of adult practitioners supporting youth participants in assessing participants own quality of life issues, developing action plans for betterment, and implementing solutions (p. S73). The participant-defined agenda enables participants to identify problems that they found important to them and furthermore engage in inquiry to provide their own opinions and suggestions for how to change the issues affecting their quality of life. One of the vital components of these programs is providing a welcoming and safe atmosphere where youth are supported in both failure and success (Cargo et al., 2003). Fostering ideas of resiliency are central to this model. Additionally, in this model adults provide guidance, support and mentorship. The other vital component of this model is the skills and knowledge students must gain so youth can participate effectively in community change (p. 75). These authors define empowerment as an awareness of issues limiting one’s life and engaging in inquiry and activism to create change.

Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki, and Velarde (2005) integrate Freirian pedagogy within the Empowerment Education (EE) model. This approach to youth empowerment is based on the development of skills and knowledge that support youth efforts toward
social action and social change by linking individual empowerment and community organizing in their social context for the purpose of making healthier choices within their lives (p. 220). Through this process youth increase self, collective, and political efficacy while developing self-protective and socially responsible behaviors. Furthermore this model develops empathy for issues that affect communities as a whole, foster active participation, and encourage critical analysis of social structures (p. 221). The aim of youth participation in this model is praxis or “an ongoing interaction between critical reflection and the actions that people take to promote individual and community change” (Wallerstein et al., 2005, p. 221).

Jennings, Medina, Messias and McLoughlin (2006) discuss the Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) model in an effort to contribute to a critical social theory of empowerment in youth. The authors discuss six dimensions of empowerment that are seen as conditions that are critical for youth empowerment: welcoming youth centered environments, meaningful engagement and knowledge, leadership development, critical reflection on society and power relationships, active community participation, and changing socio-political processes (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 41). These six dimensions were derived from an analysis and critique of the different empowerment models (i.e., AEC, YD&E, TP and EE) discussed earlier. After analyzing the same four models of youth empowerment discussed above (Jennings et al., 2006), and analyzing Jennings et al.’s own participatory research data, the authors argue that the six dimensions they recognized are vital to foster empowerment processes in youth. Empowerment here is defined as knowledge and skill utilized for the purpose of fostering a positive change in individual lives and community.
Jennings et al. (2006) incorporate “critical elements” of all four empowerment models through CYE: welcoming youth centered environments, meaningful engagement and knowledge, leadership development, critical reflection on society and power relationships, active community participation, and changing socio-political processes (Jennings et al., 2006, p. 41). The authors argue that the construct of empowerment in youth is not clear, nor are there many studies that attempt to understand how underserved youth are impacted by programs that attempt to foster empowerment processes during adolescents (Jennings et al., 2006). The aim of CYE as a model is to support and foster youth involvement to community development and sociopolitical change (Jennings et al., 2006). Empowerment is defined here on a collective level as having social responsibility towards the community and participating on a collective level to foster change.

Pearrow (2008) discusses youth empowerment in the context of the Teen Empowerment (TE) Program. This program was implemented amongst high-risk youth in urban communities in an effort to empower and advocate for disenfranchised communities (p. 509). This article focused on the analysis of this program and its effectiveness in the empowerment of youth. This program engaged youth in the understanding of empowerment as possessing social responsibility and participating on a community level to create change. Pearrow (2008) uses Jennings et al.’s (2006) six critical dimensions for youth empowerment as a framework through which TE was analyzed. The authors argue that TE is effective in uniting youth to critically examine their world around issues of poverty, schooling, racism, and all other issues directly effecting them, and at the same time collectively engaging in work to create social change. TE programs target urban neighborhoods that demonstrate disproportionate rates
of youth violence. Although the articles did not discuss any specific programs, they did discuss the way Jennings et al.’s (2006) six dimensions of youth empowerment guided the implementation of this program. The long term impact of the TE program upon participants is unknown beyond the reflections students gave after each session, which were not discussed in depth, yet the authors argue that TE’s collective empowerment approach is effective because it encourages students to act beyond their own self-interest (Pearrow, 2008, p. 521). Pearrow (2008) defines empowerment similar to Jennings et al. (2006). Empowerment is defined as having social responsibility and the active involvement of youth to foster change.

Overall, the construct of empowerment is discussed as both a process and an outcome through which individuals can gain more control over their environment and their lives (Zimmerman, 2000). In the individual empowerment section, psychological elements beginning within the individual are recognized as influential in oppressed groups’ involvement in community. Within the community empowerment body of literature discussions concerning active participation are central to how empowerment begins on an individual level. I suggest that we not position individual and community empowerment as linear processes and contest the conceptualizations that view empowerment as flowing in one direction towards the other. The relationship of both individual and community empowerment is dynamic and synergistic, and both are integral to overcoming oppression. Individual and community empowerment are overlapping, connected, and must be viewed in this way. The next section discusses the relationship of individual and community empowerment in practice, and further describes the relationship between the two.
Empowerment as a Means and Outcome in Practice

Youth empowerment relates to both individual and community empowerment, yet there is also literature discussing empowerment as a professional practice specifically for professionals like teachers, counselors, and case-workers. The literature discussing empowerment as professional practice focuses on professional roles, beliefs and methods used to foster empowerment in formal and non-formal educational settings including schools and community organizations.

Empowerment practice is based on the assumption that all individuals have the potential to gain skills, abilities, and therefore ultimately can be empowered (Freire, 1970). The primary contradiction that empowerment practice must deal with is that the person most lacking in power and who is most distressed has the greatest need for choice in his/her life (Rappaport, 1981). Meaning that individuals who have the least amount of choice and power need to make choices as these choices are opportunities for empowerment. By taking leadership roles, making choices on how to approach personal and collective issues and by working towards a solution that confronts problems, individuals can find liberation rather than silently accepting what is (Rappaport, 1981). In this body of literature empowerment represents an ideology of intervention and/or changing of the environment to provide different experiences, resources, and social and emotional support for those who are powerless (Payne, 1991). The problem is then focused on the individual’s life, something that cannot be altered. An unjust social structure and lack of resources can often be the cause of individual powerlessness, but empowerment practice literature argues that this can be countered through organizations and communities that offer solutions to these issues (Rappaport, 1987). The problem with
this outlook of empowerment is that it can be viewed as giving individuals things that may enhance their life. Furthermore, this view of empowerment is problematic because if the intervention and involvement takes a *power over* approach that is too controlling, empowerment will not take place and further oppressed. Participants are dependent on the entities that can help.

Literature on empowerment practice is full of recommendations to professionals about methods of intervention that encourage empowerment for oppressed groups (Rose & Black, 1985). This literature comes from counseling, community psychology and social policy. The foundational beliefs of empowerment as a practice can be summarized through five principles. First, empowerment must be a primary goal for all individuals including leaders and participants (Rose & Black, 1985). Second, providing opportunities where individuals can access help is a direct way to empower and to be empowered. Self-help groups are one form of this. Day-Vines (2005) suggests that individual counseling and small group counseling represent effective contexts for developing healthy social behavior among urban students, but the establishment of trust and personal respect are central to the success of the group (Day-Vines, 2005, p. 239). In response to offering resources or help, Rappaport (1994) discusses how empowerment practice can often foster dependency when resources are provided without meaningful, active engagement in decision making and accessing resources collectively, empowerment is challenged. Therefore Rappaport argues that participants must provide help for each other as well as accept help, and through this dependency can be prevented (Rappaport, 1984). Third, engaging in local action is vital for changing the conditions of oppression that disempower individuals. It is important to understand macro-level issues, but these issues
must be acted upon on a micro-level. For example, participating in local protests to oppose the demolishing of low-income housing is one local way of countering the macro issue of displacement and marginalizing low-income communities. Community involvement and democratic citizenship are ways in which local action can be possible (Friedman, 1992). Fourth, collective solidarity and collective action is a means through which change is made. Although individual empowerment is often seen as the reason for collective participation, a collective participatory component is vital. It is ineffective to foster individual empowerment initiatives that do not also empower collectivities. More than one voice, a critical mass, has the power to create significant change. Without collective action, no significant change can be fostered (Freire, 1970; Staples 1990; Giroux, 2005, Sleeter & Grant, 2007). This principle embeds the idea of shared power, or power with, in which the collective participation of many for a common goal or interest enables the powerless to attain power and foster social change. Fifth, empowerment is a multileveled construct including problem posing, conscientization, and ultimately collective social action for social change. Each level and form of empowerment is related to all other domains of its emergence (Rappaport, 1987).

The quality of social programs for empowering oppressed groups can have a significant impact on individuals’ lives. Furthermore social programs must be structured to foster dialogue in an open and safe space (Handler, 1990). Social programs must provide participants with roles where decisions can be made and individuals possess responsibilities (Rappaport, 1984).

Lastly, the professional’s role within social programs can often impact success or failure of a program (Rose & Black, 1985). If leadership is weak, unwelcoming, ignorant
of participant needs, and if the means of a program are clear but the goals are less coherent, the empowerment process can fail (Solomon, 1985). It is argued that leaders of these groups must inspire and motivate participants to engage in action to ultimately change their lives (Handler, 1990). Practitioners facilitating empowerment practice inspire by providing opportunities for meaningful involvement, responsibility, and decision-making. Practitioners must also support them through this difficult process. Such grass roots, bottom up processes allow oppressed individuals to form a relationship of trust and feelings of safety that counter feelings of fear, silence, and hopelessness (Hipolito, Delgado & Lee, 2007). In the literature about empowerment a number of professional roles are emphasized as important for the practice of empowerment including resource consultants, teachers, trainers, service planners, project coordinators advocates, and counselors (Zimmerman, 2000; Sadan, 1999).

In the context of schooling, Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) describe a critical need for comprehensive school guidance programs that call on student counselors to engage in effective practices with oppressed students through the use of empowerment theory (Freire, 1970) to guide their practice while framing the overall guidance program. The authors argue that there is a need to better serve marginalized students (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Bemak and Chung (2005) and Bryan (2005) argue that this application of empowerment theory contributes to a view of counselors as advocates, social justice leaders, and experts who are well-equipped to address the social effects of oppression on and with youth (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bryan, 2005).

Throughout this literature we see a variety of ways in which empowerment is discussed, some of which, I argue, rely on a fairly non-critical sense of empowerment
where power is not altered. Where programs, practitioners, adults or experts are positioned as the key actors, dependency—now empowerment—is likely. Empowerment requires altering power relations between those who are oppressed or marginalized and those who have knowledge or resources to offer (Freire, 1970; Rocha, 1997). Authorities must become supports, not leaders, in the process.

**Strategies for Empowerment**

Empowerment practices emphasize many strategies. Participation is by far the most common strategy discussed throughout this literature. Collective participation for social action reinforces a sense of collectivism and solidarity that unites individuals to create social bonds (Zimmerman, 2000). Shor (1992) discusses this action within the context of schooling as a “key mechanism” for empowering or disempowering students (p. 15). He states that when students have co-governance or shared power within the classroom and participatory curricula in place, this fosters democratic skills similar to the responsibilities associated with active citizenship. Furthermore, Shor (1992) states that “a non-participatory curriculum prepares youth for an authoritarian world where acceptance and obedience are taught and valued” (p. 19). Shor (1992) argues that individuals notions of empowerment within schooling shape the way youth engage with their world and have a profound impact on students’ beliefs of themselves and their world.

Another strategy encouraged in empowerment practice is organizing. Organizing is literally coming together of many people for a common purpose, to create change. The act of organizing enables a collective voice to emerge and be heard. Individually, these voices don’t have much power. Through organizing, the collective voice accesses power that an individual cannot. Herdt et al. (2007) states that the most visible manifestations of
empowerment are in the emergences of Gay/Straight Alliance (GSAs) organizations across the nation (Herdt et al., 2007). Griffin, Lee, Waugh and Beyer (2004) argue that much can be learned from GSAs as they reveal partnerships between sexual minority students and heterosexual students with the purpose of promoting sexual justice, supporting LGBT students and their allies, and promoting positive change in the school climate (Griffin et al., 2004). Griffin et al. (2004) and Milceli (2005), both state explicit efforts such as using posters, attending gay prom, faculty and staff professional developments concerning LGBT issues, and communicating with school administration to reflect LGBT tolerance, are all significant strides in SJE. GSAs work to visibly create an awareness of the issues related to individuals in this group along with advocating for their peers. Students at the same time function as counselors and/or support for students dealing with LGBT related issues (Griffen et al., 2004; Milceli 2005).

Uribe (1994) followed GSA support groups within a high school setting and found that GSAs transform youth into leaders who are seeking justice. The author further discusses the importance of youth-driven, as opposed to adult led, activism (Uribe, 1994). Through focus group interviews, Uribe (1994) learned that participants showed a strong need of having and using knowledge for social change and liberation (p. 108). Even students who were not LGBT involved themselves in GSAs because of their belief in social justice within their school (Uribe, 1994). Lee (2002) states that GSAs provide unique youth-driven contexts for the development of youth leadership, activism, and engagement in social change. GSAs are unique because participants who were not personally affected by LGBT issues advocated for the betterment of others. Lee
(2002) and Miceli (2005) also commented on how these organizations enable the formation of alliances across sexual orientations, enabling group members to confront bias and discrimination through the support of their GSA support group members (Miceli, 2005). This “alliance” strategy builds a critical mass to work toward social justice, enables a wide range of people to deepen their understanding of sexual justice, and provides a mechanism for collective action. The formation of alliances provides for a mechanism for collective action and a view of empowerment that can be characterized as both authentic and meaningful.

The third strategy is praxis. Freire (1970) argues that traditional education systems act as systems of oppression. In his view, most public education institutions operate by using a “banking” model of knowledge, or a view of knowledge as something that is transmitted from teacher (the all-knowing) to student (the empty vessel) (p. 12). Transformative learning is the opposite of this concept, and it relies on the ongoing teaching and experiential learning that makes knowledge relevant. It is then that praxis, or action that is informed by theory, is possible (Freire, 1970). Ira Shor (1992) argues that goals for this empowering pedagogy are to, “relate personal growth to public life by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and change” (Shor, 1992, p. 15). Shor states that it is imperative for these principles to be embedded in schooling, and further defines an empowering education as one that invites students to become change agents who are also thoughtful and reflective citizens of the world (Shor, 1992).
Social Justice Education

Defining SJE

SJE intends to empower those who are powerless in our world by instilling a solid academic and social education, the principles of active citizenship, and the motivation and ability to engage in the collective struggle to make positive change. I argue that SJE is a vehicle for empowerment in youth. In SJE, the school is the means through which students develop and acquire knowledge, as well as the means to access opportunities to actively participate in creating change and opposing injustice. In the context of schooling, enabling students to engage in social justice learning experiences guided by both students and teachers together is one way in which youth can be enabled to find their voice and participate within their communities. This is important because SJE emphasizes that knowledge must transcend beyond the classroom. SJE promotes students to connect their knowledge to action, and ultimately engage in praxis (Freire, 1970; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). These are the learning moments that enable both students and teachers to stand equally together for a common purpose, and this knowledge then becomes relevant while connecting to students’ lives.

SJE was conceived as a way to be responsive to oppressed and silenced groups that have been disenfranchised educationally, economically, and politically (Lund, 2006, p. 41). Sleeter and Grant (2007) discuss SJE as a means towards educational reform for low-income communities that will enable societal injustice to be challenged (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Darling-Hammond (2004) states that SJE is a form of education that not only provides relevancy and importance for many low-income and minority youth groups, but also concurrently contributes to the development of ethical and moral
principles that are missing from traditional educational models for all groups. Giroux (2005) defines SJE as an education based on the “counter hegemonic struggle and ideological battle” (p. 117).

Proponents of SJE argue that students must see how divisions within society have been a part of the structure of the state historically. These structures within society include schools (Banks & Banks, 2007). Students therefore must learn that challenging societal oppression along lines of race, class, religion, etc. is vital for low-income and minority groups. The acceptance of these divisions (e.g., on the basis of race, class, etc.) is the result of individuals’ lack of action towards injustice (Banks & Banks, 2007; Willinsky, 1996). Giroux (2005) argues that the framing of knowledge to expose relationships of power and hegemony are integral to reclaiming democracy. Ultimately, he states that the more consciousness individuals possess about the relationships of power within society, the more opportunities for liberation are possible (p. 38). These inequalities that exist are oppressive and continue to limit mobility for certain groups. SJE schools are one way in which communities can counter oppressive conditions to empower minority and low-income youth with the tools oppressed youth need for success (Sleeter & Grant, 2007).

Problems with SJE Definitions

The term social justice is contested in the educational world, and there are many who believe that there are problems with this approach that often allow for a failed educational initiative that does not achieve the goals for which it is implemented (Lund, 2006). Some of the opposition towards SJE is due to the different models that have been offered to guide the implementation and practice in schools. North (2006) argues that
multiple interpretations of SJE and social justice curriculum promote different priorities. There are various answers to the question: What is the goal of SJE? The answer to this question is dependent on the researchers or practitioners who are asking this question (North, 2006). The confusion that is created by the varying goals, domains, content, audiences, and agents of socially just teaching are confusing (North, 2006).

North continues to argue that the goals of SJE may never be achieved because of its lack of clarity. The inconsistencies of SJE and the various ways it has been implemented causes doubts in its effectiveness as changing variables may change outcomes and presumably compromise the goals of SJE. To create a school-wide curriculum and framework when there are so many different interpretations that each emphasize different focuses. In some models, SJE advocates for political and economic equity, in some models educational access and in some models both.

Some SJE models advocate for a macro level domain of implementation requiring state and national policy reform while other SJE models require a micro level focus of implementation focusing on the classroom, school district, and the surrounding community (North, 2006). This in part depends on whether or not SJE is a grassroots process. Although these concerns may be seen as shortcomings in SJE, many of the differences in SJE models may be due to the needs of the community in which SJE is being implemented. SJE is in no way formulaic, and it is imperative that each approach to implement SJE is unique to the community it is serving, taking into account their conditions, their issues, and their needs. The reasons why each initiative has differing elements may be due to the various contexts in which SJE is implemented.

A case study conducted by Darren Lund (2006) in Canada revealed a great deal of resistance from school administrators towards SJE that focused on antiracist and
The author defines Antiracist education as follows.

Antiracist education is committed to educating students and creating an awareness of the effects and horrors of racism, prejudice and anti-Semitism, and the human capacity for evil; the early warning signs of racism in order to avoid making the mistakes of the past; the moral lessons necessary to make our society more humane; the commitment to anti-racist education; the development of an attitude of tolerance and understanding (p. 32.)

The rejection of this social justice curriculum being implemented in schools was a result of the Canadian government officials’ views of SJE as threatening to the “harmony and acceptance” that Canada has always stood for (p. 37). The author states that antiracist education was considered by government officials as encouraging Black hatred of White society without resolving any conflicts between race, and therefore most social justice efforts were dismissed from schools all together. While SJE created a basic awareness of societal issues, it also created discomfort resulting from social critique and activism surrounding issues of race, class, and inequity (Lund 2006).

Many other critics of SJE in Canada specifically regard this form of education as multicultural policy, which is perceived as a significant cause of ethnic tensions within the country, seen to cause reverse racism rather than fostering unity (Lund, 2006; Resnick, 1994; Moodley, 1995). These critics also argue that immigrants must assimilate to a mainstream culture to uphold “Canadian traditions” which is vital for national identity and national unity (Resnick 1994, p. 49). Many criticize SJE as taking too negative a stance while focusing on race only, often portraying all Whites as racists and Blacks as victims (Moodley, 1995). This form of education is perceived to dismantle the important groundwork for race relations that have already been accomplished within the
Canadian society (McLeod, 1992).

North (2008) argues that any one form of SJE will not be enough to move students to action against injustice. Rather, “multiple pathways are necessary to create politically engaged, critically aware citizens” (North, 2008, p. 8). North states, “when some students are struggling to find food and shelter while others are debating the merits of this advanced placement class over that one, we can hardly expect that a single approach to SJE will be effective for all students in all contexts” (p. 8). North further concludes that those students with the most privileges need to do more than “learn about” other people’s suffering if they are going to be part of a broad process to effect real social change (North, 2008). Also, individuals who face injustices on a daily basis also need more from education than “test preparation or access to ‘progressive’ curricula and teaching techniques if they are to develop the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to tackle those injustices” (North, 2008 p. 1; see also Reed, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; McNeil, 2000). My research showed that SJE had a positive impact on participants and further empowered them to transform their lives and re-envision their identities.

Paradigms of Thought From Which SJE Was Derived

Social justice grew out of many paradigms of thought. Paulo Freire (1970), one of the core influences of this radical movement, focused some of his research and theoretical discourse on the development and implementation of an educational system that aimed to empower minority groups to become “agents of social change” (Freire 1970, p. 5). Freire criticizes traditional perspectives of the way schools engage students in learning because
of the inequality of power within this learning relationship. He believed in motivating oppressed groups by empowering them to develop a “critical consciousness,” the idea of questioning societal norms and institutional practices to understand the true hegemonic structures that exist within society. It is on this basis that students engage in social action (p. 56). He believed that this approach would empower oppressed groups by enabling them to recognize, fully understand, and challenge oppressive forces within their society for the purpose of attaining liberation from oppression, and to ultimately contribute to the establishment of a more humane society (p. 83). Social justice is focused on dismantling the oppressive structures.

Reed (1995) argues that the vital components of SJE, social justice curriculum and activism together promote a discourse and understanding of complex issues surrounding race, class, gender, sexuality, and the disabled within each students’ world (Reed, 1995). He contends that SJE is vital as it enables students to view the way systemic processes within society serve to marginalize certain groups while privileging others. For example, the correlation of property taxes to the quality of public schooling is an issue in many states (including ours) that should be discussed to understand the implications of how society enables some groups to have more privilege through their school experiences because of their social class (Apple, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Reed, 1995). Through the knowledge gained about how society functions and the problems that exist researchers and theorists argue that SJE is a means of achieving collective solidarity for the purpose of working with others to promote action against injustice in an effort to provide greater access to resources and opportunity for oppressed groups (Lund, 2006).
SJE has its roots in critical pedagogy (CP), a theoretical framework focused on questioning dominant ideologies and power to understand the deeper meanings and implications of behavior, discourse, and social processes, in the context of education (McLaren 2003). McLaren discusses CP as a lens through which we can critique society and establish justice and democracy. This critique is central to SJE as it defines the way in which students must engage with their world, including their education, to be able to negotiate and oppose oppressive conditions that clearly serve to discount or limit them.

Knowledge is key in SJE. Knowledge enables individuals to make choices in how they approach their lives and their world. Banks (2004) expands on the necessity of knowledge and states that in addition to mastering literacy skills of reading and writing, multicultural societies like America, the U.K. and Canada must also reinforce the skills necessary to identify the creators of knowledge and their interests. Having this awareness is vital, and all individuals must possess this awareness to recognize oppressive assumptions and their meaning (Banks, 2004, p. 291). If educational curriculum ignores and suppresses some individuals’ visions and experiential perspectives, and if students are constantly required to conform to worldviews that counter their own beliefs and lived realities, they will either incorporate the other view into their self-understanding and/or lash out in anger against those systems that have excluded their voice (Slattery, 1995). SJE takes a critical perspective towards knowledge and schooling which exposes the oppressive elements within institutions and institutional practice, including but not limited to schools that serve to devalue minority students and their importance within society (Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2005; Slattery, 1995).
SJE as a Means to Counter Oppression For Youth

SJE is an approach towards education that counters the many effects of oppression. One of the most powerful aspects of SJE is the way it encourages and supports students to find their voice while giving them constructive outlets to act upon their beliefs. This section discusses a vital component within SJE that is absent in traditional educational models. SJE enables students to break their silence while fostering the development of principled individuals who envision creating a positive change in their world. Freire’s (1970) work was a response to oppression seen through the nature of silence that he witnessed among the poor within his home country of Brazil. He observed the phenomenon of education that prescribed identities rather than enabling individuals to flourish and learn (Nolet, 2009). By implementing radical changes in curriculum and instruction through incorporating problem posing, developing critical consciousness, and engaging in collective action, the public school system in Porto Alegre, Brazil, was transformed. The lower classes in this community became capable of countering the oppressive conditions by making their voices heard while reclaiming their collective power to create societal change (Nolet, 2009).

Freire’s nontraditional approach empowered underprivileged citizens in Brazil through the development of critical consciousness of their world, construct action plans for change, and participate actively and fully as citizens (Freire, 1970; 2000). Some of the ways this was accomplished was through civic education. This is defined as providing opportunities for inquiry in the way institutions function within society, how these societal systems privilege some and oppress others; engaging youth in critique to
understand the impact of history on students’ lives; and partnering with community organizations to organize and advocate for community resources (Freire, 2000).

When looking at how education creates silence through schooling, and also the way silence impacts low-income students, it is clear that students’ engagement and motivation for learning within the classroom is compromised due to negative feelings and perceptions (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). The act of silencing individuals is a form of oppression, and also a way in which youth show their feelings of powerlessness within the classroom setting. Silence and powerlessness also impact a teacher’s ability to effectively instruct students in the classroom.

Powerlessness, discussed by Sleeter and Grant (2007), also takes the shape of poor motivation in the classroom. Furthermore, Darder and Miron (2006) argue that oppressed students are often poorly motivated, and are more likely to fail and even drop out of school. They discuss how students’ negative perceptions of themselves and their world, that are both created and reinforced by social institutions and structures, engage in violence more often as a means for solving conflict, and further focus on how inattentiveness as a primary issue affecting students’ engagement in school. These authors argue that such issues are dealt with in superficial ways and continue to mask the deeper issues students face outside of the classroom (Darder & Miron, 2006, p. 8). This is connected to my argument that low-income youth have needs extending far beyond academic knowledge and traditional educational curriculum. As Darder and Miron (2006) discuss the complex issues low-income youth face, it is clear that another way oppression occurs in schooling is by covering up rather than addressing the many issues students face throughout their schooling experience. Furthermore, the authors also argue that
social inequalities are not truly confronted and are usually covered up by momentary and reactive school initiatives implemented to manage behavior (p. 16). Darder and Miron (2006) state that more often than not, teachers in poor communities express a sense of uncertainty in their ability to engage their students and confront uncomfortable issues their students face. Traditional education settings often ignore the many issues oppressed youth face, and perpetuate oppression by further aggravating their circumstance due to a lack of understanding of their experience.

Giroux (2005) states that this superficial confrontation of oppressive conditions affecting low-income and minority youth is the dominant trend in teaching. As illustrated by Darder (1991), she shows the underdevelopment of minority students as they are “othered” and treated differently both in and outside of schooling. In her book, *Culture and Power in the Classroom*, she dismantles the colonizing classroom and discusses the way in which schools function in the process of silencing minority students. Furthermore, Giroux discusses how students are often “warehoused” and turned into “dead-zones”, meaning individuals who obey and perform the tasks asked of them with no opposition (Giroux, 2005, p. 20).

Ayers and Ayers (2011), Sleeter and Grant (2007) and Giroux (2005) place blame on urban educators and administrators by arguing that students are educated to construct moral characters that value passivity, obedience, and punctuality, as desirable characteristics that are taught and reinforced by authorities within these institutions. Silence becomes a characteristic that is encouraged and rewarded, and an aspect upon which punishment and discipline can be performed (Giroux, 2005, p. 35). Students are expected to be silent and listen to the teacher. When this pattern of behavior is different,
it is often perceived that students are being insubordinate by not complying with the expectations placed on them.

Lisa Delpit (1995) studied the occurrence of silence and acceptance amongst low-income and minority youth in the American public educational system. She discusses silence as something that is not chosen by minority students, but is actually a result stemming from the “liability” students fear in speaking (Delpit, 1995, p. 13). Delpit explains “liability” as being the fear of social rejection or even punishment. As Delpit clearly ties silence to the power structures within society by showing how silence fosters easy compliance and further acceptance of unjust conditions or circumstance. This silence limits individuals’ ability to have voice and act on their human and legal rights. Therefore when these rights are breached, oppressed groups fear standing up for themselves because of who they are. Similarly, Sleeter and Grant (2007) define the act of being silent as cultural and learned behavior that is the effect of viewing society as something static or unchanging, and furthermore something that they do not have the power to change. Silence is a response when individuals accept injustice due to feelings of powerlessness. This powerlessness is reinforced by dominant ideologies that limit the belief in an alternate reality (Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Apple, 2004; Kunjufu, 2005; Van Deburg, 2004).

SJE forces students to think about their world and engage in social action for the purpose of finding their voice, participating as valuable citizens within society who have rights, and by sharing the power they possess with others to create social change. Apple (2004) argues that socially just learning forces teachers and students to question the way that knowledge is constructed rather than accepting knowledge as the “truth”, enabling
critical thinking and problem solving to emerge as ways youth rationalize their world and their surroundings (Apple 1998; 2004). Oppression then is no longer a silencing factor, but rather a motivating issue that empowers youth to engage in learning to create social change. In Apple’s (2004) discussion of how knowledge is socially constructed, he emphasizes how SJE enables students to find their voice and engage in action. This can be seen in an ongoing learning process that enables one to use reading, writing, thinking, listening, speaking, collaboration and evaluating in order to construct meaning, and communicate for real life situations (Goodman, 1994). These are skills which are essential for the empowerment of oppressed groups because they enable individuals to search for understanding, inquire, problem solve, participate, and actively access the tools needed to create change at the institutional level (Apple, 1998, 2004; Ferguson, 2001; Giroux 2005).

Many believe that there is a substantial need for SJE because it acknowledges the ways groups are separated within society. It is important for youth to link themselves to “civil responsibility, moral accountability, enhanced political sensibility and critical participation” for the development of an authentic commitment to social action that extends beyond self (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 1994, p. 63). Watts (2003) discusses how many oppressed individuals go on to become resilient leaders and agents for social change, but highlights the fact that this is only possible when individuals exert a considerable effort to overcome self-doubts, personal adversity, and structural barriers (Watts, 2003).

Darling-Hammond argues that an academic curriculum alone does not guarantee that students can grow up to become principled with concern extending beyond their own
life (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Greene (1998) states that students cannot be moved to take on the responsibility for what happens between them and others. Greene focuses on the individualistic nature of schooling and argues that students must be taught how to connect, relate to and advocate for others. She argues that students need to be exposed to examples of social injustice to develop a critical consciousness that can, “pierce apathy and provoke empathy and outrage needed to prompt them to act for the betterment of society” (p. xxxiv). Giroux (2005) discusses how engaging in collective action empowers students to develop morals that denounce social injustice while encouraging students to become involved in change. He argues that critical pedagogy is central to the way in which liberation can be achieved for everyone, specifically low-income and minority groups. This perspective of education enables “a vision of change” to emerge that creates a discourse of human morality and ethical responsibility within public schooling while providing rationale to engage in the struggle for social transformation (Giroux, 2005, p. 36).

**Student Resistance to SJE**

Some of the opposition to SJE is due to the assumptions that exposure to nontraditional knowledge cannot act as a catalyst for initiating individual and social change (McKinney & Ermien, 2004, p. 160). McKinney and Ermien (2004) conducted a qualitative study looking at Caucasian students’ resistance towards SJE in South Africa. The study shows a relationship between student resistance and their racial identity. White students in higher education displayed resistance towards historical information regarding Apartheid because it threatened their identities (p. 169). As a result, students tried to throw away the events of the past by rejecting the historical implications for the
purpose of sustaining their existing perceptions of self. Students engaged in discussions that displayed their resistance and continuously maintained the outlook that history did not play a part in their society today (p. 170). Instructors continued to push students and guide them beyond their resistance by further discussing and question how this history impacted them. Although many students did not break down their barriers of resistance, some did. At the end of this process the authors concluded that resistance was not a negative aspect of this critical approach towards education. The SJE curriculum challenged the unexamined structures of privilege that students had never before recognized or even considered. These student responses were a “true” representation of student voice, feeling, and belief, as they negotiated the information that undermined their self-perception (p. 165). The researchers concluded that resistance provides a powerful teaching moment that should be expanded upon. Defensiveness and disassociation are common modes of resistance that SJE commonly evokes (p. 170).

The authors stated that the instructors did not anticipate such opposition when planning this unit. The authors recognized that, “Instructors must be invested in understanding what students value, their beliefs, goals, dreams, and the socio-political and historical moment in which they live” (p. 169). Instructors must understand that SJE is uncomfortable and that by dealing with students’ resistance towards ideas that may threaten their identities, instructors are actually confronting the larger issues that affect students in their lives, for example the inability to accept how historical events affect their privilege or lack thereof in present day (p. 169).

Higgenbotham (1996) suggests that student resistance towards SJE is the result, in part, of the way educators approach the issue (Higgenbotham, 1996). Higgenbotham
(1996) studied the way SJE was executed with novice teachers who had not been trained to execute this specific form of education. He concluded that training for SJE was necessary and vital for its effectiveness. White, middle class teachers constitute the vast majority of teachers in education (Banks & Banks, 2007; Chubbuck, 2004). Ultimately, teachers from the dominant culture must examine their own place in the societal order to make an impact on students when trying to execute SJE (Darling-Hammond, 2004). Often even the resources and materials used in a classroom may send unintended messages about who is to blame for society’s inequalities (Higgenbotham, 1996).

Higgenbotham further discusses the difficulty for any instructor to engage in topics concerning racism, classism, and other issues concerning low-income youth. He describes the discomfort of being in a classroom and facing issues that question identities and create tension is an extremely fearful event and therefore these emotion-laden issues are often not addressed by educators (Higgenbotham, 1996).

Instructors approach SJE with the main goal of calling students to action to change social inequality (Banks, 2004; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). It cannot be ignored that students enter the classroom with their own belief systems regarding society’s inequities and who is to blame (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005). Furthermore, these preconceived notions may interfere with students’ understanding or acceptance of content that instructors try to teach. Research shows that learning is enhanced when the instructor and the student share common understandings of the material; otherwise social interaction can break down and lead to resistance (Kunjufu, 2005; Van Deburg, 2004).

Chizhik and Chizhik (2005) argue that students view discussions concerning social justice and oppression as blaming certain groups, and often these students desire to
remain blameless. Appelbaum (2007) discusses resistance on behalf of students as a
defensive mechanism in response to the recognition of one’s own privileged status
(Applebaum, 2007). Ultimately these students are reluctant to discuss, explore, or
consider how their privilege impacts others. Often students avoid such content by
claiming that oppression no longer exists and that there has been great progress in the
areas of racism, discrimination, and inequality (Applebaum, 2007; Aveling, 2002). Many
argue that students’ resistance towards SJE can be silencing for many students whose
beliefs and values are being countered (Case & Hemmings, 2005).

**What Does it Take To Be a SJE Educator?**

Much of the research on SJE emphasizes that the effectiveness of SJE instruction
is strongly dependent on the strength, authenticity, and beliefs of the instructor. It is
clear that teacher’s practices, experiences, and abilities directly impact students’
that teacher’s daily practices can exert social influence and establish a hidden curriculum
that has the power to project dominant beliefs. Apple states that this projection of beliefs
is a primary way that teachers perpetuate oppression through their classrooms (Apple,
2004). It is necessary that teachers who are social justice educators must evaluate and
reflect upon their own beliefs, practices, and position of power so they can dismantle the
oppressive conditions that may result from their daily instruction and practice.

Educators can and do convey hegemonic hierarchies of what is considered
acceptable, appropriate lifestyles, valuable knowledge, and conservative world views
(Apple 2004, Ferguson 2001; Hendrix, Jackson & Warren, 2003). One strong example
of this “hidden curricula” is discussed by Ayers and Ayers (2011) in their discussion of
Chicago Public School’s Uniform Discipline Code. This is seen explicitly through the power that school administration exerts to apply the disciplinary code and its punitive consequences based on their discretion, and even determine the type of punishment (number of days suspended, etc.) on a case by case basis, based on the way they perceive the student and the students’ behavior. The way in which discretion is used to punish students is important (Ayers & Ayers, 2011). Often within this disciplinary system, some students are not disciplined the same as others, based on the perceived nature of each breach of conduct, even if it is the same violation. While one student may be suspended three days for ditching class, another may only receive a lunch detention based on how a teacher or administrator perceives the student’s actions based on racist assumptions. Some students (White) who display similar behaviors are not perceived the same way (Kunjufu, 2005, Ayers & Ayers, 2011). The point is that punishment is often dolled out unfairly. These perceptions have a substantial influence on the lives of youth, and further contribute to the development of “affluence or life on the streets” (p. 27).

Ayers and Ayers (2011) argue that teachers and school leaders use their role to wrongfully determine students’ abilities by the labels placed on them. It is vital that individuals outside of the classroom also reflect on and analyze their perceptions and schemas of belief so that injustice is not perpetuated through their actions and decisions.

Another issue with SJE that North (2006) discusses is that the burden of responsibility placed on educators to promote social justice principles is often problematic. The author states that often educators are not comfortable or well versed in facilitating the discussion and learning of controversial issues and the backlash of creating more racial tension have compromised this perspective of education when
practiced (North, 2006). Furthermore, Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008) argue that lack of emotional investment on behalf of teachers as described by Ayers and Ayers (2011) is problematic. These authors argue that emotions are crucial to the struggle against intolerance and social injustice (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008). In a case study conducted by Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008), the researchers studied the role of emotions within the context of SJE in an urban setting. A white, novice teacher was observed and interviewed in a qualitative study throughout her first year of teaching in an urban, low-income, social justice school. This educator chose her location, and she described herself as a social justice educator, yet was unaware of how her emotional vulnerability would impact her ability to teach.

Throughout the study her emotions varied from guilt, failure, shame, anxiety, frustration, and ultimately contributed to causing resistance from her students to engaging in class. Chizhik (2003) describes that a skilled social justice educator is one that can develop the skill to challenge, confront, and facilitate deep reflection and activism (Chizhik, 2003, p. 459). Chubbuck and Zembylas’ (2008) case study affirmed the idea that pre-service teachers must consider their emotional ambivalence as it may cause students to resist or engage in a SJE experience (p. 314).

The question that arises out of their case study is what occurs when teachers do not possess the deep understanding of social equity and the ability and/or desire to engage in social justice education with all that it requires? Chizhik (2003) reflects on the difficulty of teaching suburban teachers how to teach in urban schools. The author argues that the instructor must manage the emotions and behaviors that are vital to SJE. These behaviors and emotions are both unavoidable and necessary in SJE (Chizhik, 2003, p.
Hendrix, Jackson and Warren (2003) argue that mere talk about justice and harmony cannot accomplish the goals central to SJE. The authors state that there is an essential need for educators to possess a strong belief in and critical awareness of the community and students they serve. Educators must be emotionally prepared for student resistance in SJE for them to be effectively taught within the classroom setting, and they must go on to assess their own schemas of thought to recognize how their prior held beliefs may marginalize or silence students (Hendrix, Jackson & Warren, 2003).

Chizhik and Chizhik (2005) argue that teachers’ preconceived notions must be studied and reflected upon to understand the impact teachers have on students and student learning. These researchers conducted a qualitative interview-based study to understand the ways in which students perceive their status, specifically as privileged or oppressed. In addition to self-perception these authors studied the way these students viewed others. The study reveals that most students of color identified themselves with great complexity, as possessing both aspects of privilege and oppression. Almost all white male students and white female students regardless of SES, identified themselves as privileged and they viewed others undergoing financial hardship a result of their lack of effort and hard work (Chizik & Chizik, 2005, p. 124).

The researchers conclude that students’ self-perceptions are directly applied to the way in which they view others. Students’ overwhelming down play of oppression and its importance within society was the result of a lack of belief that certain groups experienced oppression (Chizik & Chizik, 2005, p. 131). Many minority students including Latino, Asian, and African American perceived themselves as privileged and did not recognize oppressive life elements that directly affected them. Many of these
students expressed their opposition towards being labeled as “victims” as they felt empowered and equal to their dominant counterparts (p. 137). The recognition of oppression does not occur as easily as educators perceive. Teachers need to be trained in challenging students’ *a priori* beliefs (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Freire, 1970). We need to understand more deeply how privilege and oppression are understood by respondents. If superficially, this is not surprising. Privilege and oppression are both about the person and the impact of their social and structural environment on their identity and their ability to achieve success.

SJE argues that it is imperative that teachers of social justice undergo training and education so they are able to effectively encourage students to examine difficult issues and be participants in promoting societal change (Chubbuck, 2004; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2003; Giroux, 2005; McLaren, 2003). This is problematic when policymakers have nearly always answered the problem of teacher shortages by lowering standards, so that people who have had little or no preparation for teaching can be hired, especially in urban schools (Banks & Banks, 2007). And with an increasing focus on academic achievement we see a decreasing recognition of the importance of teachers being qualified to handle the many other things youth bring into the classroom.

Teachers must be taught how to be a social justice educator. Institutional support and community involvement are the pillars that enable this educational initiative to be possible (Freire, 1970). SJE is incomplete without community involvement because SJE is focused on learning for the purpose of engaging in collective action to foster positive change. Therefore administrative leadership to build relationships beyond the school is imperative for SJE to be successful (Chubbuck, 2004; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2003; Giroux,
Social justice educators function in solidarity with parents, students, and community to facilitate opportunities for active participation and activism. SJE goes beyond individuals’ expertise in curriculum or effective instruction of a specific course. SJE embodies a commitment to active opposition of injustice and commitment to societal change.

What makes SJE different from other educational approaches is the social action piece which enables students to apply their knowledge and learning to their communities in ways that are personally relevant to their lives and in ways where they can see how their actions impact their communities. SJE provides for a pedagogy of liberation and transformation that inspires a hopeful and future oriented view of education, life, and community. SJE promotes critique of the existing society with its structural inequalities and promotes a view of a better future society in which individuals have the power to contribute to positive change.

Conclusion

The social and structural bases of oppression limit the potential of empowerment and social justice. Students and teachers need a deep understanding of the structural basis of inequality and oppression to challenge and overcome the psychological and material barriers perpetuated by these conditions. Understanding oppression is not enough, however. Teachers and students must become actively engaged to overcome oppression. Oppression can only be countered through the active involvement of students and adults in both understanding the way in which oppression functions in their world and their life, but also having an active role in being able to resist and challenge such conditions. We must together all aspire to empower youth at both the individual and community level.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

I am interested in learning about how we as educators can better serve students coming from underprivileged backgrounds. Given the complexity of poverty and oppression and their impact on youth, my personal connection to the subject inspired me to conduct a study using narrative inquiry in which I explored the experiences of youth who underwent a social justice education. (See Appendix B.)

In this chapter I will provide an overview of the theoretical framework within which my study was contextualized. I will then talk about the methodology employed to help me understand how a social justice educational experience impacts students. I will then present the way I collected data and analyzed this data. I will also discuss the various ways I maintained the integrity and trustworthiness of my research. Lastly, I will discuss the ethical considerations my research took into account.

Theoretical Frame: Social Reconstructionism

Social reconstructionism emerged in the early 1900s and was later applied to education and educational theory. Dewey (1900) furthered this non-traditional view of education and discussed the ways education inspired by social reconstructionism could function to instill a greater sense of democracy within education. This theory when applied to education describes education as an environment for “deliberative social inquiry into problems of collective importance with a socialist conviction that there are political solutions…” (Thomas, 2010, p. 794). Harold Rugg (1952) discusses social reconstructionism as a way to fix social problems through education. Rugg argues that all educators must be social educators to pave the way for societal change. This theorist
envisioned students as future citizens who could be taught to utilize their knowledge through active citizenship. Rugg argues that emphasizing critical thinking and problem solving paired with the study of real world problems is the essence of what social reconstructionism is, and through this non traditional approach towards education, educators are facilitating the development of productive citizens rather than academically proficient students.

Social reconstructionism is a belief that social transformation is possible through schooling (Counts, 1934; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2006; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Rugg, 1952; Thomas, 2010). This theoretical framework establishes the distinction that schooling is a platform for youth that goes beyond learning academic content. Rather, it is an environment where youth develop concepts related to social change and their own social responsibility (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). This theoretical framework was a relevant context for this study because enabled an examination of empowerment and social change that can be fostered through schooling. It is through the belief of social change that both individual and collective empowerment is possible. For youth to engage in action and activism for the purpose of countering oppression enables opportunities for both individual and collective empowerment and liberation. The belief in social reconstructionism within education emphasizes the struggle to achieve social justice thorough social change.

Various dimensions of social reconstruction are significant to my research. Sleeter and Grant (2007) and Thomas (2010) discuss how this theoretical framework makes critical thinking, recognition of social problems, liberation and social justice valuable within educational institutions and curriculum. This philosophy does this by emphasizing
that students need to question their society. Ultimately, this philosophy generates curriculum that focuses on social reform as the aim of education (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Brameld (1965) argues that through social reconstruction a just world can emerge. Brameld argues this by stating that the emergence of democracy in youth through the classroom can enable youth to think collectively rather than individually. This author also argues that schools can be a medium for positive social transformation and this framework can further inspire opposition towards traditional educational models that function as systems of oppression (Brameld, 1965). Similarly, Cohen (1999) also discusses how this can also be accomplished through this philosophy of education. Cohen states:

For social reconstructionists and critical theorists, curriculum focuses on student experience and taking social action on real problems, such as violence, hunger, international terrorism, inflation, and inequality. Strategies for dealing with controversial issues (particularly in social studies and literature), inquiry, dialogue, and multiple perspectives are the focus. Community-based learning and bringing the world into the classroom are also strategies. (Cohen, 1999, p. 4)

Cohen provides details of how social reconstructionism shifts the emphasis within schooling and curriculum from content and skill alone to skills and content related to understanding and bettering students’ lives; rather content and skills are learned through problem posing students’ world, critical thinking, activism, and collective action. The philosophy of social reconstructionism enables knowledge learned in the classroom to connect to lives beyond school. It enables youth to envision a world where change and betterment can be possible (Greene, 1991).
Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

This study used a qualitative, narrative inquiry methodological approach. Narrative inquiry makes sense in getting at a deeper understanding of empowerment and social justice because it situates youth as authorities on their experience and uses “story” as the form of conveying that experience. Clandinin and Caine (2008) describe narrative inquiry as a way of understanding the human experience (p. 542). Maple and Edwards (2010) describe narrative inquiry as, “The orientation toward understanding the story within the teller’s social situation, locating not only what is said and not said, but also the way in which events are placed and the importance given to them” (p. 35). Narrative inquiry, as described by both Clandinin and Caine (2008) and Maple and Edwards (2010), is a process through which the researcher is privileged to enter the lives of participants and see the reality of someone else through the phenomenon of story.

Through the narrative stories of participants in my research, I provided a counter-narrative to the already existing view of urban youth in Chicago. Richardson (1997) discusses how individual’s stories are an entry point to acquire an understanding of one’s experience, and to put readers in the shoes of each participant. He states that each life story has the power of connecting to individuals who are then capable of seeing themselves within the experience of another’s story (Richardson, 1997, p. 6). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discuss this relationship as a “collaboration” between the researcher and participant (p. 20). It is through this relationship a researcher is informed by an alternate reality by listening to or reading one’s lived experience: “through narrative inquiry you gain access to the personal experiences of the storyteller who frames,
articulates and reveals life as experienced in a narrative structure we call story” (Kramp, 2004, p. 104).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that, “People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 477). These authors go on to describe this methodological approach as accepting the view that much knowledge lies in the lived experiences of others, and narratives are one way to access this. Narrative inquiry therefore enables for a story to be heard, and then re-storied to create an impact from the experience of others, experience that we would never have encountered on our own. Huber and Clandinin (2006) describe how stories enable individuals to fill their lives with meaning, and encourage others to understand and believe in an individual’s truth (Huber & Clandinin, 2006, p. 2). It is through my research that I was able to accomplish this.

The rich and deep stories participants shared with me during this study provides an authentic account of their lived experience that allows readers to feel, understand, and derive meaning from the individual and collective stories. These stories are powerful and moving because they convey stories of students that have been traditionally silenced and marginalized for so long. Ellis and Bochner (2000) discuss how narratives allow us to confront issues that we have avoided within our lives and expose us to experiences that we will never encounter.

…that’s where the learning is. We lose our innocence and our lost innocence validates some good values. We gain tolerance and humility. Sometimes we’re ashamed of how much we’ve excluded from our experience, tried not to see, hidden from. And we should
be. We don’t need to run from the fear or anxiety we feel. We need to learn from it. Racism, sexism, poverty, homophobia, disability—these issues touch all of us. We can’t hide from them. We’re all complicit in some way. No one’s immune, invulnerable. So it’s important to get exposed to local stories that bring us into worlds of experience that are unknown to us, show us the concrete daily details of people whose lives have been underrepresented or not represented at all, help us reduce their marginalization, [and] show us how partial and situated our understanding of the world is. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

Ellis and Bochner illustrate the way narratives expand our mind while fostering the ability, the competence, and the desire to connect to people who are different from us. Narrative inquiry acknowledges the researcher as a participant.

Huber and Clandinin (2006) state that narrative inquiry is marked by the researcher entering into the lives of each participant and vice versa (Huber & Clandinin, 2006, p. 213). It is through this relationship of trust and respect that a sense of community takes shape between both interviewer and the participant. Furthermore, the “reconstruction” of stories by the researcher also acknowledges the place of the researcher as a participant within this study. After listening to each participants’ stories, I analyzed and interpreted each of the stories, and the way in which I conveyed each individual’s narrative made my involvement and my story not only relevant, but deeply connected to the meaning that is made from each participant’s lived experience.

Lastly, I chose narrative inquiry over other interview-based methodologies because this method empowers the participant to have control and facilitate the way in which they present their lived experience to me. (See Appendix A.) They chose each story, each moment they shared with me, and in what order. Kramp (2004) describes this as “a way of knowing, narrative enables the storyteller to organize the story told by linking events, perceptions, and experiences (Kramp, 2004, p. 106). More structured
interview methodologies may have limited individuals’ ability to do this. This narrative inquiry assumed the perspective that as a researcher I am gaining knowledge of one’s experience that I do not have. Through the act of choosing which stories each participant tells me, they made meaning and made each story important by telling their story to the researcher, and the way they linked each piece to the next.

Understanding the ways in which a SJE weaves through students’ life narratives through their stories enabled educators to envision what empowerment looks like, from the students’ perspectives, within the classroom and the ways SJE can liberate youth beyond high school. This study offers implications for teacher education programs and provides insight for individuals who serve low-income and minority youth.

Methods

I interviewed five participants—alumni—who attended a high school that is founded upon social justice educational principles. Most qualitative narrative inquiry related to my field commonly use between four and ten participants in their studies (see, for example, Cammarota & Romero, 2006; Cammarota, 2007), I chose five and decided to conduct a three part interview focusing on various stages in their lives. Participants were recruited from among alumni from Justice High School¹.

Justice High School and Its History

I chose participants from a high school founded upon social justice principles. I chose this particular high school context because this institution is a social justice school in both curriculum and instruction. This school incorporates problem posing methods, the development of conscientization, and collective action for social change in every

¹ All names of people and places are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.
classroom (Freire, 1970; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). As a former employee of this institution, I am very familiar with this social justice high school.

Justice High School was the result of a twenty-five year struggle in which the parents and community fought for equitable housing, healthcare, and a community school that would serve all students with an outstanding education. Ten years ago, the district attempted to turn Aria Middle School (now Justice High School) into a privatized charter school serving some students who met the school entry criteria. With the leadership of former Aria teachers, parents, and community, they united together and organized themselves in opposition of the district office’s future plans for this school. It was through this activism that Justice High School was born and given to the community that fought for it. This struggle was led by the former teachers from Aria Middle School.

After this decision was made, the only stipulation that was placed upon the leaders of this school was that it had to be a middle school and a high school together. The school and community then renamed Aria Middle School to Justice High School. Currently grades seven and eight are also taught along with the high school. In 2010, grades six and seven began to be phased out due to under-enrollment, and as of May 2013, it was decided by the board that 8th grade would also be phased out leaving the high school only.

The founding teachers of Justice High School developed a school that was focused on social justice, with a heavy emphasis on community involvement and activism. The school mission reads as follows:

Our mission at Justice High School is to provide a relevant student-centered curriculum focused on social justice, creating an academically nurturing environment that promotes critical and creative thinking, instills pride and respect for others and self, and equips all of our students to become leaders of tomorrow.
Currently Justice High School is partnered with a local community college, a private performing arts college, a local creative youth hip-hop and poetry non profit organization, the community park district, a large children’s hospital located near the school, a private liberal arts college, The Boys and Girls Club, Students Working Together (a non-profit organization offering urban youth hands-on and project based programs), Cease Fire (a non-profit organizations within local communities where organizers work with community to reduce gun violence), a local non-profit youth community service organization, another local university, a youth after school organization providing work study opportunities, and various other organizations and programs in and around the Justice Community.

This school falls under the umbrella of the City Public Schools and has a total enrollment of 534 students as of 2013. 93.9 percent of the students enrolled at Justice High School are considered low-income and are provided with free and reduced lunch. 82.7 percent of the Justice High School student body is African American, 10.5 percent is Hispanic, 3.8 percent is Asian, 1.6 percent is Multiracial/Ethnic, .9 percent of the student population is white, .2 percent is Native American, and .2 percent of the student population is Native Hawaiian. This school is located in a low-income neighborhood in the city of Chicago.

Participants

I was most concerned with providing rich, thick, and detailed narratives that provided depth into each participant’s experience, therefore I recruited five participants to share their stories. Participants were recruited from among alumni from Justice High School. I only chose to recruit students who experienced four years of the educational
curriculum from this specific high school. The reason why I only recruited students who attended all four years at this school is because they experienced four years of a social justice educational experience. Interviewing students with a partial social justice experience would not provide an adequate account of how this form of education impacts youth. It can be assumed that students who experienced social justice education for all four years of high school would have had more experiences with this type of education, and therefore a more detailed account of how this educational initiative impacted them.

The participants chosen for this study were asked to tell me about their life stories in the present, during, and before high school. I felt this was necessary to fully understand their experience and the impact it has had on their life. Social justice education was created as a response for youth who deal with oppressive life conditions (Sleeter & Grant, 2007). I wanted to see how and if the goals of social justice education, primarily empowerment and liberation, were met for low-income and minority youth. While I was not concerned with measuring impact, or proving the usefulness of the curriculum, I was more interested in illustrating how each young adult has made sense of their experiences, and how they feel it has shaped their post high school lives.

The reason why I only chose to interview youth who come from low-income backgrounds is because this study is focusing on how social justice education affects empowerment with students who experience oppression. Most students attending this school are low-income and deal with conditions of oppression including poverty, violence, trauma, and powerlessness.

Lastly, my research questions focused on students’ lives beyond high school because I wanted to explore how students’ social justice education experience impacted
them after their high school was no longer facilitating problem posing and conscientization processes, or providing opportunities for collective action. This study explored how these principles of social justice education instilled at the high school level impacts students’ lives beyond high school. All students were over eighteen years of age, as they were alumni. Any students that were younger than eighteen who graduated early were not included in this study because their level of social access to opportunities like jobs and government resources are likely to be somewhat different than students who are eighteen years of age and beyond. Since the invitation called for alumni, the length of time students have been out of high school varied. Justice High School was founded in 2003. Because of this, the participants who took part in this study have been out of high school between two and five years. In summary, the participants attended Justice High School for all four years of high school, and were at least 18 years of age at the time the interviews were conducted.

Recruitment

I recruited former students who attended Justice High School. I conducted this narrative inquiry research study with the first five participants who responded to my invitation that I sent to them privately through Facebook. I was not able to meet one student because of a tragedy that occurred in this student’s life. This student changed his mind to take part in this study because he did not have the time or the capacity to do so due to the recent occurrences in his life. I therefore selected the sixth student who replied to me and proceeded to conduct the narrative inquiry interview with him. Students were given consent forms to sign prior to their interview.
All former students who are currently Facebook friends of mine proceeded to request my friendship after they graduated from high school. These students have remained in contact with me beyond high school through Facebook social media. After they graduated from high school they friended me; I did not friend them. At no time was I in contact with them through Facebook while they were my students or in attendance at the high school where I worked. (There was an institutional agreement prohibiting students and teachers from having contact via social media while students are enrolled in the institution.) I privately asked participants to assist me in my research by sending them a private Facebook message through my personal account. I did not post the invitation on my wall or on students’ walls. The invitation was sent as a private message to each student.

The Facebook invitation read as follows.

To all students who attended all four years at Justice High School and were included in the graduating classes of 2006-2012, I invite you to participate in a study about social justice education. I am a graduate student at DePaul University and am seeking participants for three interviews, which will take place on three separate days, at a time and location convenient to you. If you are interested, please contact me via email at [my email address] if you are interested in participating. (Please do not post your response on my FB wall.) Participation is voluntary. (You must be at least 18 years of age.)

I then invited them to contact me if they were interested in participating and we then arranged a place and time to meet that was convenient for them individually to meet and conduct interview.

Data Collection

To understand how social justice education plays a role in the lives of youth who have experienced oppression, I conducted a three-part semi-structured interview with
each participant (Seidman, 2006) that focused on eliciting stories of lived experience in and out of high school. Seidman (2006) argues that multiple interviews allow the researcher and participant to develop a relationship. Although I already had a relationship with all of the participants (as their former teacher), I had very little contact with them after high school. The three-part semi-structured interview process enabled me to reconnect, rebuild and reopen a trusting relationship with these former students. The multiple interview approach allowed for me to thoroughly understand and interpret participants’ life stories.

Additionally, Seidman’s (2006) example of a three-part interview approach suggests a specific focus for each interview. The first interview focused on the individuals’ life history; this provides a broader context for the subsequent interviews. In the second interview participants focused on the details of their schooling experiences in particular. This interview focused on the detailed description of participants’ stories and their relationship to their high school, the curriculum, and the teachers. The final interview focused on participant’s life now, a reflection on their journey, and making meaning of their experiences. This interview enabled participants to reflect upon and consider the meaning of their experiences and how this connected to their present life and identity (Seidman, 2006).

I met with each participant in a setting we both agreed on, this varied from a DePaul university meeting room or my home. This was determined by the participant after speaking to them and finding out their preference. Each interview lasted between 60-80 minutes, so the series of three interviews lasted a total of between three and four hours per participant.
Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by myself and an outside transcriptionist. To maintain accuracy of my interview transcripts, I listened to the recordings while reading the manuscripts multiple times. I will took detailed notes after each interview so I could have the opportunity to clarify and follow up with any questions thoughts, reactions, and feelings during later meetings (Seidman, 2006; May, 1991).

After the transcription of each interview, the participant was given the transcript to review. This member checking enabled participants to discuss any areas of the transcript and the emerging analysis from the interview. This took place after the second interview to provide both researcher and participant an opportunity to discuss the interpretation and coding of each participant’s stories. I also engaged in discussions with my colleague, a former graduate of the DePaul University educational doctorate program in curriculum studies on an ongoing basis to talk through the emerging themes and codes and to decipher the main conceptual points of participants’ stories.

Data Analysis

Seidman (2006) also offers a three-step model for data analysis. Seidman summarizes these three parts “studying, reducing, and analyzing the text” (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). Step one entailed the coding and categorizing content within each interview for important themes and ideas that emerge from the data (in vivo codes). I then, in addition, coded these transcripts for the various ways each individual discusses oppression, individual and community empowerment, and social justice (a priori codes). The in vivo codes, and the a priori codes were analyzed separately. For each set of codes, I broke these larger themes up into smaller, more specific categories. Step two enabled
the development of the individual narrative. The emerging themes framed each narrative that incorporated both *in vivo* and *a priori* codes offering insight to each participants’ lived experience with focus on their social justice education and empowerment. The last step was to look at the emergent themes and draw connections between students’ social justice education within the same narrative, and consider the way in which this contributed to the empowerment they experienced in their lives.

**Trustworthiness**

I used Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) model for trustworthiness to evaluate the quality of the data and the analysis in my research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss four dimensions of trustworthiness that I used. These four dimensions are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985, Bailey, 2007). First I will define the criteria, and then talk about the strategies I used in this research study.

*Criteria for Trustworthiness*

*Credibility.* Lincoln and Guba (1985) define credibility as making sure that the study makes a credible interpretation of the data gathered, and that it is “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). This area of trustworthiness ensures that readers can clearly see how participants expressed themselves and the meaning they made in comparison to the way the researcher represented it.

*Transferability.* Lincoln and Guba (1985) define transferability as the ability to show that the findings can be applied to other contexts. Transferability ensures that the results that I attain have meaning beyond the context of the study. Readers determine transferability, since they know other contexts where the findings might be relevant.
Dependability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define dependability as verifying the ethical nature and thoroughness of the research process. Dependability allows for the reader to see the logic, documentation, and traceability of the process at each point. A detailed description of each procedural step allowed for readers to see how the data was gathered throughout this process.

Confirmability. Confirmability relates to the way the researcher makes certain that the findings of the study are influenced solely by participants’ perspectives, views, emotions, etc. rather than the researcher (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This dimension of trustworthiness relates to the researcher’s bias, motivations, and interests so that they do not influence or manipulate the research (Schwandt, 2001).

Strategies to Ensure Trustworthiness

To ensure the quality of my research, a number of strategies were implemented. I used thick description, member checking, peer debriefing, and an audit trail to ensure the trustworthiness of my study (Holloway, 1997; Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of these strategies addresses several of the criteria.

Thick description, as defined by Holloway (1997), refers to using verbatim quotations from the interviews so the participants’ words can speak for themselves; it also includes the rich and detailed account of each interview, the setting, and the unstated elements existing in the interview setting like body language, speaker’s tone, facial expressions, etc. Thick description is when the researcher explicitly illustrates rich detail of the interview providing the reader with a deeper account of the interview transcending beyond just the words. Geertz (1973) has argued that thick description is what enables
readers to visualize the data due to the richness of description. In this way readers can “see” the basis of what they are “told” by the researcher.

*Member checking* is where participants are asked to check the emerging analysis in the study. This was done after the second interview where shared the emerging analysis and we discussed it.

*Peer debriefing* as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), "…is a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytical session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). My peer, a recent DePaul EdD graduate, agreed to assist me in this process. I discussed the emerging analysis and interpretations of interviews with her on an ongoing basis. Debriefing my findings and interpretations with a peer afforded me with the opportunity to explain, defend, and question my conclusions. This process ensured that the findings and analysis made logical sense.

To create an *audit trail*, meticulous and detailed documentation was kept (Creswell, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Halpern's (1983) categories for reporting information when developing an audit trail. These categories are: raw data, data reduction and analysis products (summaries, condensed notes, etc.), data reconstruction and synthesis products (all coded documents and notes showing themes, ideas, and categories), process notes (procedures, designs, strategies, rationales), materials relating to intentions and dispositions (inquiry notes, proposal, predictions), and instrument development information (interview guides, consent forms, interview schedule) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All of the categories above discussed by Lincoln and Guba are the ways
in which all notes, thoughts and decisions were documented to illustrate the journey towards the end results and the way in which they were derived.

**Ethical Considerations**

In an attempt to create a caring and respectful relationship with participants, there were many ethical considerations that I thought through. Participation for this study was voluntary, and prior to the interview, participants were provided with a written form that each participant signed. This document outlines the ethical issues related to participation (i.e., minimal risk, no personal benefit, voluntary nature of participation, maintenance of confidentiality). In addition to this document, all of this information was communicated to participants verbally prior to the interview.

Once I collected the data, subjects were only known by pseudonyms so as to protect their identities. All personally identifying information data is stored in an encrypted file on my personal computer that was and is locked and stored in the desk drawer of my home. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts, and any personally identifying details were disguised. A key with the real names was securely kept by myself.

Furthermore, all identifying information of participants was destroyed after transcribing them and checking for accuracy. All other data will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study. The audio/digital tape – which enables recognizing voices – were destroyed as soon as the tape was transcribed and checked by myself for accuracy. The outside hired transcriptionist and I are the only ones who handled the tapes and transcripts so there was minimal risk involved within this study. The transcriptionist also signed a confidentiality agreement ensuring that he would not discuss my research data in any context.
Conclusion

“Experience happens narratively... Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). Narrative inquiries provide an opportunity to for each participant to retell their life stories with attention to all the details creating a unique experience for both researcher and participant. This method of research encouraged participants to speak freely about their experiences while inviting readers to see, feel, and connect to the life stories each individual offers. This study builds on the knowledge of how social justice schooling can impact the empowerment and liberation of youth who face the adversity of oppression. I have witnessed the complex issues faced by oppressed youth, and my personal and professional relationship with this subject matter has inspired my study that has examined the lived experiences of youth through their narratives.
Chapter 4: Stories of Childhood Experiences

Introduction

Britzman (1998) wrote, “Voice is the meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community.... The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning with someone else.” (Britzman, 1998, p 127). The beauty of qualitative research, and more specifically of narrative inquiry, are the stories that ultimately enable the participant and the researcher to flourish together in the pursuit of gaining knowledge. As one listens and learns through the vivid description of an experience of another, the participant is creating a connection by sharing their experience and through this they are empowered and validated. Britzman’s quote emphasizes the power of an individual's voice and story, and through narrative inquiry an opportunity emerges that enables individuals to claim this power through the telling of their story. More so, it helps the participant gain power through connecting with the researcher and building community through sharing their lived experience.

The stories these five participants shared with me were profound and had a genuine impact on me. Having been a teacher of each participant made the interviewing process open, honest and comfortable. Having known each of these young adults personally enabled us to begin in a place of trust and to reflect on moments we were both a part of, and this was deeply moving. To recollect the same memory with another individual from another perspective was an enlightening experience. Each participant offered life stories that were intimate, sometimes
painful, and an honest account of their lives. Although all five students shared the similarity of attending a social justice school, the way each student experienced this school and the surrounding community was very different.

As educators strong traditional beliefs often guides our practice. One of these is the belief that students attend school because they want to learn. When viewing your career through this mindset, we fail to see the big picture. As we plan and act with this assumption at the forefront of our mind, we are ignorant to the truth that school is also a place where students go to seek support as they escape the hardships they experience in their everyday life. Through the individual stories of each participant this truth is emphasized; a truth that even I was sometimes unaware of as I taught each of these participants. It took this research for me to truly understand how much was stacked against them as they actively tried to change their lives during and post high school.

Prior to presenting the analysis of each interview for overarching themes, I will introduce each student through my own memories of them while I was their teacher, and through their own voice and their own stories of their childhood and family’s influence. Each section will present a glimpse of the individual student’s identity and life at Justice High School both inside and outside of the school.

Tae

Tae was the first person I interviewed. I met Tae a few years prior to actually teaching him during his senior year in my English class. He is African American and lived in the Justice community almost his entire life. He graduated from Justice High

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2 All names of people and places are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the participants.
School in 2012. Tae’s presence at Justice High School was strong and visible. This vibrant young man was someone who clearly stuck out to me in the hallways of Justice High School because he walked through the hallways with such beautiful poise and a great big smile. From his outfit to his book bag he was well put together. This young man carried himself with such professionalism. He never spoke to others as if they were students. His vocabulary, his tone and his demeanor gave him the persona of someone much older than a senior in high school. His calm tone and willingness to listen to others made Tae someone that all of his peers went to for help and advice. Standing tall, walking with such grace, and a clear confidence that reached out ten feet in front of him, this young man stuck out from the rest and I immediately connected with him.

I got to see Tae dance for the first time as he was teaching the female Majorettes a dance routine in the hallways of Justice High School. I later learned that Tae was the choreographer of this group, and because he often conducted practices in the hallways of the school I got a chance to see this amazing young man at his best. Tae was born to dance with his long legs, straight lines, graceful arms, strength that would make it seem like he could fly. Watching Tae perform was breathtaking. While he would instruct the girls dance group, I often noticed how all of these young ladies regarded him with so much respect, it was clear that his talent was something that inspired them.

Before Tae became my student, I remember a colleague telling me a story about Tae’s childhood before I even knew him. As we were watching Tae perform in the school talent show, this colleague disclosed to me that Tae had been through a great deal of childhood trauma. She told me that Tae and his brother had witnessed their father commit murder in front of their own eyes while they were small children. As I watched this
young man dance with so much passion and beauty, I remember thinking to myself, look at how kids can be so resilient.

When Tae became my student we immediately clicked. He was a student who was extremely driven. He often ate lunch in my classroom, talked to me during his free time about his life, dance, and his future. He used to leave school early because he attended a dance class through a program offered by a local University partnership with Justice High School where students could take art and dance classes and get credit for completing the course. Tae was accepted into this program and he took ballet during his senior year. I remember having multiple conversations with him about the hardships he faced in this program. Tae had never been professionally trained in dance and he therefore struggled in this ballet class because he was much behind his peers in experience and knowledge. Even so, he never gave up. His natural talent, self-discipline and his drive pushed him past failure to a point where he excelled in that ballet class amongst his peers by the end of the year.

Tae had a younger brother who was also my student in the same class, and they often did not get along. I would always witness Tae trying so hard to get his younger brother to come to school so that he too could graduate, but Tae knew his brother’s choices were probably going to lead to him fail. He was definitely the more responsible of the two, often acting almost like he was his brother’s parent.

Soon Tae became one of “my kids”. When I refer to students as “mine”, it means he and I had a close relationship. I was like his school mom. Tae and I organized the talent show; I helped him with his college applications and with writing twelve drafts of his personal statement until it was perfect. I even attended his trunk party after he
graduated. We kept in touch after he graduated from high school. He often reached out to me for advice, support, or just to vent about the challenges he faced during his first year of college.

Tae was a motivating force for his peers who always approached everything with positivity and hopefulness. He was an objective voice amongst students who often confronted his peers in their lives about the decisions they were making. I can remember Tae talking with one of his peers about a negative choice he had made. Tae had just learned that his peer had affiliated himself with a gang, and Tae was so disappointed in him. I was present for this conversation as Tae asked him why he made this life choice. That’s who Tae was. He always saw the potential in all his peers and believed in them just as much as he believed in himself. This young man continuously inspired me as an educator.

**Tae’s Childhood Experience**

The very first story that Tae told me in this interview was how he moved around from shelter to shelter, city to city because his mother was unable to take care of him. Tae stated;

My background… okay… (laughs)… ummm sooo. I was born here. But then I moved to Kansas City, Missouri. Ummm.. To move with my father because my mom couldn’t take care of me. We kept on moving like from shelter to shelter. We was living in poverty basically. Ummm… and then my father he done something horrible in Kansas City so I had to move back with my mother basically (Tae 1:4.)

Tae later went into more detail as to why he left Kansas City when he was seven years old.

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3 I reference each interview by indicating the interviewee, interview number, and page number of the transcript, thus, “Tae 1:4” refers to Tae’s first interview, p. 4.
My mom was moving from shelter to shelter… She was saying she couldn't take care of us. It wasn't fit for little kids to move like that, so she left us at our grandma's house and never came back. She was trying to get her life together. My grandma couldn't take care of us because she's always working, so she found our father. He was in Kansas City. We moved there, we'd been there 4 years. Not that long, but he had shot somebody in front of me. I was a daddy's boy, so I followed him outside when he told me not to. Maybe if I didn't follow him, I wouldn't have seen him shoot somebody. But he did, and then went to jail. My aunty, his sister, she contacted my family in Chicago saying that the kids needed to be with Michelle, who I thought was my mother. So, I didn't really remember my mom then, and then they found my mom actually. When she had my youngest brother. Then, they came to Kansas City to pick us up (Tae 1:16.)

Tae continued to tell me about his childhood while he lived in Chicago with his mother and brother, who was one year younger than him, after they had been reunited.

okay… ummm my childhood. Well, I always moved. Like we moved a lot. Basically so, its not like I like (laughs)… like you know I grew up in a lot of places because I’m always moving.

And ummm… usually we were always moving because of like gentrification and stuff like that so we would get kicked out the building and then we’d move. And so I never really had like a childhood cause I had to like take care like of my brothers basically when I was little (Tae 1:16.)

Tae discussed how poverty impacted his life, and how he often remembers not having enough to eat.

I mean sometimes they struggled like feeding us. I know that. I don’t know if it was, if they struggled when we was little. But when we got older… and it was getting hard. People were unemployed… you know.

I then asked, how did you know things were getting hard?

Well because we had a link card, and sometimes the refrigerator would be like empty. And I’d pretend like I’m not hungry so… Like I would pretend I wasn’t hungry. Like I remember that (Tae 1:9.)
When I asked Tae to describe his family, he discussed the adversity of living with a mother who suffered from mental illness. Growing up Tae had to take on a parental role for his siblings as his mother was unable to take care of them.

My family. That’s hard to explain… Cause… (laughs)… cause it’s I don’t know, it’s a lot of personalities to deal with. And especially to deal with your mom when she’s bipolar, and so… Pause… yea, my family I mean… they’re beautiful you know, their beautiful but it just hard to deal with you know when you gotta take care of your brothers, and then help your mom out. And kinda like you don’t want to be selfish. You want to help yourself as well but its like there are other people who need you in your family. And then sometimes they don’t understand, you know they don’t get that… so you clash and bump heads a lot, but I mean (Tae 1:6.)

Upon asking Tae about the biggest struggles that his family faced while he was growing up, he told me a story about when his grandmother died during his junior year of high school. Again, Tae had to take on an adult-like role for not only the siblings in his family, but the adults as well.

… probably when my great, great grandma died. Yeeea… (laughs)! You know.. you gotta be strong because everybody love her. She was like the backbone basically, so like when you don’t have no backbone, you just crash. So it was like all the adults was like crashing and the young kids basically like the teenagers had to take care of the adults… (Tae 1:8.)

Later he talked about her again.

My grandmother was 97, died of old age. She was really strong. Still cooking, can’t even see. Real strong. It’s just difficult, I felt they (reference to mother and Tae’s other aunts and uncles) shouldn’t have kept her. I was being emotional because I felt it was her time to go and they were prolonging it. You keeping her here on life support and making it more dramatic. It was too much. It was junior year, I just wanted to go through school. After she died I was so tired. I felt like I couldn’t show my emotions because the adults were showing they ass and going crazy. I just thought that was so weird for me to take care of adults. Supporting them, calling, trying to keep family together. That’s not my job, I felt so stressed out. I don’t understand how a 97 year-old lady can do that. It’s a difficult
job. An 18-year-old boy can’t do that. That should be no one’s job. I was just like going through school difficult. Crying. I’m like what can I do? I can’t give you no wisdom. Trying to do homework and crying in the background. Arguing. That’s why, not to be selfish, but I did activities so I wouldn’t be at home. I was tired of the chaos. So I keep myself busy so I can go through the day (Tae 2:3.)

Tae told me a second story about the struggles he faced when he was in middle school.

Okay… ummm… (laughs)! Sooo I was in 6th grade. I was don’t really know how old I am.. Basically I am young. So umm… my friend told the whole school that I was gay. But, I’m in 6th grade. And so you know Justice High School has middle school and high school. And it’s a small school so everybody knows your business. And ahhhh…. It was just very difficult because I was the only gay, the only gay male at the time. At Justice High School or whatever, so its like a target… Like I was a target basically. And I lost a lot of friends… so called friends.

And uh… I don’t know it was just very difficult to be myself. Like I hated myself. I was like going through this like depression. I went to like a hospital for depression or whatever. Not like overnight. But like I would go there for some counseling. Ummm it was just real difficult cause I was like alone. I mean I was kinda of. Um… I don’t know. It was just. It was weird. Basically like I’m in the middle and everybody was surrounding me. Like that’s how I felt everyday like going to school. And… it was just cruel. Like I really didn’t trust nobody, especially because a friend, you know was telling everybody your business. And you want it to be confidential.. But that’s probably the hardest thing… but I’m good now (Tae 2:4.)

Tae also discussed the aspect of violence in his community. He described recent occurrences to illustrate this.

It is weird cause like when I first moved to Uptown, like I was a bit confused. Because it’s like… there is like some good places you know, and then you know and there’s like there’s like, a lot of violence basically. Like just yesterday like this 13-year-old boy got shot in his head… annddd… like you know, like going bananas. So it was just like very hectic. Like it’s… it could be rough. But then on sometimes it can be beautiful. Like it’s a nice neighborhood, it looks beautiful… but there’s violence basically (Tae 1:16.)
Tae then told me a story about how he had experienced violence in the Justice community while he was just a child playing with his family outside.

Like I remember when I was little. It was me and my brothers and my cousin. And... umm this girl didn’t like my little cousin, and they wanted to fight her. And so I was like trying to put them together... And this boy like pulled a gun out on me and like they was holding my brother back. And had a gun to my head and had my cousin and some other girl fight... (Tae 1:16.)

I then asked him, How old were you?

I was only like 10. You just see em. You just see little kids and they just be talking crazy. And I don’t know (Tae 1:16.)

Tae continued to tell me about the way violence impacted him in his community, and he told me a recent story of how his brother was impacted by these conditions.

Yea, like they tried to recruit my little brother. He’s 15, he’s got like dreads. And you know, he trying to fit in basically. And I think they like peeped that (noticed that), they noticed and they wanted to talk to him. Yea... like trying to influence him to try to be in a gang... Like, I just, I don’t... It don’t make no sense to me.

A month ago, ummm my little brother was outside going to a community organization dance center. Cause I just put him in a program. And so... what was they saying to him? They was like Waka Flocka (name of a popular rapper), I don’t know why they was calling him that. But they was calling him Waka Flocka. He went over there. They (Gang affiliated youth) was shaking hands. Then I had called my brother over here, sooo when I called him over here and I was asking him how do you know them or whatever, cause these are grown men, so I asked him how do you know them. And then they came over here by me, and they was still talking. I guess they didn’t know that I was his brother. Because they were still asking him the same question they asked him when he was over there. And I was just like do y’all know that this little boy is like... he’s 15. They were just like we need to recruit... And I was like your not recruiting my little brother. You know what I mean. I just. I just think that is so disrespectful because he don't got no youth, like your taking this little boy's youth away. I just found that so rude. That kinda blew me a little bit, because that's my little brother. He's already foolish. He play too much, he's a goofball. But now you tryna recruit him, that's a whole different story (Tae 1:15.)
Having friends in the Justice community came with danger for Tae. He told me a story where his life was threatened because of where he was and who he was talking to one day after school.

… if you are in a gang, you can put yourself in danger. People are going to die. Things like that happen. It’s just hard. It’s a lot to cope with when you in school. It’s difficult to take care of others in school. You shouldn’t have to worry about that when you’re a kid, but you do. I was chillin… I just talk to everybody. I was chillin with some gangerbangers basically. We was talking, like a legit convo (conversation). I was asking why they joined, because this person has a roof over his head. I was explaining that I wasn’t comprehending. You have allowance, a loving family people taking care of you. You don’t need money or drugs. I felt threatened because in the midst of this conversation, a violent battle broke out. I felt unsafe. They had weapons and bats. They were like talking crazy. I’m like, I’m not in no gang. But they don’t care. That lifestyle, it’s difficult to trust people. I don’t know. I can’t even say because I’m not in it. That’s a rough lifestyle. I felt like oh my god I’m about to die. I can’t imagine feeling like that every day. And they feel that. They go through like battles and confrontations every day. You can die any moment, that’s how I’d feel in a gang. I was like, it’s time to go. I don’t know how people can do that. That’s how I learned when and where to talk to people. But that’s sad because I should be able to talk to anyone wherever I go, and not have to hide and duck in corners. Or protect him in a way. I gotta meet him somewhere else (Tae 2:4.)

Sef

Sef’s parents were immigrant refugees from Eritrea, and he and his siblings were first generation American in his household. Sef was a member of the very first graduating class of Justice High School, and he graduated in 2009. He was not the valedictorian of his class, but he was probably one of the students the Justice High School faculty and staff most respected due to how hard working and driven he was. Sef was a born leader. He was someone who always pushed himself as far as he could go no matter what the situation was, whether it was school or football. He had so much respect for the adults in
his life, and he worked so hard to achieve his goals and dreams that his energy fueled others to aspire for similar future goals including college and a successful future.

Sef was a model student at Justice High School, a role model because he led his peers by being an example of a young man who would not accept failure. I can remember sitting in the library with Sef after school for two hours helping him practice his interviewing skills for a scholarship interview. He was a young man who so deeply desired success that he put every ounce of his energy into making his dreams come true. As he and I practiced interviewing in the library, his fellow peers watched and began taking interest in trying to prepare for such opportunities as Sef did.

I had the privilege of teaching Sef for two years consecutively. In these two years I was deeply impacted by this young man. During his Junior year, my first teaching year at Justice High School, I was impressed by how motivated Sef was. All he would speak of was going to college and giving his parents a better life than they presently had. This reminded me very much of my own relationship with my parents. He was so appreciative of the opportunity and sacrifice, his parents made for him, and he was determined to pay them back for all they had done. He would tell me, “Ms. Thawani, I know my writing is not so good so you really need to help me.” Sef’s writing was actually good. He just had some basic skill issues that made his writing difficult to understand. But that’s who Sef was, never content and always trying to better himself.

Sef graduated and went off to a private liberal arts college out of state. Throughout his freshman year in college, he often emailed me to not only stay in touch, but to get help on essays in college. Sef was deeply driven and focused throughout his first year in college. He often came back to Justice High School to visit and say hello.
Each time he came home we went to lunch to catch up and discuss how life was. Sef absolutely loved college, but he often expressed that it was hard.

Last year I got a phone call from Sef. He had just graduated from college that morning. He had called to thank me for all my help and guidance over the years. He was so happy and proud that he had graduated college, and he took a moment out of his day to thank me. When I answered the phone he said, “Thawani we did it!” That phone call was one of the most amazing phone calls I have ever received in my life. But that’s who Sef is: appreciative, humble, driven, and a born leader.

**Sef’s Childhood Experience**

Sef began telling me about his Eritrean background and why his parents came to America.

I'm Eritrean-American, lived in the Justice community my whole life until high school. Love my family, they were a big impact on me being where I am and not being in trouble. Not doing anything negative. Had a good upbringing, but a lot of pressure you face. It's understandable. Both of my parents fought in the Eritrean-Ethiopian Civil War, worked their butts to get to America. Starting at the bottom and getting to where they have, there's no excuse for me and my siblings to just not to make it. They were there for me. (Sef 1:1)

Sef always talked about his family when he was in high school. Therefore, I was not surprised as he talked about his immediate family as the primary influence in his life.

My brother is very smart, intelligent. Younger sister too. I'm okay. There's a lot of pressure when your family did so much before you were born just to get to America. Land of opportunity, all that. I think they've definitely made me the man I am. It's middle school, I didn't really care about school. I just went because I had to. With Chicago, standardized testing, trying to get to the best school. My older brother did everything. I always say he's the best in the family, he killed it academically. I didn't care about school that way. Once after he went to a good school, it was my time. I didn't live up to expectations. They weren't mad, but disappointed. I understood because of the background. So that summer, I went to
summer school in 8th grade. What made me is them pushing me, but they weren't pushing me. They just said they wanted the best for me. They made me because of how hard they've worked. My mom worked two jobs, didn't complain. My dad, he went back to school not knowing too much English and got an associate's. Doing what he needed to do, interning at 40. What you have those circumstances, you can't just take life easy. Even at young age, and high school, which changed for me. Like I really want to do something. Their impact and they didn't make excuses. They wanted the best for us, and really made me who I am right now (Sef 1:2-3.)

Like all of the participants, Sef realized at a very young age that poverty impacted his life. He told me a story about this realization.

We didn't have that much money. We were lower-income, lived in Section 8. We didn't care, I actually loved Sunnyside compared to where we moved to. That financial strain, it gets to you when you buy a home. When we lived back then in a small apartment, it was fine. Money really sucked, not having it. You couldn't do things. It's funny, I can bring this up at college. They "oh, you haven't done this?" or "We go on this trip and that trip." What is a family trip? That's what I'd say (laughs). Hardship for sure is money. That was the biggest one, and that's terrible but it was. They didn't have to worry about us as kids too much. My parents don't play. Let's say I wanted to gangbang. They'd say go to Eritrea and stay with grandma. We didn't come here for you to act stupid. The hardships didn't relate to the area I lived or went to school in. Money was a big factor (Sef 1:2.)

Every Black Friday, everything downtown around then is nice. We'd go as a family and walk downtown. It was nice, we'd go and look. Look only, though. I've gained that concept of “Damn, I can't get that. What's the point of going?” It's cool to watch and cool to see if you haven't been, but we've done it over and over. At a certain age, me and my brother would ask for a toy or game, and...it's not even much, we were into foosball. The most generic kind. They said we can't do it. The thing that made me not want to disappoint them is, even if they wouldn't do it but during Christmas they would go all out. I remember Nintendo 64 came out. I didn't expect it, I expected some clothes. But they went all out. We found out for sure when my mom...like X shopping district or when we went to malls. Now you know as an adult that TV is terrible for what they do to kids, but that's another page. But, I see that and asked if mom would get this $10-$15 game. Nobody really wants it. It was hard. We just
had to be okay with it, and we were. You think about it like “Damn, I can't get it? On to the next.” (Sef 1:2.)

Sef continued by telling me about the present financial hardships that his family still faces. But unlike many of the participants, Sef had a very strong family structure and an older brother who was a role model for him.

My mom got laid off sometime in January. My dad is really holding the fort. I can be helpful, that's the family style. I'm in a position where I can, but they've told me to focus on school. They want that. But helping with bills, like my dad is 60. He's retiring soon. Mortgage doesn't pay itself. They don't have crazy retirement plans, or life insurance. It's up to the kids to handle the household. That's the only thing that really affect. I wish I could do more, and I think they know this. I want to find something to work my ass off for so they'll be fine.

If I didn't handle my business, they'd send me [back to Eritrea]. I'd understand, because they don't want me in this bad situation. Plus my brother did well. I had that role model. I won't tell him til we're older, but he had a huge impact on...changing my mindset (Sef 2:2.)

When I asked Sef about his community he talked about the presence of violence and gangs that he saw daily.

Experience wise, I see a lot of gang activity all the time. Somebody gets whooped over territory. Thankfully I haven't seen any shooting, but I've known people who died from that. Just me seeing stupidity happen. I lived there 15 years, then I moved out. Somebody was waiting on the bus and, of course, you have to cross territory sometimes. Then you witness somebody literally beaten to hell. There's a lot that I've seen from high school times. Not too much when I was little because you aren't around that. You just come and go, because you see it and then you're out of there (Sef 1:3.)

Sef talked about how his friends were from “both sides” and he acknowledged them as his peers growing up in his community.

I had a good group of friends. From both sides, dealers or gangsters. Can I say their name? Okay. You know Yusef and Bo, he's one my boys but I don't really... Like he's a part of my childhood. Like I know these guys from middle school. We were still cool. If I see
'em now, I talk to them for a little and see how they are. We're still friends because we have that past. There's other things we can talk about besides... I didn't get myself into those situations. Peers... They were peers (Sef 1:3.)

Sef continued to tell me about his close friends and how they chose not to affiliate with gangs and violence in his community.

My close friends are people not involved in that. They really want to succeed, trying to do the best. When we were kids though, everybody is friends (Sef 1:4.)

With my background, my mom didn't trust anything. This community was ok but there were a couple gangs. Not the safest place. As a kid, you're fine. If you know people, if you're neutral, you're good. But I really wanted to do basketball or football leagues when I was little. The community had strong park districts but they were more short-term than others. Even the Eritrean community wasn't too strong in my area (Sef 1:2.)

**Aeryn**

Aeryn is a young African American woman who primarily grew up on the south side of the city and commuted to Justice High School for two hours each day. Aeryn was a member of the “mean girls” club at Justice High School. Not literally. But I used to call a small clique of young women the “mean girls” because they just had so much sass and attitude; Aeryn was no exception. They were not really “mean”. I just liked to tease them. This was my way of engaging in friendly banter with them which and the way I initially established my connection with Aeryn. My humorous sarcasm always made her laugh and this became one way that Aeryn and I became close. I called this group of students the “mean girls” because they had such a strong presence in the school. Together these youth made events happen, swayed teachers and administration to support them with their ideas for their student body, and overall they were just a strong and persuasive group of students. I also called them “mean girls” because it would get their attention and
they would always argue with me about how they were not mean, but rather the most polite and authentic young women in the school. Aeryn was in the 2011 graduating class. Although Aeryn was an outgoing and sometimes an outspoken young woman, there was something that always set her apart from the rest. She had strong character and a very determined attitude. She was the captain of the girl’s basketball team, MC for the annual talent show, and a Justice High School Leader.

Aeryn won the Leader of the Year award during her senior year because all the senior teachers felt she embodied the qualities of what it means to be a leader or role model at Justice High School. I nominated her for this award because she was a student who I often saw standing up for what was right. I can remember a moment when Aeryn was in my classroom. One of her peers just told me that she was unable to attend the final practices for the annual talent show. My response to this young woman was that this was unacceptable and unfortunately she would be cut from the show if she could not attend the final practices. This young woman began to scream at me in such anger and frustration. Aeryn immediately intervened, calmed her friend down, and told her she was completely out of line. She even made this young woman come back and apologize to me the following morning. That’s who Aeryn was, someone who stood up for what was right.

I met Aeryn for the first time when I taught her class while her regular teacher was away on maternity leave. After one week of teaching Aeryn’s class, I told her she was really talented in literature and writing, and I suggested she take AP English Literature her senior year. In this moment Aeryn was a bit stunned as almost though I had said something wrong. She couldn’t believe I saw so much potential in her. Aeryn was a
young woman who just didn’t see how amazing she truly was. Her character deeply impacted the faculty and staff of Justice High School because she was extremely unique. She supported her peers, she was principled beyond herself, and what was most impressive, she was the type of student that was driven by curiosity. She did not care so much about getting a high grade, she was genuinely interested in reading the fiction stories, and she loved the class discussions.

After Aeryn graduated I stayed in touch with her. I even hired her as my dog walker after she graduated during the summer. Another teacher Ms. Jeremy and I had really become close with the “mean girls” and we decided to have a small weekend retreat at Ms. Jeremy’s home. I vividly remember all of us cooking a huge lasagna dinner together and having a wonderful time. We all sat at the dinner table, and before we ate each person went around the table giving thanks and reflecting on one of their favorite moments from high school. I can remember telling all the girls that they were her sisters. She began to cry during this moment as she expressed how scared she was to go off to college alone. She also said how thankful she was to Ms. Jeremy for opening her home and her family to her. Aeryn began referring to Ms. Jeremy as “Mom” after this trip, and she became like an extension to Ms. Jeremy’s family. She would attend church with them, spend holidays, and stay with them whenever she could.

Aeryn’s Childhood Experience

When I asked Aeryn about her childhood, she told me how much she moved around when she was a child. She described this as,

I was born in early 1993 in the Northern hospital, yup. I am the eldest child on my father's side out of 9. My parents divorced when I was... They separated when I was 3 though. After then, we kinda moved around a lot. I stayed here, Indiana, Alabama, Mississippi.
We just kinda bounced around. I went to like 6 elementary schools. But basically yeah I grew up in Oakley neighborhood for the most part (Aeryn 1:1.)

Throughout the interviews Aeryn referred to Oakley neighborhood as her primary community because she commuted from there to the Justice community to attend middle and high school.

Grandma didn't like us outside so it wasn't too much to do in Oakley neighborhood. She wouldn't have it because it was so bad. It was crazy stuff that'd happen out there, but we'd throw a lot of parties. Every now and then go out and ride bikes, but I didn't hang out in Oakley neighborhood too much. At my dad's, we were always outside... She'd just say don't get shot. It's that simple. There were incidents where our house was shot into. All types of things (Aeryn 1:4.)

When I asked Aeryn to describe her immediate family, she told me about all of the individuals in her household and the difficult relationships she had with them.

Dysfunctional. My mom, sisters, and grandma. My grandma is kinda off, she went through some things. She went through depression and it knocked it off her game. She had high blood pressure and anxiety, so I used to go help my grandma a lot. Now we bump heads a lot because she got messed up by what's going on. Me and my mom, she is strong but she is still overprotective of me because of what she went through. She got pregnant real young and was runnin around with my dad and working three jobs to survive.

Any little thing I do, she just looked at it as “This is what I did and here's how it plays out.” In high school, I couldn't do a lot of things. I never did the homecomings or dances or football games. It was crazy. Living with her, I don't like to say it, but we are so much alike and that's how we bump heads.

I have a 17-year-old sister which is crazy because I don't know if she's going through puberty right now or something because...she didn't develop like I did with school. She went to like a KIPP school, so she wasn't really exposed to the city much. She went to the West Side for school. She never really got hood instincts. Her social skills weren't like everybody else. Now she goes to Glenwood, and everything's materialistic and about who's with who.
Now me and her are going through our little phase, she's feeling herself so I gotta let her do that.

Then I have an 8-year-old sister. She's becoming herself, asks a lot of questions. She tries to get a lot of information. It kind of weirds me out because she grows up so fast. She's a cool kid though. She's smart (Aeryn 1:2.)

Aeryn continued to tell me about her relationship with her sisters. Aeryn has an older sister who is two years older to her and a younger sister who is four years younger than her. It was clear in this section of the interview that she was sad about her current relationship with her younger sister.

... I have two younger sisters that... okay my younger sister, that's my baby (figurative). I take care of her and when I came back from school we kinda fell back. She still loves me the same I guess, who knows how an 18-year-old's mind works (reference to her younger sister)? She was just more, leaned on my other sister more. Confided in her more. We just bump heads so much and like, she went to the College Fair and she asked me to go. She got accepted to a couple schools and got good money. One school was basically giving everything except she had to pay for her books and board. I remember we went downstairs to talk to the people about more money, she wasn't as enthusiastic as I was when I was there.

One college made her an offer… They are gonna pay the whole way and mom doesn't have to take care of it. That's what I want you to do. I hate to say it but my mom's the person who gets very unstable, and I don't want that for none of my sisters or myself.

... It hurts me, I'm the oldest and took care of them at different points in time and looked up to me. And now it's not there no more. That hurts my heart (Aeryn 3:19.)

Aeryn told me a story about her childhood and how poverty affected their ability to settle down and live in one place.

I remember a lot. It's crazy. My mom and my dad, when I was like 3 we bounced around a lot just to live. For jobs and stuff. So basically feeding a household of kids there was struggle with that. It was always about that for the most part, being able to provide. That's why we moved a lot. I didn't really have a lot of issues until
high school. Within the family maybe people not getting along. I know I had a lot of issues with my dad, not communicating with him. I was a child and he was a jerk sometimes. He did childish things back then. Poverty, that's the most part we dealt with. As far as not being able to have, I remember times we'd eat and my mom wouldn't. This was before my younger sister. She'd make sure we had things (Aeryn 1:2.)

Aeryn told me a story about why her parents split up and how much this impacted her throughout her life.

My parents splitting. Things are so vivid it makes me mad. I can remember the family, I can recall us doing things and coming home together. Staying at my grandma's house together. I can remember us being a family. So when they broke up it's like “what am I gonna do?” I was a daddy's girl hardcore, like that was my main man. I was sabotaged, I was bad. I would give them hell. I don't even wanna talk about the stuff I did because it was bad. Like I was mean, I wouldn't give nobody the time of day for anything. I was so hurt. I think probably till like 8th grade I thought they would get back together. A little even freshman year, I was hopeful. My mom didn't tell me too much what happened, and they hadn't been legally divorced yet so... I was like, that was something I go through a lot. A lot of my problems have to do with that (Aeryn 2:4.)

When I asked Aeryn why her parents broke up, she was clearly upset by the memories she was telling me about.

My dad was cheating on her! He was a dog. He was very immature. He didn't know better, and she didn't either because she was young and naïve. Like she was a nerd, she went to TL Magnet High School, didn't do nothin. She was like not exposed to a social lifestyle. She met my dad because she went out to a party and she don't really be goin' out. Here's his guy and his mom doesn't care about what he does. He had a lot older cousins and hung with older people. When he met my mom he'd already had 4 kids.

I don't remember the day. I do remember getting a call. Officially I knew they broke up when we moved to Alabama. Me and my dad were just talking about this. My mom and sister just moved to Houston and I was telling her about how her dad was feeling about moving down there (Aeryn discussed her mother’s recent move with her younger sister to Houston. Aeryn did not go with.) (Aeryn 1:7.)
Aeryn went on to remember when her mother moved her abruptly to Alabama one night and how her father told her how hard this experience was for him.

And he (her father) was like, he was on his way out and he cried all day and night in the car. I was like that's crazy, I'm taken away from my dad, my grandma, my cousin. We moved to Alabama (Aeryn 1:7/8.)

I asked Aeryn more about Alabama and why her Mother kept moving.

We were in Alabama on and off for years, I kept going back and forth. For maybe like seven years.

I asked, why back and forth? She replied,

Issues, I don't know. Did what was best, go where the money was. We stayed in Alabama for a long time, she got a job, met a guy. They broke up and she came to Chicago again and then we stayed. That's how it was (Aeryn 1:8.)

... I had some good times there. The guy my mom was with, he was the only dude I like out of the people she dated. He was the one that didn't work out. He ended up cheating and having a baby on her. He was so nice to us though. He bonded with me too, just a super nice dude. I just enjoyed him, he gave me a father figure type of thing. He was there for me. Events at school, he'd be there. Pick us up, drop him off. He played football so I'd go to practice with him, he'd let me come to games. I really liked that dude. Now when I see him, he doesn't get the time of day.

He cheated on my momma. He did me wrong and I had so much feelings. I sabotage relationships, anything to get mom's attention. I give you the time of day, and this is what you do? It was a night my mom got real upset because she found out about everything. She was arguing and I was up in the room. Mom is yelling and I got up because my room is across from theirs. She was like butt naked, drunk, I don't know why. Drunk, in her feelings. He was telling her, she fell like down the stairs and stuff. I remember I got involved because he was like call his mom and dad. I just learned my address. My mom was like I need to know that in case I have to call the police. I remember his parents coming over there, my mom freaked out and they freaked out. We had a Cadillac with rims, and leathers and TVs. He drove off with the Cadillac and never came back (Aeryn 1:9.)
When I asked Aeryn more about her life now and why she did not continue going to college, she told me the story of how her mother never paid her financial aid bill.

So at first, the school wanted me for basketball. So my mom was getting everything together, like I didn't know too much about the FAFSA. She was supposed to do the tax thing. That was her job, I couldn't do it. I remember she took a long time to do it. The coach was calling me, trying to get me down there, and my mom wouldn't jump on the wagon about it. She jumped on it so late in the game, school was gonna start in like two weeks. While in school, she didn't tell me about the money arrangements. It was just taken care of, but in reality we took out a loan of course and she didn't tell me about it. All it was, was $50/month while I was in school, she didn't tell me that so I also had a balance. It was like $6,000.

So as I'm going back to apply, my coach is like “Yeah, call financial aid and we'll get it going.” That's what I did, then I get a letter because my FAFSA wasn't cleared. It wasn't because my mom hadn't paid the bill at all. Never paid and I had no knowledge of it. I called and asked what was the deal, she was like “Yeah, that's the bill wasn't paid.” I'm like why won't you tell me this? I have a job, I coulda been paid this (She could have paid this on her own if she had known that she would owe this amount). I ended up having to pay like $600 to get my FAFSA cleared or put on hold. Then the school was like we can't do it, because I had a balance for like $6,000. I'm like what are you talking about? She never paid the balance off. She didn't get it, regardless of if I'm in school, I'm gonna have to pay this back. It's never going away (Aeryn 3: 20.)

After Aeryn’s mother and father separated, and Aeryn maintained a relationship with her dad. She described him to me by telling me a story about her childhood.

So we'd go to the movies – he had a truck – he was very stingy too. For a man who sold drugs for a living and was a little wealthy, he was very stingy with his money. We pull up to the theater, he'd park the car, he wouldn't turn it off. And he'd just sit, so we'd sit because we're kids. He'd get mad at us and say “why y'all still sitting in the car? Why didn't you go in there and get the tickets?” Something just like that. Like how were we supposed to know. We didn't do nothin'. He was so mighty. People put him on this pedestal. That happened, and you just bow your head and go do it. Nothin' you can
Aeryn’s father was a drug dealer in the community and Aeryn learned about her father very early in her life.

... I physically knew he sold drugs because my mom and dad split and we'd go see him. He'd have a pillowcase of money and he'd let me count it, I'd stay up and hang out with him because he was gone during the day. I'm standing waiting for him to come home usually. Money was our thing. I remember one day, he had a small window that people would come to at night, and that's when I saw, when I knew (Aeryn 1:3.)

I asked Aeryn if she was scared when she visited her father. Her response to my question led to a story about who her father was in the community.

Because who he (father) was, and what my last name was. Nothing happened. I could get away with murder. I wasn't scared at all. It hurt, it hurt because people knew. It hurt us as kids, the things he'd do. Pick us up and take us to the hotel but leave us there. He wouldn't stay. We didn't come for that, we came to be with you. So those type of things hurt us (Aeryn 1:3.)

She continued to tell me about her father and the experiences that she had when she went to visit him.

My last name makes me part of this kaboom. He had a Ford truck and it'd be full of fireworks. It was crazy. Everybody's outside, it's kind of late like 8 or 9 pm. Just having fun, and it's like a house on the end of the block. I always thought they were cool even though I didn't know them. I guess he [a neighbor] had a problem with all the fireworks being too close to his house. My dad is such a jerk that he didn't care. We're just all playing and I'm sitting with my sister and brother, and the guy comes from his house and has a gun and he's coming across and we see him so everybody stops. We just look at him because he has a gun, and it's my dad and cousin. They're just talking. I don't know what they're saying. They're on the sidewalk, I'm on the driveway. They're yelling, my dad is acting an ass. So, this man loses it and let's it go. My cousin pushed my dad out the way and he got shot in the head. All I remember is sitting there watching it, and I couldn't move. I was there, stuck. People are scattering around, leaving and running. I was just looking. My sister
came and dragged me to my aunt's house. I wasn't even scared I was just like “Wow...”

He died on the way to the hospital. I was there for a long time. He got shot, he was laying on the floor. The guy ran, my dad was helping and then my uncle came. He was on the ground and they were talking to him and he was like gasping for air. It was crazy. I was 12 years old (Aeryn 1:4.)

Aeryn told me about how she lived in Oakley neighborhood, but her mother enrolled her in school on the other side of town, a safer community. This ended up causing Aeryn to have to commute during elementary, middle, and high school. Often she commuted without adult supervision.

I Started at S Elementary School on near Oakley neighborhood, then me and my sister got in a lottery so then we went to a magnet school in a better area.

I then asked her, So you went to school on the other side of town? She replied “yeah”. I then asked her how long the commute was.

An hour and a half from school to home. But back then my mom was in the Chicago Ensemble Theater, so we'd just catch a bus there. This other kid from the South Side, his mom would take us sometimes. We took the train though mostly (Aeryn 1:5.)

In addition to the instability in Aeryn’s life, she also told me many stories of family members who died and the impact this had on her.

I lost my brother, my cousins, two cousins. Like they did something. One of my cousins... he was just a good kid. Did good in school, wasn't looking for trouble, and somebody ended his life. I got a cousin who she had leukemia, and we'd hang out and she never complained. Never. She gets leukemia as a sophomore in high school and never complains. Smiling and embracing people, like it's ok. It's not. And then my brother... that just hurt so close to home, you never see stuff like that coming. We were talking and he was like “I want you to come around more.” Because he stayed in the suburbs, he was like... I felt so bad, so bad. It's like now, I think like “Man, what can I do?” It's nothing to do (Aeryn 3:20.)
Aeryn told me the story of how her brother on her father’s side got sick and passed away this past year.

He got sick. He had a virus, thought it was the flu. He got sick, but it was a parasite and it was in him eating him up. It happened in the summer, he was good and then...he was good for a while. And then he got sick, and then he had to stay in the hospital. And he'd be good, he was doing well, then he got severely sick. Then it got to a point where he goes up to ICU. Then like those last 3 weeks he was just in ICU. He ended up dying from 3 different viruses in his body.

When my cousin died, he died in the war. That hit us rock bottom as a family. We hadn't had immediate death, and he was so young, like 21, and that got us all off track. I remember as a family it being really bad. That's when grandma went into depression. Seeing grown men cry and my mom, my first cousins. It was so dramatic. I was more affected after the fact, like “Oh, he's not here no more.” That was hard. My aunt went through a phase too. Psychologically, because she just lost her son. She was in a facility in the city. It was my grandma's sister, my mom's first cousin.

I then asked Aeryn, how old she was then? She responded that she was “7 or 8”.

Aeryn also told me about her Grandmother and what it was like when she passed away. Aeryn described this moment in a story (Aeryn 1:2.)

When my grandma died, that caught me off track. I heard about it and I was in the room with my cousin. Her and my grandma were just talking, like she had just died that previous night and nobody told me. I wasn't asleep I was just laying down, and I was just like bawling. It was crazy, me and my grandma were close. Not that close, but I had just never felt so hurt before. That's when I had saw my dad just...go through some things. My grandma had 4 kids and he was the only boy. She spoiled him so much. And I think that was his problem with havin' all them kids because she didn't penalize him for anything. She just let him think that whatever he did was okay. He was a king, unstoppable. That's when I knew that he was breakable. I knew that he could hurt. My dad was manipulative to us, do the craziest things. He'd think we knew what he was thinking. I went outside and I was like “Wow, he can be hurt.” (Aeryn 1:2.)

When Aeryn described her community, she told me stories of beauty and adversity.

Initially she started by telling me some positive stories of her community.
We had a lot of older people that people just genuinely respected, not because their age but because of who they were. They could say “stop”. A lot of people had the genuine respect. It wasn't as bad as it is now, it wasn't. People really had respect for people.

I remember I was younger, they used to do block club meetings. It was like the area though, not just the block. I remember people being very active about that. There were flyers everywhere and people were outside talking and spreading the word. Picking up trash. Cleaning up the community, trying to make it work (Aeryn 1:5.)

After some positive memories Aeryn described a shift in the attitude of the youth within her community that brought about change and violence.

The kids, the young kids. I don't know what happened, but the kids are just like... they don't care. Nobody values life, they don't think it's worth anything. As if it's a video game, “we just gonna shoot them and then it's over.” What about that child's child? Or their mother? You just so strung up on who's with who that you're gonna end a life. People are just exposed to too much now. A gun is too easy to get, it's too easy to do a lot of things. There's no restrictions, even with drugs. You don't see no 14 year old kids selling back then, you just wouldn't. What grown man do you know that would let a 14 year old sell drugs? It's no respect. There's no levels to anything, it's just open for everybody to do what they want.

They just say you're crazy for living there, it's awful, they kill people. People depict Oakley neighborhood is trifling. We do put ourselves out there like that, that's what you see. Three dead in Oakley neighborhood, four injured. That's what it is. You got people that's coming up outta this, it's not all failure. You know? (Aeryn 1:6.)

When I asked Aeryn about her community, she also described violence and she told me a personal story of her involvement in events that she was ashamed of.

We had bad kids at Justice High School. I was very naïve to that. I didn't have a crowd, so I was looking for one. This was before basketball started, so we're taking the train with all these heathens and they just like... they don't have a care in the world. They don't care about the next hour. I was so stupid that I didn't recognize that. I was in the hype because everybody's all pumped up. I just regret and seriously I feel bad. I should report some of the things I was a
part of. I was there but I didn't physically do anything. I wasn't happy with what people were doing. I didn't realize it until after but I wasn't happy with myself for associating with them. I was getting a bad rep for that, we were in the paper it was ridiculous. Not good press at all. That was what my mom wanted me to leave Justice for. That's when I started falling off a little bit, I was like whatever. Doing day-to-day. Just to do it, you know? The school was so bad at that point in time, I don't know how anybody coulda slowed it, because of the kids. How they were. That type of thing... I wish that I hadn't been in tune with that. I would've done better than what I did. That was awful times (Aeryn 2:15.)

I then asked her, “Tell me a story where this struggle impacted you?”

Yeah... so the older guys at that time... trifling... their idea of fun was going on the train and beating on somebody and taking everything they got. They would do it. One time they did it, this is when I was done. It was an old man, like 60 old. I remember they just beat em. To the point where his pants split on the sides, they beat him. He was so hopeless, so hopeless. It was crazy because it was so unnecessary. They didn't even take anything... maybe his wallet. Usually what they took was electronics, but it was like... (long pause)... I was so disturbed. I watched that man get off that train, and how disheveled he was. It was bad. I made it a point then that I would not be a part of it any more. I couldn't. Might as well go to jail with everybody else at that point. I wasn't gonna be associated with that any more. What that meant was waiting for the next trains, that's what it was. I couldn't do that. I couldn't do that gang violence. Couldn't do it. I couldn't put myself in that position, because I'm just as guilty as the guy holding the gun (Aeryn 2:15.)

Aeryn described some of her neighbors in the community and she told me stories of violence she witnessed while living in Oakley neighborhood.

Yeah, there's a house to the left of us. This nice old lady lived there, but she died. She kept it really nice, but then the house became a Section 8 house. Nobody stays in that house more than 5 months tops. They don't take care of it. There was a incident, this one family living there who'd friended a neighborhood drug dealer. I don't know why they always happen to find the neighborhood drug dealer but they do. They befriend them and then... I don't know how it works in that house. The girl she had two kids and friended the drug dealer. They always argue at like 9 pm, really loud. But you just sleep through that after a while. Like whatever, that's what they do. They're only paying like $20 for rent. They'd argue, scream,
One day, we woke up and it wasn't okay. The girl and the guy had a bad argument and he killed her. It was something really simple, but I can't remember. It was simple, and he killed her in front of her kids. I was just thinking like, it was so sad (Aeryn 1:6.)

Aeryn told me a story about one of her peers she went to school with when she was younger.

No home training, hoodlums. It's crazy you ask that, because there's a girl who grew up in the community and she was younger than me, and she disappeared for a while and when she came back she didn't look like herself no more. She was little. She had been on drugs and stuff. I was just looking at her the other day and now she's on drugs and just out there. Only a year younger than me. I was just like, wow, it's crazy how that can happen to you. We went to the same schools, I knew you. It's just sad, she's just out here selling her body doing drugs (Aeryn 1:6.)

When asking Aeryn more about her family, it was clear that she felt like many of them didn’t care or worry about her. She describes this conflict with her family.

Then I got taken out of school, slight depression you could say. Moved around a lot. A lot of conflict with my family. I just got a lot of... my grandmother really would throw a lot of punches at me for being at home. Nitpick with me a lot, not really sympathetic. She's from the era where it's high school, you get a job, like that. But that's just not what I was in life, I wanted to go to school. When I came home I remember it being so hard, she was such a jerk. Say I wasn't home or I was in Gurnee, whenever I'd be there my sister think it was okay that I was a bad person. She got brainwashed that I wasn't doing nothing with my life, worthless, imma be here forever My sister wouldn't clean up, my grandmother would be like “Oh, she's in school she's doing something.” I'm like where'd that come from. That's why I bounced around a lot, because I couldn't be there.

I don't even care like... Like I don't even get support from my family. My grandmother would call my sister 30 million times from the time we got out of school till the time we got home, but I walk the street by myself it's okay. Like you can handle it, you'll be ok. They never asked me if I step out the door Imma make it back? It's kinda my fault because I had that “I'm good” persona. I'm out here, you know. This is what I lived up to. Taking the midnight train
home through Chicago, or even on to high school taking the train home from games from way out west. Like I don't care. That's just how I grew up to be, that's what the streets did to me. I don't know how to be no different. I don't know how to be sympathetic to that. It don't matter. It won't change. And I see why all the people are outside, because that's all you know that's all you did, that's all you seen. So if you grow up like that, the TV puts the illusion in your mind that the streets, you'll be tough. When you do that you think it's okay. I couldn't fault anybody for what they do, because I do it in the same manner. Only difference is I don't carry nothin' with me (referring to carrying a weapon) (Aeryn 3:21.)

Trinity

Trinity was one of the four Caucasian students who attended Justice Community High School. She graduated in 2010. When I saw Trinity around Justice, she was always alone and very quiet. She was very shy and timid. I never saw her involved in many activities after school. I really only saw her during the school day. I remember looking at student attendance rates while I was on the Instructional Leadership Team, and noticed how poor attendance was. From the records it showed that Trinity attended school two to three days a week.

One day I was talking with a group of teachers, and I learned that Trinity was pregnant. Trinity was not my student at the time, but I had heard from others how intelligent this young girl was. Ironically, Trinity came to speak to me that day after school about the Empower You program, a program that another teacher and I began at Justice High School a year before. The Empower You program accepts a cohort of only 13 students each year and provides life planning, college planning and preparation, individual youth guidance, and a supplemental academic and social education that helps to empower youth to pursue a college education. This program begins during students’ junior year, and the mentors of this program follow students through their first year in
college providing them with support, checking in on them frequently, and just maintaining a relationship with them.

Trinity had come to talk to me because she wanted to know about the program and whether she would be eligible for it despite her pregnancy. I remember feeling overwhelmed as I did not have all the answers for her. I told her that as mentors in this program we choose students based on their character, determination, and willingness and not their life circumstances. I explained that the students who were accepted into this program were individuals who truly wanted to change their lives and their future. She asked me if I thought she should apply, and I told her that I absolutely thought she should apply. What was the worst that could happen? Trinity was later accepted into the program and at that time she decided to have her child and place it up for adoption. Trinity’s mentors were Ms. Bach and Ms. Barts, two of the most dedicated teachers at Justice High School.

I can remember talking with Ms. Bach and Ms. Barts daily on how to best support Trinity. These two teachers went above and beyond to provide Trinity with support, advice, and resources. They helped Trinity attain an order of protection from her abusive ex-boyfriend. They were involved with Trinity and her mother as they disputed over having her child, and lastly they were with Trinity every step of the way through her schooling, her pregnancy, even when Trinity decided not to give her child up for adoption.

I can remember Ms. Bach coming to my classroom weekly to get all of the work that Trinity was missing. Ms. Bach would go to Trinity’s home and tutor her in all subjects three days a week during and after the pregnancy. While Trinity was a student in
my class during her senior year I remember being so impressed with her because she was one of the most self-directed learners I had ever had. She would miss so much time away from school, and she would come back with all of her work ready to submit. She was an avid reader and loved the literature we read in our English class. She would often ask me questions about my background and culture after we had read the text, “A Fine Balance”, and she was very much passionate about understanding the cultural and social dynamic in India that she had read about in this novel.

When I met Trinity’s mother at Parent-Teacher Conferences, it was clear why Trinity had many disputes at home. Her mother suffered from mental illness and was extremely vocal about her beliefs concerning her daughter and her pregnancy. No matter how much I praised Trinity and her accomplishments in my class, during this meeting her mother was more concerned with discussing her daughter’s recent decision of choosing to move out of their apartment because it was infested with bed bugs. Trinity was concerned for her health while she was pregnant, and for the health of her child, so she decided to move into the much safer home of her mentor, Jenny.

Although Trinity was a very timid and quiet student in the classroom, she had a very strong set of beliefs. She often questioned and challenged her peers, and her essays were always written with so much persuasive language you could hear her passion in her words. After Trinity had her baby in March of 2011, she often emailed me about how she was doing. She even brought the baby to school one day. Eventually Trinity came back to school while she was still on track to graduate. She scored a 24 on the ACT exam and was accepted into a state university. I remember talking to Ms. Bach about how this University was offering her a full scholarship and family housing, so that was probably
where Trinity was going to go. I remember being so proud of Trinity because I really believed that she was truly changing her life.

**Trinity’s Childhood Experience**

When asking Trinity about her childhood and where she grew up, she told me the story of her background, which included the divorce of her parents and homelessness.

Originally from Oklahoma. Lived there until I was 7 years old. My mom and dad were divorced, so I'd live with my mom and my dad would pick me up sometimes. At the age of 7, I don't know if that's relevant... my mom asked me if I wanted to move to another city. I was like yes, yes. At first I wanted to. I didn't want to be around my dad anymore and see them always fight, so I was like “of course, I'll go so you all won't fight again.” When I was 7, went to Justice neighborhood and my mom wanted to come here for art school but that never really ended up happening.

We were homeless for 2.5 years. When we first moved here we lived in near the Justice community. Catholic charities, different shelters. I went to D Elementary School. That was really, ok. I loved it, I excelled there with straight As in my classes. But, my attendance was really bad. When I was 8, I moved to... a lot of shelters. I lived in many different places. Even DHS (Department of Home Services) (Trinity 1:1.)

Trinity described the many community shelters they lived in, and she described these experiences in great detail until her mother was able to move into their first apartment.

Department of Home Services. We were there for a few days. It's a transition place in between shelters. My mom refused for us to sleep on the floor. Anyway, we finally moved into a shelter near the Justice community. It was like a long-term shelter. We were there 2 months. It was a Jewish based shelter. I'm happy we did that, because I am Jewish by blood and that was kinda like a rekindling like with my heritage. Even though it was a shelter and there were strict rules. We had to eat kosher, like Jewish tradition. Orthodox. We celebrated the holidays like Passover... like in the evening. We celebrated holidays and Jewish traditions. After that we went to a second one in Rogers Park. It was like 5 blocks away, we were there a couple months as well. Then after that, it was like 4th grade. Then we moved into our first apartment in East Rogers Park. A small studio, but it was a home and I got a cat, which was nice. I
was about 10 years old then. We moved the next year, but they were turning that building into condos because it was on the lake. Prime real estate, so it was like we couldn't afford the proposed rent. So we moved to another neighborhood.

At the shelter, so you had to be Jewish to get in that shelter. It was targeted to... I guess people... like religion and it made people feel empowered. It was very helpful in that it was targeted toward that.....I don't know... ethnicity and religion. That was a strength, highlighting your own race. And it was good that people cared about that. I didn't really think about that completely when I was younger, but seeing it as an adult it was good for those things to be there. Otherwise, where would we go? (Trinity 1:3.)

Trinity discussed the impact of poverty on her life and how difficult it was to move into a safe apartment.

And then being in poverty...we couldn't afford much at all. My mom would always have to call organizations to get money and gifts for holidays. I couldn't get the nice stuff, and my school shoes and clothes were majority secondhand. Also, just the fact that we were in poverty and couldn't move anywhere outside that infested apartment, it was terrible. I looked for so many apartments, but you need to make like 3 times the rent and we were nowhere near that. We were barely making the rent (Trinity 1:3.)

When asking Trinity about her mother, she told me about the many issues that her mother faced and continues to face today.

I don't know… She couldn't keep a job, so she got disability. Mental disability. I still believe she can work, like if she's passionate about something. It's hard for her to take authority, it's just not.

PTSD. From stuff she's gone through. Aspergers or something is what I have. My social ability. It's a lot easier now, but growing up it was very hard for me to take social cues from people. It's still hard and I'm still awkward. But it's better than it used to be. Social acceptance even, so that was really...that's always been a struggle. That's kept me just, my relationship with her? (Trinity 1:5.)

Trinity then discussed the difficulty of trusting her mother and the story of why she felt this way.
I couldn't really trust her and I was accused of taking drugs. They called my mom to school and she yelled and stormed in there. Like you didn't even listen to my story and you're gonna believe the administration. I think that broke a lot of trust there. I had to take this class, like I can't believe she's making me do this right now. So, that definitely broke that trust. She is just really passionate about stuff, like her beliefs. I wasn't able to feel comfortable telling her what's going on. Basically, like she avoided issue. I never told her what was going on. I've some crazy things happen that she still doesn't know about and I won't tell her because it'd hurt her. It's fine, she doesn't need to know that (Trinity 1:5.)

Trinity discussed the way she was desperate to move into a safer and healthier apartment.

As a child she took on an adult role as she tried to help her mother move into a better apartment.

I don't know. I know...stations where we could search for apartments. I'd create lists and create budgets for my moms and really try and get out.

I then asked her, “How old were you?”

Maybe high school... I had enough on my 17th birthday. Junior year, I was like “mom, All I want for my birthday is to move and a haircut.” I need to move, that's it. I'm done here. That's all I want, so a month later we moved thankfully.

When I asked Trinity about her childhood and schooling, she told me many stories of trauma and abuse she experienced.

I switched schools to D Elementary School. It was nice and had many programs, however when I was in like 7th grade there was just the worst year ever. Not exaggerating. It was horrible. I got rumors every day. Rumors about me being a lesbian, like what the heck. But it all started when I told this guy I had a crush on him. I don't know what that was, he coulda been like sorry I'm not interested. What type of 7th grader says that? But whatever.

I slept over a friend's house one night, I woke up and her stepdad was on top of me. I didn't know what to do. I was just like....I don't know what happened. That's why I woke up. Her step dad, the guy asked me when I woke up if I was tired, and I was like “Yes. Where you?” I was just in shock. He got up off me and he just stopped and
right next to my friends on the side of the stairs all night. I couldn't sleep I just laid there waiting for him to leave. DCFS kept asking me questions over and over. I'm like “Even if he didn't do that – which is a problem, because maybe at that age they didn't think I could do hypothetical, which makes sense because you're supposed to do that, according to my psychology book, when you're a teen... and I was just 12.”

She asked what I was wearing...just victim-blaming. Like why you asking me what I was wearing? I'm 12, this guy is like 25, 30, I don't know. Not old, but...I didn't say anything to the school about it. My friends, quote on quote friends, said something. Rumors got around the school that I was tryna break up her family. People came up to me like why'd you do that, and I'm like what the heck. I didn't know what happened, I just told them the story that the guy was on top of me. He didn't do anything, but he was on top of me. Like why was her dad on top of me when I woke up. Thank God I woke up. I don't know if he did something while I was asleep, because I was asleep. Hopefully I woulda woke up from that, maybe that's why I woke up. I don't know what happened, but even knowing that the guy is on top of me was almost like attempted...or whatever. The dude shouldn't have been on top of me. Something needs to happen about this, right?

So... that was very hard. Just, my mom was on my side but all my friends, all the people I talked to turned on me... It really affected me in 7th grade, I ended up leaving school. My confidence level just like down to zero. I didn't care about my life, much less anything else. I was just like whatever. Through school. I hated school, but I did very ok considering I hated it and was always sick. Sometimes I'd pretend I was sick because I didn't want to go, but a lot of times I was sick (Trinity 1:2.)

Trinity experienced even more trauma when her mother made the choice to move near the location of where Trinity was sexually abused, Trinity described how much this impacted her.

So then the next apartment, the third we moved into. It was across the street from where the thing happened with my friend's dad. So we're right by this tragic event...I was like, wow. We were there for like 4 years. This time I'm in high school, so the majority of the beginning of high school. It was horrible.
I didn't have my dad in my life so I couldn't talk to him. I didn't really want to because he abused my mom, and then about that whole thing with the dude being on top of me and nobody believing me. Yeah I was mad. I begged my mom to transfer me, she wanted me to stay at the school I was at (Trinity 1:4.)

Trinity told me a story of how she had sex for the first time when she was thirteen years old, and other sexual experiences she had when she was in 8th grade.

Naive and stupid at 13. I was 13, 13. I didn't know anything about that. I didn't care, but this dude told me something like it would help him. So I said let me help you. If I had could go back I'd say that it's worth so much more than that. Don't just give it up. But, that's what happened. After that it was whatever. That wasn't even a relationship. We said it was but not really. That's all we did, and then he'd leave. That's it, so. That didn't help very much. After that, I had like

Yeah. I knew some people there, and there were a lot of boys. 8th grade I was numb to it, okay you can get with me. I'm numb, I'm just gonna take it. Taking yourself out of a situation, I forget what it's called. When you take yourself out of a situation, you think about other stuff. I was numb for a long time (Trinity 2:7.)

Trinity described her first boyfriend and this experience when she was sixteen years old.

She described a story of how she put herself in dangerous situations that lead to her being raped.

16. He was in a gang. It was bad. I hung out with people in gangs. I didn't really care. I would go there and try and get some kind of affection, but I just wanted... to feel loved. But that wasn't love, and now I know what real love is.

I was in an abusive relationship but we said we liked each other. But I cheated on him. Not really cheated, but like I was in this apartment, and my friend told me to take of my clothes. I felt like if I didn't do that like....I would just get brutally raped. I was just like whatever.

Those guys were in a gang too. They had guns, all that stuff... Part of me did put myself in that situation and associate with these people because I didn't really care that much (Trinity 1:6.)
Trinity described her first relationship as abusive, and she told me stories of what it was like when she was with her ex-boyfriend.

… I was in an abusive relationship. When I didn't wanna have sex, I basically had to. That's sad. He said he'd kill me if I left him, or knock the shit out of me. I felt mad, yeah I was mad. Even in high school like, there was situations I put myself in where the path was wrong, but I felt that if I didn't do those things that I would be raped. So I just did it, so I wouldn't be physically beaten. Or like rape raped. “Really raped”. One time like, there was an attempted rape by another high school students. At the time I didn't know you could report that, but thank god I was praying so hard. And it happened, and I was like Oh My God, I can't believe this is happening right now.

Now thank God I'm not. When I talk about it, I get a little bit anxious. Triggers. My mom I couldn't tell her much of what was going on because... I didn't feel comfortable telling her what was going on. She was like don't have sex. Don't hug them, don't kiss them that leads to sex. She was very passionate about that, so the first time she found out that I was not telling her about other things I told her I was pregnant (Trinity 1:3.)

When I asked Trinity about why she decided to keep her baby during high school, she told me the detailed story of how she came to this decision.

Okay, so it was mainly... You know about how her [Trinity’s daughter]dad is the guy I was with for two years in this abusive relationship. And, yeah. I wanted her to have a dad. I was strongly considering adoption, I had families come and everything. I wanted her to be out of poverty and have a dad in life. I strongly wanted that for her. I never wanted her to think something else because if she went to go for adoption and um...yeah... up until right before birth I called the prospective parents like “I'm going to have the baby and I want to have her come home with me for 3 days to have that time with her.” I just need my time with her before I give her to you, because I'm not sure when I'll see her again. It was an open adoption, but it's not a legal matter. I couldn't go to her once a month legally. There's no enforcement, it's a trust thing. That was kinda crazy, I didn't know.

I was trying to have 3 days to have time with her. I wasn't sure I'd see her till she was 18. I wanted that so bad for her that I said I'd have my time and then pass her to you. But they didn't like...they
were like we can't do it. I'm like, it broke me down like really? I picked you guys out of all these people and now you're telling me just because of one little thing, this one condition I wanted, you can't do it? They were scared I was gonna keep her, but by them not trusting me to do that – and I'm trusting them with her for like...until she's 18 – and you can't trust me for 3 days? I got off the phone and I'm in labor. Contractions, gotta go. I got in the hospital and was crying because that had happened and it was horrible. Even after I gave birth I was considering giving her to them. I strongly wanted that for her.

Even after that connection, I still wanted her to have a family. At the same time, I still wanted to see her but they wouldn't trust me with that. A lot of praying and stuff. It was crazy. My daughter ended up in the infant ICU for like 8 days because she had pneumonia. It was mainly me and her, I wasn't really thinking about that as much, except for when I wasn't with her. I just want her to get better. I felt selfish for keeping her, at least in my mind. Then, now I recognize I'm not. After that, I took her home. That was like Oh my gosh, they are doing this. They seemed to be back onboard with it. They visited the house, they were still there and everything. We go to the courthouse signing the paper, and I can't even sign it. My vision, everything is just blurred and I can't see anything and the room is spinning. I'm trying to sign and physically can't. I don't know what got me from that, but thank God I didn't go through with that. After that I was crying and my whole family was like take a break and go in the other room. I was with my sister, she's a mentor her name is Jackie. My mom was there. I'm like I don't know what's going on right now. My whole mind is shaky, it's horrible. She's like, “What is God telling you?” I said maybe that everything is going to be ok. And that I could possibly take care of her by myself. I didn't have anything for her. It was bad. It was like I'd lost a weight. She's like “I think he's telling you the same thing.” So I walked back in and I'm like, I've decided to keep it. Time like slowed down, I don't know. It's hard to describe, but when I said that the adoptive parents were waiting and they were devastated. I was just really happy, yet... I don't know.

When I asked Trinity about her community, she described it as very diverse both ethnically and financially.

When we lived in the Indian neighborhood it was more stable and affluent. Well, some of my friends, they were more affluent. I guess the more popular kids had more money, houses and stuff. I was just
like whattttt! To my knowledge it was mainly the people who lived in my neighborhood. Godwin, Sheridan, they're not really that rich there.

The community was like Indian and Pakistani. The other side of the neighborhood was Black and I guess White too, depending on the building. The building I was in was mainly White. We didn't see everyone, I don't know it wasn't like neighbors talk. It was more like “Oh, this is our neighbor.” It was this guy Oz, he was White. He was nice. I'd use their computer sometimes, because I didn't really have a computer ever until the last day of high school junior year (Trinity 1:4.)

When I asked Trinity about her school community, she reflected on the abundance of violence she had witnessed in this neighborhood.

But there's still just so much violence in the community, that it's crazy. I just saw a video last night of some stuff going on, shooting or whatever, it was like right next to the mural right near where they were fighting. They're just fighting. There's a mural and they don't even care to look or see it. There's a church right next to them, they're just fighting. They don't even bother to.

It's super violent, but at the same time I've grown up with a lot of people in those gangs and I've hung out with them. So it might be easier for me to ask them about what they want, but then again I don't know what they want. But a part of me wanted to do that and take the active role. It's obviously not being fulfilled.” (Trinity 3:4.)

Edwin

Edwin was one of the 64 members of the first graduating class of Justice High School. He is Latino and first generation American in his household. Unfortunately, because Edwin and Sef were in the very first graduating class of Justice High School, they were very much the guinea pigs for the school. Justice was a brand new high school led and established by three elementary school teachers. Even the principal they chose was inexperienced. Because of this, the school, the curriculum, and the community partnerships were still developing. Many of the opportunities and resources that were
later implanted at Justice High School, Edwin and Sef did not have access to because the school was so new. Aeryn, Tae, and Trinity received more resources and opportunities because they attended after this group.

I have so many memories of Edwin because I had the opportunity to teach him for two consecutive years. With such a small senior class, I feel like I made deep relationships with almost every student in that graduating class, including Edwin. Edwin was a skinny young man, very much into goth (gothic) and alternative music. He had a tight-knit group of friends that he constantly hung out with, and he was the kid that won all the academic achievement awards every year in high school. He was totally his own individual and completely had different interests compared to his peers.

I knew a lot about Edwin and his family. He often talked to me about his father’s health issues, and this seemed to really affect him emotionally during high school. I think the most vivid memory I have of Edwin is when he decided to apply to one college, an in state university. This was such a profound moment for me because when I applied for college, I applied to one school, the same school! It was a very ironic and surprising moment because he was so sure it was the only school he was going to attend. He was so driven to only go to that school. He did not even consider attending another university.

I tried to convince him to apply to other schools and have a backup plan, but he did not agree. Edwin was the most stubborn, yet one of the most intelligent students I have ever taught. I can remember one day Edwin and a few of his close friends came to my classroom after school. They asked me why Justice High School did not celebrate Latino Heritage Month, and why the school only celebrated African American Heritage month. I did not have a response to their question. I encouraged them to organize and
discuss this with the principal, as well as offer solutions for how we could celebrate Latino Heritage month. I can remember how he strongly felt that Justice High School did not recognize his culture.

In the classroom Edwin was driven by curiosity. His skills surpassed most of his peers primarily because he really valued his work. He went above and beyond to understand and argue his points within the essays he wrote and in class debates and discussions. No one in his class could really prove Edwin wrong because he was so knowledgeable and informed about the topics that we discussed whether they were literary topics or philosophical issues. He was so intelligent and naturally gifted, but more so he really had something to say. He strongly valued his point of view and his voice empowered others to participate, think, and push outside-the-box.

To this day I use Edwin’s personal statement as my student writing sample for seniors who are preparing to go to college. His personal statement was authentic, unique and genuine. This statement strongly described his deep desire to attend college, and how much this moment meant to him.

**Edwin’s Childhood Experience**

Edwin began by telling me the story of where he grew up and his immediate family members.

So I grew up in the Justice community in a really small apartment. One small living room and bedroom and dining room. Started it was me, my older brother, my dad, mom and me. Around when I was 7, my sister came from Mexico to live with us. So there was 5 of us. I was there till I was at least 10 or 11.

They would have the same arguments they'd have now. My dad and mom get along but then don't get along. They have that dynamic where they're either okay or there's a problem (Edwin 1:1.)
Edwin described how he was the only child that his parents had together, and his siblings were his half brothers and sisters.

My dad and brother have a weird, symbiotic relationship. Like they can't live apart from each other. That's just how it's been. Years before my mom got with my dad, my brother and dad have been close. So I understand it, but at the same time it's frustrating because it's like he very much coddles him. My brother doesn't see it as that. They have this weird relationship, they need some counseling haha. He's the youngest, I'm the youngest. I have two other sisters that are my dad's children. I'm the only kid that my mom and dad had together. My sisters are from my mom and somebody else. There was a lot of arguing. We lived in a super small house and they're all passionate Latino people so everything is an argument about something. They're all very opinionated (Edwin 1:1.)

Edwin talked a lot about his father and he told me many stories about who his father was.

My dad is very conservative in his thinking. Where are you going, you can't be out. He doesn't trust people, big trust issues. A lot of that is he had to grow up when he was three. His parents died by the time he was 5. In Guatemala, their economic and political system isn't the greatest (laughs), but having to grow up since before. I don't think he even got to experience childhood.

Even now, I can't go out for a certain amount of time because then he's “Where are you? Who are you with?” He feels the need to be in control all the time, because if he doesn't something will go wrong. That's how he thinks. I understand, but it's frustrating because I haven't done things to have him mistrust me. I can't say anything because that's how he is (Edwin 1:1.)

When I asked Edwin about his mother, he described her to me and told me more about his father’s relationship with his siblings.

My mom is... not loud but very passionate. Like I'm a woman, I can do what I want. I don't have to tell you where I'm going, and that conflicts with my dad. So they argue about that, even now. My dad never really liked my sister, likewise my mom doesn't like my brother. My other two sisters are in this weird limbo area. They know how my dad is and they fought with my brother crazy, so they're kinda separate. I hang out with them and my sister does too, but they are distant from my dad and brother.
There's always this sort of, my dad needs control and my mom is free spirited so it's interesting. I don't even know how they got together in the first place (laughs). But that's how it's been the whole time (Edwin 1:1.)

Edwin described his childhood to me, and in this description much like Sef, it seemed his parents kept Edwin very sheltered.

They knew the neighborhood wasn't the best. They didn't want me getting shot down the street. There was kind of a sense of community in the building we lived in.

They never went outside unless somebody is with them, because they didn't want to be out alone. If you can't even feel like during the day something is not right. My sister went to the nearby community college to do her... GED. She did that, and we always had to pick her up me and my mom. Even 2 blocks down, we never let her go alone. Thinking back, I was like happy I get to go outside. Now, it's like they didn't want her to go alone because there's so much things going on that they didn't want her to be in danger.

Usually I was inside, if I was outside I was with parents or siblings and it was during the day. I was only there till I was 10, so I didn't have needs to go out with friends. I was like “Mom, Pokemon is on TV.” I didn't know about the neighborhood, and my uncles and aunt lived in the same apartment complex we did. If I wasn't home I was with them. I had babysitters in the building that took care of me when my parents were at work. So I wasn't really outside enough to know if it was safe (Edwin 1:1.)

Edwin told me stories about many of the struggles he faced when he was a child.

My parents don't really speak English. My mom doesn't speak English. She knows some words and phrases and can understand mostly, but she doesn't speak it. I always had to go along and translate. Everywhere, doctor appointments. Things I didn't even understand at that age, like what is this even about (laughs) but I had to just translate it (Edwin 1:2.)

Edwin continued to describe the struggles he faced at home by being the only first generation American in his household. He described his relationship with each of his immediate family members and how hard it was to be able to confide in them.
I was first-generation born here, so I was dealing with “Okay, so this is the society I'm in now. But at home I'm completely different. It was hard explaining to my dad like “This is what it is here.” He just didn't get it. Or my mom, but she's a little better she's more understanding. My dad is like you have to explain.

Beside that...they always impress on me, at least my brother, because we have a lot of arguments but he really impressed on me to get an education, that it's about more than just going. Even at a young age, he'd buy me encyclopedias. I was like 5, and he really wanted me to know that just because we're here doesn't mean we can't do something at school (Edwin 1:2.)

My brother is one of the smartest people I know, but he's not really emotionally developed. Like he's so intelligent but he's really naïve in some things too, so it's hard talking to him about certain things. In general I don't feel like there's anybody at home I can talk to, because I don't want to have to explain something because if I talk to my dad about something he's like what do you mean (Edwin 1:2.)

Or my mom because she works night shifts so I don't want to bother her during the day. My sister kind of gets it because she was here at 15, and she went through adolescence and stuff. I had to teach her English. Me and her, it's a little easier but I still wouldn't necessarily talk to her about things going on with me. My brother, unless it's scholastic we don't talk. My other sister, we talk a lot. I want to say she's the most like me. She's energetic and she laughs a lot about everything. We are more in sync in that sense, so it's easier for me to talk to her about... (Edwin 1:2.)

Edwin discussed how poverty impacted his family while he was growing up.

My dad worked at a factory most his life, and then my mom just worked smaller side jobs. I remember the first job I knew she had was with my sister at a clothes-making plant. I remember visiting and it wasn't the safest job. Thankfully they got to a place that was way better. It was only financial hardships.

Whenever we went to stores and I see like “I got this new thing”. At the time, my parents couldn't afford a lot for me. Like toys, dumb stuff kids want. They'd try to get me the generic toy, the one who looks similar. At the time I'm like, it's a toy I don't care. I didn't think about it then, just how much they had to struggle to even get me that. My brother at the time was more financially stable, even though he was living with us. So he got me things my parents couldn't. I didn't ask him to get me things because I felt bad for my
parents. I wanted my parents to help me and get stuff with me. I remember dealing with what I had here (Edwin 1:2.)

When I asked Edwin about the hardest life issues he faced, he again brought up his relationship with his father.

The hardest life issue I feel I've faced is gaining acceptance from my dad. My mom and me are cool, she knows I like to draw. She knows what I like. I went through a Goth phase and she went to a goth store and she'd be like “Oh, I love these shoes!” I wasn't too crazy goth, I just wore black. I wasn't a sad person or angry, I just liked black and rock music. My dad is always, I feel because he at such a young age didn't have an outlet, he just had to become an adult.

According to my brother, he's a lot better with me than my older siblings. Like he didn't even say happy birthday to my brother, but he offers me coffee every day. He said he never offered to make or get my brother anything. I remember talking to my other two sisters and they were like “He was only like that because my brother was a douche to my sister and pick on them.” I'd talk to my dad about it, like Carlos says you were meaner and would hit him. And my dad is like “He's full of shit.” (laughs) And I don't know if he's lying or if he doesn't remember it that way, but I feel like me and my dad don't always agree on anything, whether it's politics or culture or society or about how women, men, people of this race are, this sexuality.

When asking more questions to Edwin about being open with his father about his sexuality he expressed that his father was not willing to openly discuss this.

We just don't have a lot of the same things. He's already 70... he was...73. He's already in his mind like “This is how these people are, this is how this is.” You need to try to explain to him, that might have been the mentality then but it's changing now. He's changed a lot. He never hit me, you always get yelled at and it's like he's gonna hit you and that was enough for me to stop what I was doing. I feel like I am someone who's helping him learn. It sucks in the way that I have to help him learn, because I wanted him to already know this stuff before I was born so I can talk to him about stuff and tell him things. He's gonna give me that generic answer that everyone back then thought. But in a way I'm happy I'm teaching him, because it means there's enough in me to have him change something about himself (Edwin 1:7.)
When I asked Edwin about his community and what it was like, he described it to me in stories.

It wasn't safe. This community has always been like... people think it isn't as bad. I know, at least this is what my dad said because they lived there before I was born, that it was really bad. They couldn't go out, people got shot and mugged and stabbed in the middle of the day. My brother lived there a long time too, he told me stories about how he was by the community college and some guy randomly tried to stab him in the back. He's like I'm glad I had a thick coat because that's all that stopped it. It's not been a good neighborhood, but at the same time I don't have memories of it being a bad place (Edwin 1:4.)

After Edwin moved out of the Justice community, he had to commute during high school from another community to Justice High School. He talked about how this impacted him.

I moved from that area to neighborhood X, so the commuting issue. At the time they were starting to slightly gentrify I guess, at least west around the school. My dad would be like be careful, it's not a good place to be. Those kind of issues where I felt like I should get home early because it'll be dark and I’ll still be in the neighborhood. It pushed me to find somebody I knew. Fernando, we took the bus every day after school. At least there's someone with me. I was really cool with Facundo (a fellow peer at Justice High School) so that helped our relationship as friends. I wasn't worried like, if I went by myself and something bad happened there'd be someone there to help. The violence issues in the neighborhood (Edwin 2:16.)

I know it's gotten a little better because it's been gentrified. They built a Starbucks and a Target. So half of it is good, half is bad. I don't have bad memories growing up just because I didn't experience it, but from what I know it's not a very good neighborhood. Now it's a little bit better, where I’m at. Even now it's starting to shift, because a lot of the people who moved in recently have been from lower development project government funded programs.

I know it wasn't the best place to live back then, I don't wanna say it's fear but it is. Fear of going outside your route. That was one of the things that... forgot the word...that stopped me from hanging
after school a lot… The only thing I was worried about was the safety of my environment, and senior year (Edwin 2:16.)

Edwin emphasized the “fear” he had of being alone in the Justice community as he commuted home through public transportation. These life circumstances, as well as the various conditions discussed in this section had a profound impact on each participant’s life. Often these feelings of fear and stress were caused by conditions like instability, lack of safety or protection, and/or lack of support at a very young age. In the next section I will present the three key themes emerging from this section of stories about each participant’s childhood experiences.

**Emerging Themes of Participants’ Childhood Circumstances**

Throughout each participant’s discussion of their childhood, their community, and their family, three key themes emerged. These themes were family influences, poverty and violence, and trust and betrayal. These themes consistently emerged in all of the participants’ interviews. These themes describe the condition of participants’ circumstances that most impacted each participant’s life.

**Family Influence**

All of the participants discussed the strong influence their family had on them. The family of each participant often determined the circumstances each individual grew up in. For Aeryn, it was moving each time her mother broke up with her boyfriend or found a new job. Because Aeryn’s mother did not communicate with her about her college financial aid, Aeryn could not go back to college. Aeryn’s mother had a strong influence on the direction her life took and subsequently how Aeryn feels about herself.

For Trinity, dealing with her mother’s mental illness and taking on a parental role to somehow escape the unhealthy apartment that they lived in had a huge influence on
her life and the individual she became. For Tae, his mother left him at a very young age, and because of this he shifted back and forth from multiple homes in different states, with different family members before he finally met his mother. Tae became the protector of his siblings through all of this. He literally was in survival mode for most of his childhood trying to live through homelessness, multiple guardians taking care of him, and trauma as he witnessed his father murder another man and then be taken away to prison, all before he was eight years old. Edwin’s family also influenced him profoundly. The inability of Edwin to be open about his sexuality and be accepted by his father is the biggest life struggle he has ever faced and continues to face each day. Sef discusses the great deal of pressure he faces as realizes the sacrifice his parents have made to give him the life he has. His family has influenced his outlook on life and his identity.

The influence of each individual’s parents and immediate family had a profound impact on their lives, and many of these influences imposed a great deal of emotional trauma that many participants had to overcome. The individual relationships of parent and child for many of these participants were not very strong and trusting, but rather chaotic and unsupportive. Different family influences often caused a lack of stability in each participant’s life by their parents’ decisions, and many of these participants had to develop the resiliency to overcome these circumstances.

**Barriers: Poverty and Violence**

Every participant discussed the hardships of poverty on their lives throughout their childhood experience. It was overwhelming to hear so many stories about not having enough food to eat, moving from shelter to shelter because they had no home, and the stories of wanting small things like toys, but not being able to have them. Poverty was
a circumstance that limited each participant’s life in multiple ways. One of the most profound impacts of poverty many participants described was not having a safe place to live in. Aeryn, Trinity, Tae, Edwin, and Sef all told me stories of how the lack of safety in their neighborhoods and the abundance of violence that surrounded them.

As Sef and Edwin witnessed much of the violence in the Justice community surrounding their high school, their family sheltered them from this by keeping them home, tucked away from all the danger. When Sef wanted to join a community basketball and football league, he couldn’t because his parents were afraid. Trinity, Aeryn, and Tae had many traumatic and close experiences with violence. Tae saw his brother being recruited by a gang, and he almost was hurt or killed in a gang fight because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, talking to the wrong people. Trinity was raped by individuals who she thought were her “friends”. These “friends” were people she feared because they too were involved in gangs and had weapons. Aeryn lived in a neighborhood where murder and violence occurred often in proximity to where she lived. She saw her father’s drug dealer lifestyle up close and personally and therefore witnessed a murder in front of her eyes when she was only twelve. Each of these participants shared traumatic stories that illustrate the impact of poverty and violence in their lives. This theme shows how disempowered each participant was during these circumstances and how little support they had in coping with the trauma of these experiences.

**Lack of Trust and Betrayal**

Many of the participants in this study discussed the way family members in particular were not trustworthy or had betrayed them. Trinity described the loss of trust with her mother when she accused Trinity of being on drugs when she
wasn’t. Her mother did not believe her. Also, when Trinity was abused, her mother did not help her through the situation, instead she moved across the street from where this incident had occurred. This lack of trust caused Trinity to shut down from her mother even when things were happening in her life that could have killed her. Similarly, Aeryn discussed her mother’s betrayal and how it led to her getting kicked out of college because she never disclosed the loan money they needed to pay to keep her enrolled. In addition, Aeryn is treated negatively by her grandmother who blames her for not being in school and consequently looks down on her for this.

Edwin discussed a lack of trust with all his family members in his household, mainly his father, because they never really understood him. Rather his father rejected him as he tried to discuss his sexuality with him and gave him “the silent treatment” for three months. Edwin never brought it up again. Tae discussed this lack of trust when his grandmother had died and there was no adult figure that helped him through this tragic time. Rather the adults leaned on Tae for support because they were unable to emotionally cope with the loss of this family member. Most of the participants were hurt and betrayed by their closest family members, and this lack of support and trust caused each of them to go through depression, anger, resentment, and become somewhat numb to the pain in their lives by accepting it as a norm. Each participant discussed the way these moments impacted their self-confidence and their emotional stability.

Conclusion

Each individual vignette of the participant and the stories they told me show the big picture of how oppressive conditions like poverty and violence were impacting their
lives prior to and during high school. They shared experiences that had deep effects on them, and this illustrated what life experiences they were bringing into the classroom. Each participant discussed the many struggles, barriers and limitations in their life that disempowered them and broke them down, all examples of the way oppression manifested within their childhood experience. The many stories of trauma and violence depict a rough childhood, and these life circumstances show how they were trying to survive while they were just children. All the participants seemed to lose out on a childhood and instead had to deal with adult issues and experiences at a very young age. Their stories reveal a bigger picture of being set up to fail by the oppressive circumstances and experiences they encountered in their lives.

Despite these challenges, by the time these participants entered Justice High School, they were youth who took advantage of opportunities, shared their life stories with their peers and teachers, and opened themselves up in the safe space of the school and in specific community organizations to confront adversity and transform their lives as seen in my reflections of each participant in school. These participants were vibrant and motivated young adults in high school who had so many strengths and talents they offered to the school community, yet still dealing with oppressive conditions in their lives like poverty, racism, and tragedy. Even though oppression was directly impacting all of these participants during high school, they still contributed to the school community in various ways through their talent, their curiosity, their beliefs. They significantly impacted the culture and climate of Justice High School with their voice and their presence. School became a place for their self-expression, a place where they emerged as
leaders, and a place where they showed strength and perseverance even though oppression was continuously impacting their lives.

In the next chapter I will present stories about participants' high school experience. In this section I will explore two domains of their experience, the community and the high school. The central focus of this chapter are the lived experiences of each participant in their high school and in their community. These stories describe the way participants were impacted by the Justice High School, the community, teachers, school staff, their peers, the curriculum during and after school, and civic participation and/or activism.
Chapter 5: Safe Places: Stories of Community Organizations and the School

Introduction

The domains of community and school were a central focus in the stories shared by the five participants. Each participant told me stories of their schooling experience and how they were involved with their community. For each participant, their stories showed how deep of an impact Justice High School and the Justice community organizations had on their lives. For many of these participants, these domains offered them mentors and opportunities that helped each student cope with the hardships in their lives, tap into their passions, and ultimately provide support and encouragement that they did not receive at home.

Community

One question I asked each of the participants was how they defined a strong or successful community. Tae described a strong community as one that has strong communication. He stated this in the description below.

A community strong or successful is communication. Like if you don’t talk about what’s going on in your community, you’re just being quiet, then nothing is going to be solved. And. That’s basically it. If you see something and you don’t say anything, like they’re going to continue to do it. Like but if you speak your mind and you saying what’s things bad things happening in the community, it can be solved. Like umm… it was violence in my old elementary school. And now they do like… ummm… voluntary I don’t even know what it is… it like people watch the road basically for the children to go to school and from school. You know like stuff like that. Just to make life for youth safe (Tae 1:13.)

Aeryn provided a brief yet similar description when I asked her the same question. She stated that a strong community was one that had members who were deeply invested in creating positive change. She described these members as,
Genuine people that really just want to be there and make a change. People who are like “this is ours, and we are gonna make it work.” Dedicated and focused (Aeryn 1:5.)

When I asked Edwin the same question, he echoed many similar thoughts as the other participants, but he also mentioned that a strong community was one that was inclusive of all people.

Just everyone having an idea of where they wanna go. I don't want to say two opposing ideas don't get things done, because if there's only one idea then everybody just kinda follows. I guess people working together, actually wanting to, seeing a problem together and trying to figure it out. Because some people can't see the problem and figure out what's going on. Outreach. Getting to houses (Edwin 3:4.)

Sef’s response to this question directly spoke to his opinion of Justice community. In his response he emphasized that a strong community was one that did not have violence, drugs, and poverty, similar to his present community.

I define success as a good and clean neighborhood… I think no visible drugs. You don't have violence occurring. Clean as in, you walk out and feel safe. That's how I define clean. Justice community, it was diverse. Let's be real, it's been changing. When I lived there, it seemed fine. Now it's getting crazier. Before, when I was really little it was crazier. Clean neighborhoods are together, active, with kids because kids are the future. Having a clean environment where you feel safe (Sef 1:5.)

When looking back at the previous chapter it is evident that the Justice community was unsafe. Their responses to the question, What makes a strong or successful community? were responses that critiqued their home communities and the problems with violence and safety that each of them discussed in detail in the last chapter. Each participant discussed violence and poverty in such depth and the impact that these conditions had on their lives. In this section I will continue to present data on students’ communities, but this section will show the stories of how each individual was
involved in their community through organizations and initiatives and how these experiences impacted them.

Community Partnerships and Organizations

Justice High School had many partnerships with neighboring community organizations including The Boys and Girls Club, community park district, Non-profit youth hip hop and spoken word organizations, university sponsored partnerships to provide dance and art classes to high school students, Gear-Up, community service organizations focused on youth leadership service learning projects, the local community college, Empower You college prep program, and many more. These partnerships offered students various opportunities to participate in community projects and events. Many of the participants told stories of how their involvement with these community organizations affected them.

Tae talked about a non-profit youth hip hop and spoken word community organization in all three interviews I had with him. It was evident that this community organization had a profound impact on Tae’s life from his childhood to present day. He told me so many stories about this organization and their community space, and he illustrated how empowering his experiences were there. Tae told me about the first time he saw dancers and artists from this organization perform at the Boys and Girls Club in the Justice community.

While I was a kid… ummm.. when I was in 5th grade, I went to like an event sponsored by this hip hop organization. And like I didn’t know anything about hip hop. (laugh)! I went to the Boys and Girls Club in Justice community. Its like a umm… I don’t know a cool space… But I was watching like people break dancing. And doing Graffiti, and I was like real amazed. Like yea, I’ve never seen that except for on TV. And so (laughing)!!... So I was like really like into it like you know hip hop literally in my face. And so that was
good and ummm.. it was just then that I just stuck with it (Tae 1:10.)

Tae then told me about the first time he actually went to this community organization workshop located inside the community park district.

When I was younger it was like in elementary School, and then we got older and graduated from their, and they (non-profit organizers) told us to come to the park district, which is down the street from where I live. So I go to the second floor and I'm like “This is real ancient...” as I'm going up the stairs, because the stairs is like real janky. I'm like where am I going.

I get up there and there's nothing but like graffiti on the walls, beautiful murals, couches and shit like that to chill at. There's more room, a back room for poetry, another room for arts and crafts, and a dance room. So I went to the dance room of course. You see nothing but everybody free styling. Everybody got they headphones in they ear, just bobbin they head. Vibin'. Just like going into they own little world, so I joined the party, put my headphones in and started dancing.

We do this thing called “Circle Up”, where you just give peace and respect to the people in the circle. You give dap. Just so everybody is on the same vibe. It's nothing but love (Tae 1:17.)

I then asked Tae, how he felt in the circle.

It was good. A lot of positive energy. It was good. It gave me energy, I felt more alive. You know how you go into a space and you're real shy and nervous, but here you don't care. They just welcome you with open arms (Tae 1:17.)

Similarly, Trinity told me a story of how she used to attend the Alternatives Boys and Girls Club in Justice community. For Trinity this was a place where she could deal with the emotions she was unable to deal with at home.

Boys and Girls Club, where I had a mentor that texted me sometimes. One of the teachers in the art room I liked a lot and I'd go there and there'd be like paint and canvases. Every time I would go there and talk to her about what I was feeling, she’d be like “Draw it out.” She'd tell me draw it out. Terrible dreams, just draw it out. Any time I'd remember a dream, it'd be horrible. But
anyways, she'd tell me draw it out. And I did. Getting out my anger with something positive. It was good. I was doing a lot of negative stuff at the same time, but I never like completely dealt with anything... there was a lot of anger (Trinity 2:4.)

Trinity also discussed how the Empower You program changed her life and enabled her to believe in herself and her potential.

Like Empower You. It's in the name. They definitely empowered me to go through the college process and do that. They didn't hesitate after I had my baby, I was still in it, still completing college apps. They just treated me like everyone else. And basically they were like you can do it, you have these qualities they want and you can clearly do it.

I was very ambitious, I knew what I'd like to do. They asked could I tell a moment where I was resourceful and I was like I got that (laughs). I didn't tell them personal stories, but I told them about how my mom was in the ER and I went back to the house and the house somehow got struck by lightning. The roof was, everything leaked in. There's water from the roof and the hallway roof, I did what I could. Pots everywhere, I did what I could. Got my resources and handled the issue, obviously I went to the ER again. My mom was fine, she was like “What happened to the house?” I said it's all good I got it covered. Then they were like “Wow, she's resourceful.” (laughs)

I felt empowered through that program. They saw I had a potential and they were like we'll give you resources to fill that. They empowered me to fulfill that potential. They'd always told me like, even from freshman year when I was being bad. They said I had so much potential (Trinity 2:12.)

Like Trinity, Tae was also involved in a community partnership program with a university through Justice High School. This program was through a performing arts university. It offered inner city high school students access to art and dance classes. Tae was accepted into this program during his senior year and participated in this program helping him learn ballet.

In this program, which is advanced... you can leave school early and go downtown and do art. I leave school after academics and go
to dance. I wanted more experience with different cultures, so I went and learned ballet after school. That helped me network and be active and learn new things (Tae 2:2.)

Trinity also told me stories of how she volunteered with a non-profit community organization that encouraged youth to lead community projects in Justice community.

I volunteered a lot with an organization that paired with theater clubs. We did forest preservation work... we did a conference where we learned about stuff we can apply to our organization. It was good. I also did that organization sophomore year in high school. I was like one of the leaders of the team. One thing I've found I loved before high school was working to preserve the community and better the community. Keep aware of the forest. Implement programs in the Boys and Girls Club. Fundraise.

I guess when I was in the leadership volunteer thing, the leader of that I looked up to… He was really organized, and just... I don't know. Led our team well, he monitored the team. We tried to complete community projects and he monitored all that. He would make us do jumping jacks and pushups, which is good. I like that structure and authority, maybe that's because I didn't have that at home at all. I never really had that authority (Trinity 1:3.)

Tae discussed another community program he participated in called Teens-Up, a program organized through Gear-Up and Northeastern University during the summer.

Oh. Okay. Ummm I did this a program called Ummm… I think it’s called Teens-Up or whatever… It was like people in the community. We used to dance. And… ummm go on trips. Retreats and stuff just to help like the young teenagers interact or whatever… (Tae 1:10.)

Tae told me more stories of how he found a very strong role model through his participation in this program. I will share these stories in the following section on community mentors and role models.

The community partnerships and organizations in this neighborhood were meaningful for these participants. Out of many of the stories we see a sense of passion for what the programs were trying accomplish as students reflected back because they
meaningfully impacted these participants by providing a safe space where they were interested, a space where they could express themselves, a space that was a positive outlet.

**Community Mentors and Role Models**

Another theme that emerged from the participants’ stories was how each developed deep relationships with individuals in their community through the programs they were involved in. These people became mentors who offered each participant support, resources, and a safe space where they could work through the difficult problems that they faced, an outlet where they could express their feelings in a healthy way.

Tae told me a story of how one of the mentors in the Teens Up program helped him through a very difficult time in his life.

Ummm… it was this one person. Well he’s my best friend now… And he’s like 6 years older than me basically. And uhhhhhh… I kinda think of him like as a best friend slash mentor. Cause he like really like helped me, and establish.. cause like he’s gay as well. Cause he like helped me with the transition or whatever and uhhh… I don’t know he was always there for me like anything… that I needed or that I do not wanted cause… like it’s a difference. But like anything that I needed, he would help me with. And ummm he would let me know. And we would just have life talks.

Last year I was like I had like a break down because I was I was a teaching artist at the non-profit youth hip-hop and spoken word organization, and I didn’t feel as though I was being appreciated because I had been dancing there for so long. And umm… I just felt like… I was tired of teaching. Because I have been teaching dance since I was in 3rd grade. (laugh)!

And so… I never had the time for to be taught like you know what I mean. I’m always teaching somebody else, but like nobody never actually trained me to do anything. So I always wanted to learn and go outside of the box. But I never had the opportunity to. So I was like had a breakdown, telling him like I’m tired of teaching. And he was just telling me like these kids they need you and people look up to you and if you fail, then you are failing on these kids. Like you
are going to have to think of other people other than yourself like… Although it’s a valid point you do need help, there are people younger than me, looking up to me. But you know, help them basically.

Well… ummm it made me realize that I can work on myself. Like its just. self motivation. Like I can’t lie, I can’t let other people see me, I don’t want to say fail. But you know like see me break down basically cause anybody can like look up to me basically anndd… I don’t really know who’s watching me. But I know like everywhere I go, somebody knows me and so like… I’m a role model basically so I just can’t I can’t give up (Tae 1:13.)

Aeryn told me a story of how she too had a role model in her community who gave her hope for a better future. Unlike Tae, she did not personally know this individual, but just being in proximity to him and seeing his story unfold in front of her eyes empowered her to believe that she too could make it out of Oakley neighborhood and fulfill her dreams. I asked, Do you have any memories of individuals in Oakley neighborhood who impacted you? She responded:

Derrick Rose. He didn't stay that far from me. I remember his high school career. Seeing him going to the courts. I remember draft night and we went to his momma house and kicked it. I remember that.

It was real hope. He was the first person I can recall who really made it out besides Lupe Fiasco and Common. He was just so close, like other people they were more on the Low End. But he was right there. Also, having people go to his high school. That school is so... they don't have deaths, but it's violent. It was like I can grasp onto that dream too (Aeryn 1:7.)

Aeryn discussed a second mentor/role model she encountered during high school, but this time developed a deep relationship with after she graduated. Aeryn’s former teacher became like a second mother to her, and she even refers to her as her mother.

My mother gave me a home out of school I was staying out there. She was giving me shelter. Spiritual guidance when I was out
there, which led to a lot more people I met over there… Definitely Ms. Jeremy. She just kinda embraced me. I wasn't looking for it, I didn't even know it was coming. I just thought I was going to have dinner with my teachers and kick it for a couple days. I wasn't looking for it and I don't know how it happened. I really don't. She just be doin' too much sometimes, I can't really describe it. She challenged me to do more. She like doesn't tell me to do stuff but tells me to do stuff in indirect ways. It makes me mad but it's right. She was always tryna help me. What's next, what do you want to do, I was like whatever. But she was definitely always in my corner, her sisters too. I'm grateful for them (Aeryn 3:22.)

Trinity discussed how she too had a mentor from her community Church program, a program her mother signed her up for. Jenny, Trinity’s mentor was someone who opened her home to Trinity and gave her a safe and healthy place to live while she was pregnant and also after she had her baby.

She (Trinity’s mother) signed me up for a lot. She wanted better for me, to have someone to look up to. The mentoring stuff can take me out to eat, a movie, she couldn't afford that. Once in a while, but we had to get a specific time. She wanted me to be able to do things like that. She provided for me and everything, but she wanted somebody who could do those things for me (Trinity 2:11.)

In Verona Hills this mentor, my mom sent me to a mentoring program and when I was 12 and finally I was assigned a mentor when I was in high school (laughs). When I was 17 and 5 months pregnant, we started meeting and talking. She was very supportive. She's like “you can do it”. She had all her friends donated baby clothes and a bassinet and we moved in with her. I had moved in with her before, after my daughter got out the hospital we moved in. Where is she gonna go (Trinity 2:11.)

Sef discussed the positive influence his brother had on him throughout his childhood and adolescence, coaching him to deal with failure and setting an example for who Sef could aspire to be like.

Plus my brother did well. I had that role model. I won't tell him till we're older, but he had a huge impact on me... changing my mindset. He just did what he was supposed to do. He works hard. He's very smart, the smartest out of all us children. My older
brother did everything. I always say he's the best in the family, he killed it academically. I didn't care about school that way. Once after he went to a good school, it was my time (Sef 3:26.)

All of these stories showed how these participants created meaningful relationships with individuals in their community who greatly impacted their lives. Through these stories it was clear that these relationships organically evolved into a mentorship that was unintended. These mentors were not systematically assigned or did not set out to have this role in the lives of the participant, rather over time became influential people in the lives of each of these participants. These relationships offered support, access to the broader world including exposure to things that they had not experienced on their own, and healthy place to go that provided something that they did not have at home, stability and an outlet where they were safe.

**The Neighborhood Aka “the block”**

In addition to the community organizations, many participants talked about their neighborhood community and how they organized block parties, meetings discussing community issues, and conducting community outreach where members actively tried to create change in the neighborhood.

When I asked Aeryn about memories in her community, Aeryn told me a story about the summer yard sales that her Grandma would have. She described this moment in a story as she remembered her childhood.

Summer times every year we did a yard sale. We stayed with my grandma. The thing about it, is that people make Oakley out to be hardcore, which it is, but sometimes it's like you got these moments where we have this yard sale and everybody in the neighborhood comes to be a part of that. It's sort of funny but it was like the neighborhood is joyous. It's like regardless of all the other stuff goin' on, I still love Oakley. I can't deny my city. I couldn't if I wanted to because at the end of the day there's so much love there.
It's a lot of humble people, but at the same time there's hurt people and hurt people, hurt people. It's a lot of people just like watching over you and keeping track of things you're doing. Even to this day, I still got people who ask me about school and how so and so is doing.

There were several instances. I was able to be put in charge of my belongings. Everybody made me get up at 7 am and set up, and I was putting my stuff out there, and this is when I was really young, and I was selling my stuff for $10 and $20 and my grandma was like “you're never gonna make any money, you have to lower your prices.” She was telling me that people can't afford to buy things like this, so you have to help people out and I guess it was like a mini-lesson. I think that's why I'm a giver now, because all my grandmothers and great-grandmothers taught me how to give and to look out for other people. In the end, it's not really about you. I don't care about certain things, like money or material things because they come and go (Aeryn 1:1.)

Aeryn also told me stories about her church community and the church potlucks that often turned into community meeting sites.

The church would do food drives and pot lucks and make church a common ground, so people felt safe and welcome. Using that as a home base, they'd build around that. The meetings and stuff. My grandma always made sure to keep our community and family together. So I was outside cleaning up trash, and she made sure we kept ourselves together (Aeryn 1:7.)

Aeryn continued to talk about her neighborhood. She described her block and how her neighbors organized to ensure cleanliness and safety in the area.

I remember I was younger, they used to do block club meetings. It was like the area though, not just the block. I remember people being very active about that. There were flyers everywhere and people were outside talking and spreading the word. Picking up trash. Cleaning up the community, trying to make it work (Aeryn 1:6.)

Tae also told me stories about how in his community the members would frequently organize block parties where he and his peers were invited to perform dance numbers on stage.
Block parties, a lot of those. It was like a back to school thing, to help kids with school supplies. They'd have like performances, contests, just to engage the community. We'd have carnivals, something cute for the little kids.

Yeah, this is when I was little. Not sure how little, but me and my cousins was at the block party and, me and my cousins dance all the time, so they asked us to perform. It was nice, because when I was little I was quiet. Like really don't speak quiet. So, this little boy dancing so big. So, yeah, it was nice. They don't really do that – well they do, but it wasn't as big as when I was growing up (Tae 1:15.)

When I spoke to Edwin about community events and programs, it was clear he did not have the same experience as Aeryn and Tae. Rather, he felt his family was very disconnected from the community because they did not speak English.

But I feel like if that ever happens in my new neighborhood it's not really done in a good way. My parents don't speak English, so why would you send someone who only speaks English to get them to come somewhere. I'm not always around, and then if I'm translating it disconnects them because they're thinking about what I'm saying about what they're saying. It doesn't work that way.

To even have programs around that even help. While there are community programs that want someone to help, there's always people in an area that are more connected to it than other people. This city is one of the most diverse cities, but it's split along. Nobody wants to integrate. Like I'm going to 26th Street and then two blocks down it's a different neighborhood and three blocks away is the other.

How can you have a sense of community when it's so cut up. I get it, people come from somewhere else and they don't know how to get in the new environment. They stick to what they know, I get that. But if you're gonna send someone to that type of place at least tell them about where they're going and the people there. If you talk to somebody who doesn't speak English and has lived on a farm their whole life, you can't just be like “Oh, let's do this community thing.” They're too busy trying to survive where they're at. They don't see it as it benefitting me now when I need it, so why should I do it to benefit others later on. Just because... they just don't. Maybe if you can say “it'll help people along the way but it will help you
People are always willing to help themselves faster than someone else, sadly. At least for most things (Edwin 3:21.)

Edwin then went on to tell me his extended family who lived in proximity to him was his primary community rather than the neighborhood he lived in.

A lot of cousins and uncles I had lived in the building. Uncle on the first and second floor. My aunt on the 3rd floor. My dad doesn't have family here, because he doesn't have much family left. They were still in Guatemala. I've never met any of his family, except for my brother and sisters. My mom, she has like six brothers and five sisters. Most live in Chicago and mostly all came together and brought others with them. They've always stuck together for the most part. That was more my community than the actual neighborhood (Edwin 1:5.)

Although Edwin did not participate in very many community activities, he does remember being involved in weekend programs that were focused on academic achievement through his church. As much as his parents were disconnected, they did involve Edwin in Saturday school through their community church.

I remember weekend programs where a community group would do activities with the kids in the area. I did that a few times... I had Saturday school at the church. They'd do things in the building... Games, learning activities like the game where you connect people to animals so you can see how many animals you know. I know at Saturday School they did a learning thing. I remember the teacher, I still know him kinda. He was my 1st grade teacher, Mr. Gutierrez, and I know he did the Saturday School. I still kinda am connected to him.

I know we did stuff like reading time, math programs. Even before that I was in pre-K. I remember that, there was a giant bird/clown at the door everybody was afraid of. I thought it was cool. It's weird thinking about it, learning about what's buoyant and what's not. They'd give us a big tank, and my teacher Ms. Vargas, I still remember her name, I know she was Asian but I'm not sure the nationality. Her and Ms. Williams, the teacher assistant, they gave me a really big tank once. They said put the item in the water and tell me if it floats or sinks. I just wasn't expecting to be taught that in pre-K. Now thinking about it... that's some other higher level things. At the time I was like Oh, this rubber duck floats. I don't
know if it was them or if that was just the curriculum. They did community stuff where we walked around and helped paint planters they put in the middle of the street (1:6.)

In these stories each participant discussed their neighborhood and community in unique ways. These stories illustrate how communities were not always defined by the surrounding neighborhood, and rather extended far beyond geographical location. The question that can be asked is, where does one find community? For Edwin, it was in his building where he mostly interacted with his neighbors and family. Many stories reflected on communities that were not physically visible to school personnel, or anyone for that matter. Communities were primarily defined as spaces where these participants felt accepted, safe, and had a clear role.

In the previous section, each participant described many unhealthy and negative aspects of their community. Yet this section provided a contrast showing the positivity that also existed in the same community. It can be seen through the stories each participant told me about the community programs, role models and mentors who emerged from these programs, and the surrounding neighborhood that organized events, that they positively impacted many of the participants who got involved. It could be said that their community experience was bitter-sweet. A word that describes both aspects of the conditions and circumstances the participants described through their stories.

**Justice High School**

The primary focus of the second interview was to understand participants’ high school experience. As stated earlier, Justice High School is a small urban high school serving 534 students located in a low-income neighborhood. 93.9 % of the students who attend receive free or reduced lunch, 82.7 % of the school made of African American
students. The remaining population is made up of Latino, Asian, and White students. All students who attend Justice High School choose to go there if they are accepted. Justice High School is not a community school, rather it is a contract city public school (a school that is reviewed every 3-5 years to see if they are meeting district standards or annually yearly progress) that has the autonomy to admit any youth who resides in the city where it is located.

From the outside of the school building, Justice High School stands out amongst its surrounding buildings as a large and colorful wall of graffiti, painted by the students of the school, stating the word “social justice” guides you to the front door. The face of the school is covered in three panels of glass and tile murals including images like the city subway, faces of important individuals who were from the Justice community, images of books, peace signs, and a distinct image of a young woman wearing a hijab and holding her diploma. Justice students created these images and worked all summer long to cover the face of the school with these beautiful murals.

Upon entering the school you visually see large hand painted murals of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King created by students and teachers together during the 1st year of this schools inception. Along side these images the students who painted the murals also painted a small portrait of themselves embedded into these murals. The school walls on each floor are covered with meaningful quotes, student pictures, student awards, student art, student hand prints all emphasizing the social justice mission and vision of this school.

Upon entering any given classroom at Justice High School, you will see a poster of “acuerdos”, or agreements and understandings that each staff and
student abides by. Within these acuerdos are things like; respect myself and respect my peers; put forth effort all the time; use my voice for what is right. Over the loud speaker each morning you will not hear the Pledge of Allegiance, but rather you hear the Justice High School pledge written by a group of students who graduated in the class of 2011. These students were opposed to standing to the Pledge of Allegiance and with the guidance of a few teachers, met with the principal to discuss this matter. The principal offered them an opportunity to write their own pledge that would be said each morning as an alternative, and they did.

The SJE curriculum instilled in the academic courses is primarily lead by the history department. This department is made up of four teachers who lead the school in the practice of SJE and in the creation of SJE curriculum. These history teachers took it upon themselves to fuel the school-wide initiative to instill SJE and its principles in every course taught at this school. To accomplish this, the History department lead school-wide professional development to educate teachers and provide hands on opportunities to collaboratively create social justice curriculum. One of the ways Justice high school implanted this curriculum is through a school-wide opening unit, where each teacher and course would begin the school year with inquiry into some aspect of a social justice issue or topic that was followed by a community action piece. One example of this was when the history department developed a unit titled “Hope and Hopelessness”. In each course students utilized academic content to understand, explore, discuss, and engage in inquiry related to this topic. The Justice High School faculty spent
countless hours of professional development time creating this unit prior to the starting of the school year.

When we actually engaged students in this unit, I remember seeing all the different types of student work that was presented to the whole school at a culminating unit event. In math classes students visually plotted out the number of violent deaths and the location where these deaths occurred over the summer on a mapped grid of the city in which Justice High School is located. Students presented a subsequent discussion and analysis of their interpretations of this data and what it showed. I remember English students creating personal narratives and spoken word pieces that expressed the ways hope and hopelessness had manifested in their lives. Students created stories, spoken word, short narrative essays that all expressed the various ways these elements had manifested in their lives. Each subject area participated in this school wide unit in their own unique way. To culminate this week long unit, the whole school gathered together to present the different pieces of work students had created and they also engaged in various community action events including a march through the Justice community for non-violence lead by the Cease-Fire organization. We also engaged in community outreach to serve the homeless meals. Lastly, students culminated this unit by posting their artwork and performing their spoken word pieces at a community event hosted by the school. This is just one example of how Justice high school engaged in this type of education.

Beyond this opening unit, the history department at the school provided various opportunities to educate staff and new teachers on how to create such
curriculum continuously throughout the year. They provided examples of how other teachers had created SJE learning experiences while offering their own insight as to how they do this in their classroom. They planned interdisciplinary projects collaborating curriculums together. The history department at the school lead an annual history fair where students engaged in research and performed presentations about social justice topics that were important to students. Often the English and Science department partnered with these initiatives and collaboratively integrated the curriculum for these projects. These teachers and students also established the first social justice summit for all community, staff, students and educators from all over the city and suburbs. At this event renowned speakers, authors, researchers discussed social justice topics, engaged in break out sessions addressing various issues impacting youth and education, a space where students presented their work, students panel discussions providing narratives of their experience, and a space where the community as a whole comes together within the Justice High School building to engage in this day of learning.

The history department at this school also organized most of the opportunities for students to engage in activism, protest, and collective action. The rest of the school supported these events and the initiatives organized by them. Often these four teachers would bring these opportunities to the whole staff and collectively we would organize and support these initiatives through our classroom space. One example of this is the annual Columbus Day protest lead by a single teacher in the history department, but then supported by many other teachers. The history department lead students in action research within the
community as they tried to gain information about Justice High School drop-out rates and youth violence.

Beyond the history department there are also other teachers at this school who were also strong social justice educators. These teachers are still actively involved in the Justice community. These two individuals had been, and currently still are activists in the Justice Community. These teachers greatly influenced and inspired the implementation of SJE in the classroom as well as the community action piece connecting class content to students lives and the larger community in which they live. Two of these teachers, Mr. Z and Ms. Zach, are deeply connected to the Justice community in various ways as life long residents and are able to create bridges between the school and the outside community. Mr. Z co-founded a youth hip-hop, arts, and activism youth program that many Justice students participate in since they were in elementary school. Mr. Z had seen many of these youth grow up in front of his eyes before they set foot into high school where he teaches math. Similarly, Ms. Zach, a former supporter and organizer of the local Black Panther Movement, continues to provide community education about local politics, issues facing the community, organizing meetings with the local police departments to facilitate meetings about police harassment of Justice High School students upon leaving school. These two teachers are so strongly connected to students, their families, and to inspiring and mentoring us teachers to be present for students beyond the classroom, but also within the community. They were constantly educating us teachers of what was going on in the community and how this was effecting our students.
The Justice High School curriculum was definitely inspired by all of these strong influences. With such a small faculty and staff there was a very dedicated effort in learning about what it meant to be a social justice educator, but to also do the amazing things that these teachers were doing in their classroom. The teachers leading this school were so passionate about this and made every attempt to instill these principles and ideas in every staff member of the school. Administration emphasized a strong belief in project based learning, action research, oral presentation, and community action by enforcing a rule that every teacher had to engage in some type of community action a minimum of twice a year. Whether it was community service projects or community activism, every teacher was expected to organize two opportunities to the Justice students to engage in community action. All of these elements contributed to the unique experience participants reflected on during this interview.

During this section of the interview, participants told me various stories about their experience as students at Justice High School. From these stories five sub-themes emerged including Justice High School’s purpose and school environment, which primarily describes the social aspect of what it was like to be a student at Justice High School, curriculum and content, activism, opportunities the school offered, and the faculty and staff. Each story conveys a truth about the way each participant was affected by the social justice education taught at this school, as well as how each participant contributed to the climate and culture of this school.

Although each student graduated from Justice High School at different times, there was an overwhelming similarity in the way they described the various ways Justice High School impacted them, especially when participants talked about Justice High
School’s faculty and staff. In this section I will present five primary themes which emerged from these stories including: Justice High School purpose and environment, curriculum, extra-curricular opportunities, activism, and faculty and staff.

**Purpose and Environment**

When I asked students about the purpose and mission of Justice High School, they told me various answers that included preparation for real life, preparation for college, connecting with others to create community, and activism. Tae summarized the purpose of Justice High School as;

A community-based school. Set up to help those who really can’t afford school. To me, its kinda seems like they’re creating small activists (Tae 1:1.)

He continued to discuss the way Justice High School administration and staff encouraged creativity and the arts while exploring social issues through the daily curriculum that was taught.

We have a lot of people in the school that are very artsy. I don’t know how that happened. The education they teach us helps us with our art. They focus on poverty and, not only what happens in our community, but other communities. Then they tied it into the materials we learn. The mission is like prepare us for real life basically, with knowledge and the stuff that happens right in front of our faces (Tae 1:1.)

Tae also discussed how the education he attained from Justice High School was very different from his peers in college. He described how he gained a social awareness and knowledge of social issues that his current peers in college were unaware of; yet still preparing students for life beyond high school.

I fell like I’m book smart and street smart, and my college peers are just book smart. Most of the street smarts is common sense, and unfortunately some people don’t have it. They don’t know about protests and helping and community and poverty. If they went to a
social justice school, they’d know that. We’re reading a book called *A Long Way Gone*, I read it in 6th grade but they are just getting exposed to that.

We’re sheltered here in Justice community, but in college you get a taste of the real world. Social Justice school prepares you for how to save money and shop your future. It tells you about what’s going on in poor communities. What’s going on in real life, plus education. You’re teaching us what you’re supposed to, but in a broader sense of life (Tae 2:5.)

Edwin told me the story of how he understood the mission of Justice High School through the connections he made with others. He described the close community that was created through this small school and the impact this had on him throughout high school.

Having done things after school or even hanging out with teachers. We went bowling with Mr. Haines and you. Realizing that you can hang out with those same people outside of school as a group, those are the moments when you're like... I know we are an individualistic society in the US because we are taught that. But it's nice to do the group thing. If you have a strong group and makes strong bonds within that group. While it's jokingly at times, I can still talk to people about whatever. Friends I made then I'm still friends with, even I don't see them often. Like Diana (high school peer). I can still talk to them. The idea of being in groups works in that way, that's how I learned a little about trying to be part of the mission.

It's a small school so I know there's a difference between big and small classes. It's the connections you make. Those 12 people in your class for a year, you're going to bond... The people I met at Justice High School I made connections with...

Justice High School, whether good or bad, everybody was social. They talked and even if they didn't do well in school, they had friends. That aspect, whether it was a good or bad school, whether they achieved their mission, but the fact that everybody was really social helped me in college. If I'd gone to a school where I was sheltered, I wouldn't have made friends in college like I did. Saying hi to people I don't know. I'm glad I went to Justice High School, there was always something going on (Edwin 2:17.)
When I asked each participant about what Justice High School was like for them they had so much to say. They described their school environment through a range of stories and details. Tae described the environment as different from other schools.

I feel like Justice High School’s environment is different. Their rules, grading systems, teachers actually care about students. You don’t really find that in high school. You get material, you be quiet, I grade it. If you don’t get it, you don’t get it (Tae 1:5).

Trinity also reflected on how much the faculty and staff cared for students and their success. She discussed the way the school had a restorative approach rather than punitive approach towards education.

There was a more restorative approach to detention instead of just kicking kids out because they weren't doing well. Justice High School really seemed to care, like everyone there. Everyone I interacted with.

With my attendance, like in my case I was pregnant, and kids get kicked out because of that. You didn't, you helped. I actually had AP classes after, and I graduated on time. And I'm in my 3rd year in college, and I support my daughter. I think the mentality of the teachers was great, and then not kicking kids out is so important. Like you need to believe in kids even when they struggle, that's when they need it most. I wasn't in a gang or anything, but it was nice to have people who believed in you and could offer you resources (Trinity 2:9.)

Aeryn echoed similar thoughts as Trinity and Tae about the caring nature of the Justice High School staff. Looking back on her high school experience, she told me why she became deeply connected with this small high school.

Everything about that little small school, I just loved it. I don't know why, I don't know. I started going a lot after college, a lot of good people came from Justice High School. There's a lot of good people there. I still want them to know I appreciate and respect them. I respect the opportunities that Justice High School does give people that I can't say anything like it's a bad school. Everybody there has a purpose and I can appreciate them for what they do. Teachers like you down to security like Ms. Nee (security guard). I just love that
school, appreciate being able to be there. I don't know, I just loved it (Aeryn 2:14.)

It was very unique. I appreciate the different style. I always pictured myself at a big school, like big like most suburban schools. The teachers, they were so down to Earth. Mr. Oly, all them. They went to school there, so they had ties to the community. Teaching style was different, more active. More of a visual thing for me... and people cared. They weren't just talking to you about school. How you doing? It was very unique, nobody had made a school like us. Nobody was doing things like us. You had a variety of kids... but it was different, nobody was doing things like us or was like us (Aeryn 2:16.)

Edwin discussed how the accepting environment at Justice High School was a liberating experience. He felt accepted and validated even though he was very different from the peers around him. He told me a story about one of these experiences.

The people there all pretty open about things. I remember my music class, you got extra credit for bringing a CD and you could bring a song. Me and Z were the only ones that were really into rock. At the time I felt I needed to explain myself in the intro to the class. I always said if you like it you like it, if you don't you don't. I think it was Briana, she said “Oh my god! Just play the song, we don't care the style.” I think at that moment me and Z rocked out and everybody else is chattering.

In a way it's good that they didn't care about any style people had to offer, it taught you to be yourself. One person you at least had a connection and could be yourself with. I was happy I had a lot of those people... I guess that it’s freeing, to be your self around those people. Even people who don't know you, it's a respect that. Like I said, you don't have to understand but coexist. I don't think the school taught that, I think the kids taught that to each other. A lot of kids didn't want to go there honestly: it was their neighborhood school or they didn't get in elsewhere or they transferred, but everybody who went there learned to be with each other. We might not like the school, but we can learn to be with each other (Edwin 2:17.)

Many participants told me stories about graduation day from Justice High School. These stories emphasized what the Justice High School environment was like through the eyes
of each participant. Edwin described his graduation day and how meaningful this moment was for him.

A moment that sticks out to me was during graduation. My last name starts with Y so I'm last to get called. Washington was in front of me. When they were like and last but not least, and that always happened to me in school, I never felt so many people caring. Not just family and audience, but students, faculty. I was glad to be last. All the people, whether I liked them, they are supportive and happy. It's not forced. They're happy we're all moving forward. I felt empowered there.

I felt like all those connections I made during those 4 years there. If I didn't make a connection, they wouldn't have screamed. I felt like, at least I made some good connections with people and that empowered me. Even if we all go different ways, some point we will talk and it'll be cool. That's still my friend. It's still Tom even though we haven't talked in years. That's Tom. Same with Trina, I see her every week. I remember when she didn't talk at all, and she had long hair and didn't want to associate with anybody. But she changed, I changed, and we're still brother and sister. I feel like that moment I felt super empowered

I feel like everyone, whether you say do care about what others think, you do to some degree. I felt at that moment, it was a unified yes. It didn't matter what was going on outside that moment. It was all about that moment in time. So I feel like when you have moments like that, it's the same when you're little you get so happy on your birthday. Everyone is focused on that one point. Everyone is trying to go for, and those moments if they are good they kind of push and lift you up. Especially now, because everybody is always hustling and there isn't time for people to do things. When you have the moments where everybody takes time, and moves forward and is happy about something, those are moments where you're empowered where they feel a way they didn't before… (Edwin 2:14.)

Aeryn also discussed her memories of graduation day. She told me a story of that moment and how she was deeply impacted by this experience.

At graduation, I had made this speech and had a short joke about a cheerleader being the guest speaker. I was sitting there with my friends and the principal was giving out these scholarships for school. My friends were like “Yeah, they gonna call your name!”
And I'm like no they're not, they don't know me like that. It's a million other smart kids that can use the stipend for their books. So she (Justice High School Principal) is onstage like “yeah, and she's a great cheerleader for our school” and I'm like wow... wow. $200 ain't a lot but that was money. It was recognition again, beyond the material factor of it. It was recognition, and I was appreciative of it... People noticed. I don't look for recognition, but I'm a giver and it's nice to receive sometimes. I don't get that (Aeryn 2:13.)

Tae discussed how the impact of the Justice High School environment went beyond the walls of the school. He described the way this school impacted the larger surrounding community.

Justice High School gave the community life. The murals we did for the school,. The community did what Justice High School did. If y'all didn’t tell the communities about the protests, they probably wouldn’t do it. It’s important to the community. It brought it together. You see them come together to events and support Justice High School games. Watching what Justice High School has to offer. If it was gone, some people will leave. Some people move close to schools. I feel like there’d be more violence. More chaos. I don’t see shootings or gang retaliation or vandalism or people smoking or throwing bottles around the school. It’s civilized. People respect it because the education (Tae 3:21.)

Through these stories, each participant showed that they understood the mission and purpose of Justice High School. Through their experiences I was able recognize how connected they felt to each other, the community, and to the faculty and staff at this school. While looking back on their high school experience, each participant described the Justice High School environment as one that was supportive not only to them, but to the larger surrounding community.

The small school structure provided a space where so much was possible. Because the school structure was so small it became a place where another level of community organically developed. The small school structure was key in establishing community amongst the staff and students primarily because this created a deep
connectedness between them. Peer and staff relationships with students were deeper and more complex than traditional school models. Additionally, the school provided a tight link between the outside community and the inside space. Through the meaningful partnerships established by the school, students were able to access and experience the broader world.

Curriculum

Each participant told me stories about their classroom experience and the content they studied. These two aspects seem to go hand-in-hand as each participant described the type of learning they engaged in on a daily basis. Each participant reflected on the content of their courses, the relevance this content had to their lives, the rigor of the classes they took, and their own attitude and engagement toward different courses.

Tae told me a story about his AP Calculus course during his senior year and his learning experience in Ms. B’s classroom.

AP Calculus. First day of class. You know how I am in class, but I didn’t know that this is math. Usually in math class I don’t talk, I don’t. People know that about me in math, I stay focused because its numbers. She was like, her name was… Ms. B…she was saying the names and was giving problems. So I’m doing it and not speaking, and she asked who had the answer. I didn’t say anything. I thought I had it right though, but then everybody started doing it and I was like, “oh, it’s so wrong.” Then she’s like “Tae, you go up there.” So I said let me go show Ms. B I got this. Everybody was so surprised, because sometimes I have blonde moments. I be like the only one in class that gets 100% in AP Calculus, though. If you just pay attention in class it’ll help you… I had Ms. B before AP calculus… She tied it to real life. We found derivatives. To be honest, I don’t know when I’mma use it in life. So she gave us life scenarios, and it made sense. Helped me understand how to work the problem by doing it in real life (Tae 2:2.)
Sef similarly told the story of how in his Senior year English class, ironically the class I taught, he wrote personal statements for college applications and a professional resume. He discussed this experience and the impact it had on him and his peers.

It was your class, it was our senior year. It was really helpful, the personal statement. That just giving us... like some students were like “uh, why we doin' this?” Majority, well I know for our class, they really wanted to actually set themselves up so they could get applications in and get ready for college, so I thought that was just a good, helpful way for students who need help with writing to actually get help so we could send our personal statements… Helpful for me to actually be... well, don't get me wrong I would've done it by myself if I had to, but I had the necessary... like, the people around me to help me out. They provided the necessary tools I needed for that resume, that application to be set. So I could be fine. It wasn't no half-ass type of ordeal, it was full here-you-go... that's how I felt. So it was helpful, and it was just… I don't know. It meant a lot to the students because you're helping us out to get to that next level. Because that's the biggest thing, just education to get us to higher education (Sef 2:3.)

Sef continued to tell me about the rigor of his courses during high school. He told me how challenged he was in his Law class, and at the end of the course how accomplished he felt after completing a lengthy research paper.

Let's say, in my Law class, I'd never written a 15 page paper... he wanted us, it was one of our biggest projects... I never written a 15-20... he wanted 15 pages I think. Had we ever written 15? Not in your class, but in law class... it was over all the amendments... see, this is too damn long, c'mon (laughs). I felt really accomplished, and I'm going another class too... your class... I felt really accomplished after getting that paper finished (Sef 2:2.)

Aeryn told me stories about her English courses both Junior and Senior year. She emphasized how engaged she was in these courses because of the rigor and how she was able to connect the content to her reality.

You two (Ms. Jeremy and I) were the only people whose books I read. I don't read like that, I do enough to get by. I actually read those books. Ms. Jeremy class, I think what she did was kinda
establish me more of a reader. She kinda challenged me, back there we read plays and stuff. Like Shakespeare stuff, detail, analyzing. That was pretty cool, that was fun…. Macbeth, I remember I read that book through and through. I didn't need like... the sheet kinda to break down meaning. I didn't need that. I just enjoyed that class. I was really in tune with that. The cool thing was we had two teachers in the mix. ACT trainer that was the time during junior year. She had a lot of cool in class sessions…

I do remember reading *Beloved* a lot, that was really good. I can't actually remember something. I do remember it was really, really good. We did a lot of training, and I was learning a lot junior year with that. In your class, the conversations we had, the way we connected them from the book to reality. That's what I enjoyed the most. I can't remember the question, remember when you used to have us write the... it was two questions we had to answer after we read everything. What is the author’s truth and how does this literature impact you. Yeah... that class, it was always able to have me connect to reality. The different books we read like *Metamorphosis* and *Beloved*, and all the poetry. It was dope (Aeryn 2:11.)

Edwin reflected on memories of certain units he studied in his English class during his Junior and Senior year. In these stories he described the coursework, the instruction, classroom activities, and his feelings about these experiences.

I remember reading *Tale of Two Cities* in your class and we had that lawyer and I was mad because I had a good retort but you could only talk once. Good and evil, are these people bad because of what they do, are their actions representative of who they are? In History you can't have much discussion to a certain range, because it's something that already happened and people already have ideas about it. It's hard to create a new opinion that hasn't already been made, but when things are abstract like art or writing. Like in music class like “how does this music make you feel.” Things that like help you find your own way, those topics are what I paid attention to. Anybody with enough effort, anyone can do math. A lot of people can at least get basics. But if you can't do abstract thought, or talk to people, it's not as fun or appealing. I liked the classes where we could debate and give our opinion (Edwin 2:12.)

Edwin also described the rigor of his courses. He told me a story of a particular English unit and assignment that he remembered from his junior year.
When we read Animal Farm, you gave me the Raven and how he symbolized religion. At the time I thought you gave me that because you believe I could find a connection. Everyone else's were so easy and right in the text, but with the religion one you had to do background work. At that time I was like ok, I realize now that in high school that I settled for mediocre in core classes because mediocre was above average there. Classes where I had to do a little extra, I'd be like let me do something. That's why I like English my last year there (Edwin 2:13.)

Edwin continued telling me stories about a tough research paper he did in History class and how the challenging topic motivated him.

Mr. Hughes' damn paper about the emperor. Smaller moments like doing well in a class I thought would be hard. Passing my own expectations, like certain papers. History class we had to pick a figure in time. I picked the Emperor of Japan, Hiroshima. I don't know why I picked him, but everybody was doing well-known people. I said let me do someone I don't know. I know Mr. Hughes had higher expectations for some students than others, I feel like all teachers do. Who can be pushed more. He had some idea. He helped me find sources and things. I felt happy I did well in that respect. I got an A on the paper and class. It's funny now the AP exams, which are terrible because you can't guess. At least for history, I was able to get a 3. I don't remember. It was a 4 or 5. I didn't care, it was better than a 1. That means I gave a little extra, I felt empowered in that sense (Edwin 2:14.)

Edwin told me how he felt valued and invested because he had a choice in the curriculum in his English class.

I liked English class because I realized I'm good at reading and I enjoyed it. At an early age I was into it because I had to be, but I grew to like it. I liked you too as a teacher. I felt more relaxed. We had a role in picking the books we wanted to read, which was good because I don't want a book I wouldn't read. It helped me invest in the class (Edwin 2:11.)

Aeryn described her AVID\(^4\) class, a four year academic strategy and college readiness course, and told me a story about her learning experiences in this class and how they

\(^4\) AVID is a national organization in which schools all over the nation participate as a four-year, college-prep program. This program is usually implemented in urban schools.
inspired her.

In AVID, we had a lot... her purpose was to build our composition, literature type of thing. We did a lot of writing, and the cool thing about her class was the guest speakers. Motivational speakers, all these different people from the neighborhood who'd speak to us. Just like schooling us on the different things of life, like they weren't even really talking about school. It was about life. It was more interesting, just like everyday people, just there. We took a lot of college field trips, which got me involved in different things like taking college credit classes. So that was pretty cool…

In AVID, I think it was my freshman or soph year, I'm not sure. I can't remember the guy's name, remember he lost all that weight and then he gained it back. And then he was on TV. He had the dreads, short fat black guy. Glasses... Mr. Something. At first he was really thin, lost a lot of weight, then he gained it back. I forget his name but he was a guest speaker in AVID once. He was talking to us about life and, I forgot who it was, but some kid was in there sleeping, and he took $100 bill out of his pocket. He rubbed it against his ear and the kid woke up. He said “If you can tell me what this is, I'll give it to you.” We were all like “we know”. He said see there goes to tell you that you have to be alert at all times. Know what's going on around you. I remember like he used to be very kind of motivational. I was like wow, he was ready to give up the $100. He was serious.

I was like wow. I just come from poverty, and he was serious. He woulda gave it to him. It was like, I saw changes. I remember seeing him on TV because he did the 50 Million Pound Challenge Thing. He was on TV. I remember seeing him on TV and calling my mom, because his commercial had a tub. He was like “can you move the tub”. Everybody tried to move it but couldn't, and then he was like that's how much I used to weigh. It's Mr. something. He's part of Teens-up (after school program). Dreads, glasses. That was showing me he had a purpose, he was doing things (Aeryn 2:14).

For Edwin, his favorite classes were the ones in which he connected with his peers. Being in the first ever graduating class at Justice High School his student body was quite small, only sixty-four students, as were the classes.

Freshman year, my favorite class was art class… Definitely art, with my teacher she was Japanese and a bit older. I had her for my second advisory thing. I like that class because I like art. I
previously had notions of animae, and she knew about that and had those books too. Part of our project would be to draw in that class so I was invested in that class.

A lot of my now friends were in there: How, Z, Annette. All these people I sort of knew from other classes, I connected with them there. Mr. Vu's math class, algebra I guess. Same reasons, that's where I met Trina and Dia, Liz, Z. People who I'd see continuously. I had people to talk to. I liked art class more because I like the art aspect more. That feeling with those people, we sit at the same table. That was something I looked forward to (Edwin 2:2.)

Edwin went on to tell me how his teachers showed him how to learn subjects outside of the classroom that he did not have access to.

At the time I wanted to learn a language. I taught myself to read and write in Korean. I may not be able to speak it, but language is something I always wanted to push myself in even before I took classes. I feel like the fact that Justice High School didn't have a lot of language courses and other schools did, when I found out I can learn on my own. Mr. Zach showed me a website, he saw me reading some book. He said if you Google it you could learn the alphabet. And like if your college has that course you can take the course. Even if at the time I was like “eh”. I taught myself how to read and write in Korean, granted I liked the culture aspect of it. That wasn't in the curriculum but I figured if... my art teacher from freshman year helped too. She said she'd help after school if I had time. At the time I couldn't, but to know something outside of school could help me learn something I didn't need to know really. But I knew I could do it on my own (Edwin 2:9.)

Tae characterized the way his teachers taught him as “straight to the point”. He felt as though his teachers demanded that he did better when his work was not up to par, and he perceived this as “investing” in students.

Y’all are straight to the point. If we give you a BS paper, you say it’s BS. You say redo it. In real life this won’t slide. I’m not going to be like it’s okay when it’s not. Most schools let you slide, and it makes college harder. I think it’s interesting that y’all don’t sugarcoat. Y’all are teachers but still people, so you aren’t afraid to give sass back. Most schools don’t do that. They hardly invest in teachers or kids. You aren’t learning or interacting or engaging (Tae 2:5.)
These stories illustrate the memories these students recalled about the classes they took at Justice High School. It was amazing that former students like Sef and Edwin remembered the specific details of content and coursework they learned more than five years ago. I could not believe that they actually remembered the details of assignments and texts that we read and studied in class.

The primary aspects of the curriculum they emphasized was the interesting nature of the non-traditional content, the challenging coursework, the expectations of the teachers, and the social education in addition to the academic content they learned in classes. Each participant described different classes and assignments they remembered. They reflected learning moments where they remembered having a choice in the curriculum and opportunities to offer their beliefs, thoughts and opinions as they studied academic content.

It is evident that the many stories these participants told me about the learning they experienced could not have been possible if the teachers did not have the flexibility and creative space to facilitate such content. Teachers were not restricted but rather empowered to engage their students and create content that directly connected to their lives. They were given the freedom to deviate from academic content and implement a social education along with academics. Also, it must be noted that the rigor of coursework can be a double-edged sword in schooling. It can often empower students to achieve more or it can work to defeat individuals and instill feelings of failure and hopelessness. The rigor that these participants experienced in their courses motivated them and challenged each participant rather then defeating them. The teachers within this school held high expectations that motivated their students to authentically engage in the
content while supporting them to overcome feelings of inadequacy and failure when their work was not up to par, even when they put forth their best effort.

**Extra-Curricular Opportunities**

Another sequence of stories focused on the multiple opportunities offered by Justice High School. These school-initiated opportunities were often extra-curricular events, sports and clubs that students participated in during and after school. These stories describe how these opportunities impacted each participant. Tae told me a story about a time when he performed in Justice High School’s annual fashion/talent show. I used to coordinate this talent show while I was at Justice High School, and this show was one of the most popular events for Justice High School students and families, and the surrounding community. This was a student led event where students would sing, dance, and perform their original spoken word pieces in front of hundreds of people. Tae told me a story of when he participated in the talent show and performed a dance routine and an original poem.

The Talent show, when I wrote a poem about sexuality. I was dancing and letting everything go. I didn’t care what people thought anymore. I cold do what I wanted to do. It was too different times, a dance and a poem. It was sophomore year. At first I was supposed to dance, and then I read the poem. I was nervous, but still I read it. I was like “Ah, finally.” It just came out. I just felt like people will judge you for anything. I’m black, I’m male, I’m gay, so that’s three strikes against me. Already. Every mistake I do, it’s a problem. I’m like eff it, I don’t care. This is me. If you can’t take me, oh well. I sad that in my poem. Showing my dance. I felt real powerful, like you can’t tear me down (Tae 2:3.)

Aeryn told me stories about her senior year and how she accomplished so much for the Justice High School Senior class. She told me stories of how she and her peers successfully organized social events at Justice High School.
That was fun. Even the failed Winter Dance, it was still fun. Even though it just didn't happen. Pep-rally was awesome, we had so much fun during that. We even got the step team.

I then asked Aeryn what they did. Aeryn replied:

We had to organize it and do the funding, which was crappy. At the end we had a big show, it was greatness. We all went and got t-shirts, which is fly. I was supposed to get one but I didn't. It was dope. We had this big step team from out of nowhere that Paulette (fellow peer) did for us. I played three sports that year so I was all geared up. It was wicked. It's something about when you do something on your own, it's great. It's awesome. Some teachers be houndin', or the approval won't let too many things happen... The fashion show! That was great. I don't know if that was your biggest crowd, but I had a great time. That was great, I had so much fun doing it (Aeryn 2:16.)

Aeryn told me the story about the Senior Night basketball game where graduating seniors were recognized with their parents prior to the basketball game. She described how all her family and friends came to the game to support her and how emotional the night was for her.

Basketball senior night was very emotional. I knew it wasn't over because I was playing college ball, but it was the end of that chapter. It was so amazing because we the team we were playing Michelle Clark who was our rivals since the beginning. We were at our house battling for this #1 seed. It was game time, we had to be focused. We'd been through so much. It was great. I actually didn't play that well because I was cramping, when I got past that I got it together. My dad, my mom, my cousins came. My good friends. It was dope, it was a lot of people there. We lost, but it was like... we were losing I don’t know if it was a minute. We just came back and we down by 3, but we had to make the shot but we lost. It was okay. It was over, it was cool. We woulda been conference champs if we won that game. The other team hadn't won conference in years, like 2003. We lost. I was freaking mad, but I kept it together because I was captain and I had to be there for the team. It was emotional because we were leaving and had younger kids under us. I was like this is crap. I was happy the next day because we had regional’s. That was freaking awesome, great, freaking' great. Greatness (Aeryn 2:16.)
Aeryn then told me a story of how she was recognized during her senior year as the “Leader of the Year.” She described this moment to me and how it impacted her.

Senior year I remember I'd been doing a lot. I was very happy, it was finally here it's over. I was involved in a lot, trying to get my name out there just to help. Award season comes around and I know Imma get like five awards, because I played athletics. Then they got the Leader of the Year Award. Then, I'm like sitting down with my friends. We're in the Kiva (Auditorium) and somebody taps me like “That's your name.” I'm like you're dumb because you can't see it's too far. But they were like, “nah that's your name”, and sure enough it was and I had won Leader of the Year. I remember just being like “wow, that's pretty cool.” I was recognized for being who I am, nothing to do with athletics. Nothing to do with how I played, it was who I am as a person. Of course that was incorporated with that, but we were just looking at me as a person.

A Justice High School Leader … It's just somebody that is a leader and empowers others. Demonstrating success. They made it something profound for us. If you got this award, you did really well. More than the average predicted. You were recognized for being a great person, for doing great. Doing greatness for others, and showing it to your peers. That's what this award means (Aeryn 2:15.)

Similarly, Trinity told me a story about how the guidance she received in the US Empowered program enabled her to believe in herself. She described the role the US Empowered program played in empowering her to finish high school and go to college.

Beginning of the year, I was focused. I remember I was just gonna focus on myself. This was still when I was in my bad relationship. I made a decision to focus though. I heard from my friend about like US Empowered. I wanna apply, I wanna do something with my life. I had a conscious decision to focus, I don't know what it was. Maybe it was my summer school sophomore year, but I made a decision I wanted to do this. It was more of an “Ok, I'm gonna do this now.” In the beginning of the year, maybe October or late-September. The 31st of October I got inducted into US Empowered. That program was great and I think it should be in every school. It'll prepare students for college. I don't think I'd ever be in college if not for their guidance I didn't know the process. I'm first-generation, so my mom didn't know anything about college process, financial aid, they helped with all that. It was good. They helped with my
track to graduation. When I put my mind to something, I can do it. When I believe in myself, it's good. They were like these are the things that will get you to college. This is what will make you successful and help break poverty. To get out of this cycle, this life. I was like yeah.

With the Empower You program… That was a big part of Justice High School being social justice, because it prepared us for college like we came from a more prestigious high school. To understand the process of college, stuff that kids with parents who went to college would've already known. It was a very social justice thing to prepare us for college. That wasn't directly a part of the school though (Trinity 2:10.)

Each of these stories about the extra curricular opportunities that Justice High School offered to these participants express a tone of pride and accomplishment. Through these opportunities these students were validated. The fact that each of them could recount every detail of these memories that occurred more than two, three, and four years ago shows how incredibly meaningful and important these moments were to them. I could feel the joy, the humility, and the liberation these students experienced as they told me these stories. The extra-curricular events offered by Justice High School provided these participants with a sense of validation. Through these experiences each participant felt valued for the individuals that they were and valued for contributing positively to the Justice High School community.

Activism
When I asked the participants about activism through Justice High School, they had many stories to tell me. For Trinity, Aeryn, and Tae, they had many more experiences to reflect on because they attended Justice High School during its later years where with time it was more deliberately organized, active, and connected to the community. Sef and Edwin attended Justice High School during its earlier years and did
not have the same amount of exposure to activism and the community partnerships
during their four years because the school was a brand new high school in the area when
they attended.

Tae described how he engaged in activism through Justice High School High
School.

I was engaged in my own community and participating in
programs and helping develop other programs, and working on
LGBT youth. It impacted me, because I really like helping
people… Its one thing to see it but another to want to change it.
We have community meetings for justice. We have protests.
Justice High School is big on that. Events where we went to Mali
to help the underdeveloped countries. Stuff like that, stuff that
activists do (Edwin 2:3.)

Tae went on to tell me a story of how he protested during Columbus Day by attending a
rally at downtown that his history teacher took him too.

When we went down to x location. This was for US History. We
were learning about how people feed lies into textbooks. Like how
Columbus discovered America but killed all the indigenous people.
They call them Indians but really they’re indigenous. But I didn’t
know that. So we went to go protest, because the so-called Indians
are considered like immigrants. So we protested about that and
learned about their culture, and singing with them. It was beautiful,
it was freshman year. It was a parade going on downtown. Very
chaotic, and at x location it was a big circle and very positive.
There’s something about that kind of atmosphere. Very like…
native. A lot of singing and protesting. The police kind of harassed
us but we paid them no mind. We learned about real Native
Americans. The whole Justice High School was there. Those who
know about the event. The Justice community… A lot of us. There
was a lot of reaching out from different communities… It showed
beating the system. We tell people they are immigrants. We’ve
been doing that, but you can’t push somebody out their land and
say that it’s yours. It was very powerful, because it was mainly
youth here. I’m not Native American, but I’m fighting for
something I know should be fought for. So that was powerful (Tae
2:3.)

Aeryn also told me a story of how she experienced activism through Justice High School.
She reflected on a school-wide walk out to protest the proposed budget cuts in 2012 that were going to affect all city public schools and the extracurricular programs that were offered.

When we had the budget cut. When we left school for the budget cut thing. We all left organized, really just together. I thought it was just, they kinda gave us an option to ditch or whatever. But people really went to the rally. I was moved by it, seriously was. I was happy that we stood up united and together. Basically what happened was city public schools was gonna cut everything basically. It was student organized, I believe there was a rally going on in front of a city public schools building. The thing was everybody come to school and then ditch, walk out. And then go to the rally. So what our school did was have organizers – all I can remember is Mr. Hughes and Mr. Matthews for the most part – they organized so that we can all go together. They made us able to get there. They made an announcement over the intercom. I remember we just walked, teachers, the principal was there, security they all directed us to the park district near the school. We were over there waiting for everybody and it was 100s of us. He ended up walking somewhere to get on the bus somewhere. I remember we marched and marched to a the district building downtown, I did an interview with some news reporters. It was fun. Me and my friends were out there for 2-3 hours and we went home (Aeryn 2:13.)

I then asked her what she did at the rally. Aeryn responded:

Fist pumps, singing, made it known that we care too. It's not even just about the athletics, it's about our school. We're even willing to fight our teachers, come back for things we need, come back for funding. A lab, a library. I remember a point where we weren't gonna have a library anymore (Aeryn 2:13.)

Trinity also told me a story of how she experienced activism during the walk out. She was five months pregnant at the time, but she still joined her peers and protested downtown in front of the City Public Schools’ district office.

I appreciated the walk out, I was strongly for that. I don't know if you remember, but it was awesome. That was bad though, I was 5 months pregnant downtown like “We Want Justice, We Want It Now!” It was stressful. I was pretty involved junior year… After
the protests and stuff, I was just like my body won't take this. I took a step back. Anyway, I like how the school... that they actually supported that. They supported it, the teachers walked out with us. Everybody at this school would support. It's not like some people can't go because they can't get out of class. It's Justice High School (laughs), we were able to get out easily. The teacher was like “Go ahead! Go do social justice things.” No hesitation, it was awesome. It empowered us to do something we were passionate about. I think that's important in a positive way. We were destroying things, we wanted positive change. We didn't want them cutting teachers and security and installing cameras. That wasn't going to be effective in our school. I was passionate about it. There's enough violence here and you wanna cut security, are you crazy? Obviously you don't go to my school haha, you see this going on in the neighborhood… That was one of the big moments, because of the protest they didn't make those cuts. The support of my teachers. That led us to be able to do that, and make that change. To stop that negative change (Trinity 2:9.)

Aeryn told me another story of how she and her peers engaged in activism within Justice High School to change the school rules so students could have off-campus lunch.

Probably liberating was off campus lunch. Okay, let's go back. Before senior year started, we had a pep-rally group, I don't know... but it was a group of my friends and we'd determined that we were gonna plan our senior year. We had a list of things we were gonna do, because you know you need fun senior year, the pep-rally, a couple of dances, and off-campus lunch. I really enjoyed that. We worked hard for that, really hard. I remember sending our person, Shawn (fellow peer), to the Principal’s office and sometimes she wouldn't be there or sometimes she wouldn't talk to us. But finally we got it. I think I went off-campus three times and it was over, but we got it and we did it. Of course people messed it up, I knew they would, but, actually, I don't think nobody messed it up I think they just wanted to stop. We did it, that was ours. We did that, and they'll never do it again. Ever. They can't do it like we did it... It was just us, the kids. We didn't really have too much people... we had to get down there do it our self. Not to say teachers were against it, but they were being realistic about it. “They're gonna ditch, it happens.” We sat down, drew the guidelines, and did it (Aeryn 2:16.)

Edwin also told me a story of a youth-led initiative called “peer counsel” where students would actively try to resolve conflicts amongst themselves through dialogue and
communication.

My 3rd year there, the peer counsel thing for the first two years. Me and Z went there because we weren't talking. At first I'm like they're our age, what do they know. The fact that the counsel was so diverse, Mr. Lafer led it but students facilitated it. Thinking back, I don't know if it was a good idea to have students leading it. We were all hormonal and emotional, so what if it got outta hand? That played a role in me and Z coming together… It's like people from all over come together and not let things sit, they make it better.

I think it was Nique. I think it was her who had the idea, and I don't think me and Z were aware where we were going. We got there and we were like “Oh...” She knew we were really close friends. The aspect of somebody else seeing an issue and trying to help when you don't have to. She didn't have to tell the dean or whoever else, they should be friends again. She didn't have to waste her breath. The fact she was able to orchestrate it, even though I never said thanks. I talk to her sometimes on Facebook, but I never connected her with it till later. Even the counselors, them just being there to facilitate it kind of led the way. You don't have to know everything 100%, but you try. At least they tried, and they got credit for it. They were there to help us when we didn't ask for it, but we needed it (Edwin 2:13.)

These participants discussed various ways Justice High School promoted being active students and active community members. Many of them told me stories of how they not only participated, but how they led these initiatives within their school. These stories reflect an experience that is not happening in other schools. The stories of activism showed how they developed skills to make change and further connect themselves to their community. The opportunities students had to engage in activism situated them as active participants in their society rather than powerless, silent bystanders of circumstances that were beyond their control.
Faculty and Staff

When I asked every participant the question, What specifically about Justice High School was meaningful to you? They all said that the relationships they had with the faculty and staff at Justice High School were most meaningful about their high school experience. For me, a former teacher at Justice High School, these stories moved me beyond words.

Tae described the impact that Justice High School teachers had on him by empowering him to envision and pursue a college education even though he initially did not believe it was financially possible.

Hmmmm… Probably relationships with teachers. In some high schools, it’s thousands of students so you don’t have that. When you get to know your teacher and their material, it’s easier to do the work. And you know what they really want, so you get an A (laughs). When you have this close bond with a teacher, it makes high school easier to deal with. And the BS outside of high school. You get to know them on a personal and an academic basis.

If I didn’t know you… I wouldn’t be doing this study. I know you’re a pro dancer in India. I wouldn’t have the connections that I have. That impacts me. Let’s say I didn’t talk to my teachers. It’d be hard for me to express myself. If I didn’t talk to y’all, you wouldn’t know I’m a dancer. You help me with goals, like college. But you don’t see that in your own community, because it’s very difficult and college is expensive. I was not thinking about it when I was a freshman. I was thinking about working, because I knew that you needed money to go to college. I have no money (Tae 1:9.)

Edwin also talked about the investment of his teachers and how they ‘added warmth to the class’. He discussed how his relationship with teachers extended beyond academics.

That helped a lot, the teachers are really trying to invest something in the kids. It was their first years also, they were like students because they were learning to manage a class and do curriculum. I appreciated it, at least people who I kept in touch with who didn't go to Justice High School would be like my teacher just sits there, we do whatever. At least the teachers I had classes with were trying
to make a point. That added warmth to the class. You don't want somebody who's like “just read.”

Teachers were for the most part very comfortable to talk to. Mr. Zach loved sports, so if you loved sports you can talk to him. Mr. Hughes loves history and talking about communities. Ms. Thawani is the super personal one. Anybody, a lot of Justice High School teachers had their element. You knew who to go to if you had a problem. I feel like the fact that it was somebody there always to talk to... There are others who are willing to listen, so that mentality stuck in my head. Also, all the kids who went to Justice High School were all cray in our own way (laughs). That stuck (Edwin 2:12.)

Sef also described the impact his teachers had on him during high school. He expressed his beliefs about what it takes to be an effective teacher in City Public Schools and how his teachers helped him to be successful in college.

I feel they were all invested. Sometimes teachers can not be invested and not love what they do. They could just go over the subject and just teach it to you. What if you're dealing with kids with attention spans that are different? They go to the extra mile, I think. Plus… I think the personality of both teachers came into what we were going to learn is a skill we definitely need to manage later on. It helped me out in college because I did very good. Law, it goes with the history side... investment, they were really truly invested (Sef 2:2.)

Sef then discussed an example of one of his teachers, Mr. Fromm, who he had a lot of respect for, but Sef really disliked the content of his geology course. He talked about this personal relationship with his teachers as a motivating force for his investment in the courses that he disliked.

I love Mr. Fromm as a person, I love him. But I hated Geology. I love Mr. Fromm with history and geography, that was ok. It depends on the investment. Don't get me wrong, I love Mr. Fromm. There was a lot of teachers that's why throughout my four years it's… truly invested, you'll be here and really be able to help people out. Students who really need help.
If the students need help trying to understand a concept, the teachers had no issue giving a little time after class to help the student out. Or, making... I know we're not supposed to make class “fun” in that type of way, but make it interesting to where it captures students and they really want to do good in the class or really want to learn. That's where I think it really should be... that's how teachers should teach certain public school students, the ones that aren't selective enrollment. Because it's hard. My time at Justice High School though... uh... I had a lot of great teachers that really helped me out but from the beginning. Definitely my football coach, Coach Rob.

Sef then emphasized the commitment of the staff to the school and how these relationships impacted him even today in his present life.

What I'm trying to say is, Justice High School... for me it was another school. A second start for me. I think they were known for the staff. Academics was... good or strong enough compared to other schools. Can't compare to some of the premiere high schools in the city, but we were good compared to a lot of other schools.

I think we had a good staff. When people made time for you after work hours, or when they really want you to do something with your life. That extra help, Justice High School staff did that. So many people want me to succeed, they're still in my life giving me opportunities. I'm out of college now. Relationships that most of the senior class had, they had good relationships with at least one teacher. I don't think that happens at other schools (Sef 2:2.)

I probed Sef further about how Coach Rob impacted him and he told me two stories describing Coach Rob’s influence on Sef’s life.

He got me involved. I didn't plan on doing much in high school. I was so focused, I just wanted to excel academically and get to the next level. That's all that was in my head. Just focus and do what I had to do. No playing around. He impacted me... my dad was there, but he was that next step saying this is what's best for you. Telling me how to be a better man. Coach Rob did a lot. He made me into, sports-wise, he made me better. It helped my confidence with everything, like I could do anything. I knew football, but I didn't really know how to play. I knew basketball. Coach Taylor impacted me too, but not the same way that Coach Rob did. Took a scrawny little kid to play football, be a man, and do positive things (Sef 1:4.)
Sef went on to tell me another story of how Coach Rob helped him while he was dealing with many family issues.

This was junior or senior year. I had a lot going on. So much drama with family. So crazy I don't want to talk about it. Very sad. A lot of issues. My mother and father didn't have the best marriage. Those nights were probably some of the worst. It was disheartening. Next game was Saturday, the day after all that happened. I told Coach Rob everything that's happened to me. My head wasn't there. He listened, he didn't care about football as much as me right then. He provided a lot of good wisdom to me in that situation. I was 17, I was crying a little. I don't like even admitting to cry. What wisdom did he share? He said “Look, I know you're going through rough things. Whatever decision you come to is fine, you don't have to play.” He basically said that things happen, it's not your fault. I was kind of like “How can I fix it?” He told me that it wasn't my responsibility. He got me refocused and it was one of the best games I ever had. I always remember that. He really believed in me. That made me think that I've grown (Sef 1:4.)

Similar to Coach Rob, Aeryn described how Mr. John, Ms. Jeremy, and I all supported her while she was an Justice High School student.

Mr. John (special education teaching aid)... ever since my freshman year he's a cool dude. Nice, sweet, helpful I remember freshman year I had a game, English class I didn't do a paper. This was when I was on my ego, basketball I thought I was unstoppable. Then I was like oh crap, I couldn't get my grade sheet signed. She said I had to type my paper before I went to the game, and this was after school. I had like an hour or so. I remember just feeling like I was at the lowest point. My dad was coming from the suburbs, I almost broke down. Then Mr. John comes out of nowhere and was like “you gotta do this for you... you can't go past this, you gotta go through it.”

He was like, basketball won't break you. At the end of the day I still need education. From then on, I respected that man. I love him. I went back and saw him and said “Hey, Mr. John.” He was like “Call me Quinton.” I was like nah. You know what, he said he respected that about me. Stuff like that. You... you just flipped at the mouth and we just gotta love you. You did a lot. We spent a lot of time together from end of junior year to senior. I love you and stuff. A lot of stuff. We bonded. I got to know you, you to me. I know your dogs. I respect that. Ms. Jeremy, she's cool. She kept us
in check. Y'all were there for a greater purpose I wasn't understanding. I don't know what other teachers I looked up to like that. Everybody has their purpose, but out of all those people I think y'all three were just the ones that were more I was affected by (Aeryn 2:14.)

In the former section, Community Role Models, Aeryn told me a story about Ms. Jeremy and she referred to her as her mother. She described how she opened her home to her after high school and embraced her. This relationship with Ms. Jeremy continued post-high school and she continued to explain how Ms. Jeremy was a mother-like figure even today.

Trinity told me stories of how her teachers supported her during difficult times, specifically her Empower You program who were also full-time teachers at Justice High School, Ms. Bach and Ms. Barts. She described how these two teachers went above and beyond to support her in various aspects of her life.

Sometimes teachers like... they, even my AP Psych teacher, she helped me. I think she was the first person I told at school about my pregnancy. That was because I trusted her. She supported me. I got an order of protection against my boyfriend. My teachers helped drive me home once when I was really scared. I didn't want to take a risk because I had just broke up with him and I was scared for my life. I wanted to make sure I was safe. Ms. Bach her and Ms. Barts they helped me get clothes. We couldn't really afford that, my mom bought some but it was nice to get new clothes for pregnancy stuff. That's empowering. It wasn't a part of the program, but I told them before I got inducted... not before I got inducted, but before it was official that you were in the program. We had to wait till January until you are accepted. I found our before that I was pregnant, I didn't wanna go into it without letting them know.

They helped me lay out the options I was considering for the pregnancy. Abortion, what would happen with the pros and cons. The helped me make a list, for me to write what would happen with an abortion, adoption, keeping the baby. Kind of helped me through that process. My mentor in Empower You did a lot of home teaching for me. That was great, she was someone I trusted to help catch me up with work. In the summer, for AP Calc, I'm an
overachiever, I like challenges. I like the AP classes. She helped me prepare for AP Calc over the summer before. She was like there's no way I'd be able to do all this without help, so she went over and beyond for me. Indirectly, the school helped me. I'm very grateful for that... Ms. Barts was really helpful. She helped me with my classes, she helped me get to college, I don't know. My order of protection (Trinity 2:19.)

Trinity further described the way all the teachers at Justice High School empowered her to complete high school and go on to college, rather than kick her out due to her poor attendance or because she was pregnant.

The stuff that helped me indirectly, they were teachers that worked there. Teachers at a social justice high school have that kinda mindset. It's different there because teachers are empowering kids to care about social justice issues and to consider it... It's smaller, so there were connections with teachers. From what I've heard in other schools, if there are issues in violence, you get kicked out right away. At Justice High School that doesn't happen. With my attendance, like in my case I was pregnant, and kids get kicked out because of that. You didn't, you helped. I actually had AP classes after, and I graduated on time. And I'm in my 3rd year in college, and I support my daughter. I think the mentality of the teachers was great, and then not kicking kids out is so important. Like you need to believe in kids even when they struggle, that's when they need it most (Trinity 2:12.)

I found it very interesting that each participant used the same word ‘invested’ to describe their teachers at Justice High School. The stories these participants told me showed how the role of staff was much more than just their teachers or their coach. The staff at Justice High School were described as mentors and supporters who not only taught them academic content and skills, but inspired them to not give up when the hardships in their lives became overpowering. They provided resources, ensured students’ safety, and opened their lives up to helping these students succeed both inside and outside school. These stories show the freedom that the faculty and staff had to be much more than teachers and staff. By this I mean that they had the power, the flexibility,
and the capacity to make their classroom spaces a place where students could express themselves and connect their lives to the content that they were being taught. In these spaces students were comfortable, accepted, and a place where they were inspired and challenged. The relationships participants described sounded like they were describing their family members rather than school faculty and staff.

**Negative Experiences at Justice High School**

Although most of the stories these participants shared were about the very positive influences of this high school experience, yet there were also some lived experiences illustrated some negative experiences in Justice High School.

Edwin shared a few stories with me expressing how he felt that Latino students were invisible in Justice High School as the Latino culture was not celebrated like African American culture.

I know they have social justice, the Gandhi picture on the second floor. I know there was also, their goal was to be social justice and have everyone be equal in voice. I realized junior and senior year that it wasn't the case, because the neighborhood around the school took over the mission. I know we didn’t have many Asian or White or Middle Eastern, Latino students, so they were pushed to the back burner. Like focus on the people we have a lot of. That's not really social justice, because that's what the world does. I remember one day being really upset they were doing... I don’t remember how that feeling came about. Latino American Heritage Month is the first month of school, so it's hard to bring it in when people get adjusted. But we don't have assemblies, we're lucky if we get a sample board. But they'd take chunks out of the day for... Only a few people even cared (Edwin 2:10.)

Edwin went on to tell me another story of a time when he was deeply offended by the school principal’s reaction to a salsa dance performed by Latin dancers at the annual fashion show.
The Latino dancers danced and one of the principals said it was obscene... like have you seen a dance at the school? 99% is juking. She didn't want them to come back to school. They were doing a dance that's been done forever, but they are wrong? Towards the end there, the social justice is a nice idea but not when it gets consumed by the people who want to make it about something else. People are people, and we can all want something super nice for everybody, but there's always somebody who wants more than others. In the beginning I didn't pay attention to the mission. It was a nice idea I guess, but later on it really was frustrating. I don't care if they didn't represent a lot of Latino culture, but at least have one thing. They didn't do anything for Asian Americans. They didn't do anything except African American history. If I wanted to only learn about this, I'd take a class. If they did it equally I wouldn't mind as much it's like the same thing over and over again. It's not really social justice (Edwin 2:10.)

When speaking to Tae about difficult experiences he faced during high school, he reflected on a story about a conversation that he had with the Justice high school dean of students when all of his peers in the school were bullying him after finding out that he was gay.

The Dean had pulled me like into his office or whatever. And he was explaining to me... Like he was asking me like how do you know that your gay? or whatever... Like talking to me basically like I'm his child or whatever. And I'm just like ummm... soo... I'm kind of a smart, smart alec... So I kind of asked him how do you know your straight? And so he was like well I just know... or whatever... And you know at the time I didn't really think like... pause... I mean I'm smart, but at the time you know when your young you don’t really think like being gay is ahhh abnormal, or whatever. But like that's what I found... like, why are you treating me different because I’m... And then he was trying to explain to me like, I’m by myself. He was kinda upset, like telling my cause people gotta watch over me now. Cause you know I’m by myself or whatever. And he was like giving me the demonstration with some fruit and I was the banana... like... lol! Like he didn’t know what to say because he never dealt with you know somebody like being gay or whatever... soo... I mean it’s funny now, but at the time it was kind of irritable because I felt like, who are you to tell me? ahhh... what I feel and this is not accurate or whatever. Cause... it cause its not normal to you but its normal to me though (Tae 2:14.)
I then asked Tae to tell me how he felt when this was happening. He replied;

I really didn’t feel good. I just felt like he was attacking me. Kinda telling me I’m by myself… Yea. I thought it was kind of rude…

Subsequently Tae was forced to interact with this Dean for the remaining four years of his high school experience.

Unlike Tae, Sef's negative stories about Justice High School focused on academics. He felt that Justice High School did not provide as rigorous academic coursework as other premier high schools in the city.

I see it (Justice High School) as the same as other CPS schools... I don't know how it could be... Uplift is supposed to be a college preparatory school, right? From what I've heard from other schools, I don't think we're at that level academically. I think the steps they're making are very good, it's just we're not there compared to Hoffman High or... that has a lot to do with the students, so I don't really diminish Justice. I think it's a pretty good school for the students we do have. so I don't... I just think, I mean, they're a regular public school (Sef 2:15)

Trinity also expressed similar thoughts concerning the academics and academic resources at Justice High School.

I knew we didn't have enough resources though. That's kinda negative in terms of preparing for college. When I did talk to my friends from other schools, they had all these AP classes and stuff. I went to Marten, an art space downtown specifically for students who didn't have much art at school. There were kids from Lane Tech like why are you in this program. They had like 5 AP classes already, and art, totally on track for a Bachelor's in Art. Whole first year done (Trinity 2:13).

From these stories it is clear that these participants also encountered some barriers at Justice high school. Both Edwin and Tae shared stories where they felt othered, discounted, and offended by different experiences they encountered while they were in high school. These negative experiences were something that they vividly remembered.
and became extremely emotional about as they told me their stories. Amidst all of the caring individuals in this school, there were some who obviously acted as barriers for these students. Additionally, Trinity and Sef reflected on the lack of academic rigor they experienced during as they reflect back on their experience. For these two students, this was important and meaningful.

Conclusion

These stories of participants’ community and school experiences showed a sense of trust and family that was created by Justice High School and the many community organizations that provided safe spaces for these youth while they dealt with the oppressive conditions in their lives. Most of the teachers and staff in this school were individuals who were deeply trusted by their students and extremely influential in their students’ lives. This aspect of the school shows how teachers were empowered to serve these students and take on a role much larger than an academic teacher or sports coach. Through these deep and meaningful relationships that were established, a safe space, for the most part, was created for these participants. It cannot be denied that Justice High School students did also encounter negative experiences that impacted them. These negative experiences also illustrated how this high school was not perfect, and at times a place where students struggled and felt like they did not belong.

Overall, I found these stories enlightening especially since I have personally witnessed how the era of accountability has demoralized educators who had vision, passion, and innovative ideas. How were the teachers and faculty within this school motivated to extend beyond their professional role? This question comes to mind because these stories emphasize the negative, positive and even life changing impact educators
can have when students trust them and feel connected to them beyond the classroom setting.

In the next chapter I will present stories of these participants post high school lives. In this section I will provide the stories each participant shared with me about their present life. These stories demonstrate the choices each participant has made after high school, the way they have transformed their lives, and the manner in which they have redefined themselves and their identity. In this section I will also present stories of the way each participant discussed their future aspirations and their goals, as well as their current achievements and their attitudes towards themselves.
Chapter 6: The Roses That Grew From Concrete

Post High School

Each participant involved in this study graduated from Justice High School between two and five years ago and has moved on to the next chapter of their lives. I wanted to share their stories describing the path they have paved for themselves after high school up to their present lives to present the larger picture of the way they reflect on their high school experience and the way this experience impacted them in their current lives. I thought it was important to share these stories after they graduated from this social justice high school to see the manner in which their lives have taken shape. I chose to present these stories in the same way I began in chapter 4, by presenting individual vignettes of each participant’s post high school stories.

Tae

Tae told me the story about his academic path after high school beginning with the summer before he attended his first semester at a performing arts college located in his home town. He is currently a second year student and a dance major.

It’s so weird talking about the present. I was looking for a job in the summer time. I was trying to get money because I wanted to live in a dorm at Columbia. I paid some of it, it was $13,000. They paid (college scholarships and financial aid) my whole tuition so I was just good. Scholarships and financial aid. My grandma paid the other half even though she did not agree with my choice to pursue dance. My first year experience there, and it’s downtown. Very commercial. My first year, I didn’t do so good because of personal problems. But it was still a good experience, I was doing West African dance, learning stuff I never knew. Then I was on academic probation, but I wanted to raise myself up. I was like I knew I could do better than this, all because of my attendance. So I’m like okay,
next semester I’m gonna do good. And I did, got straight A’s. This semester is going excellent. I had auditioned for 5 pieces, and I made it for 3. My grades are phenomenal. Ain’t no slackin’. I didn’t miss a day. My teachers know I put in work. I’m just loving it… From these last two years, seeing myself grow. When I first went to Castlehouse College. I was very intimidated, because there are people who’ve been doing ballet since they were 3. I was like I got a lot of catching up to do. But they can see I’m really trying, I’ve gained so much experience and knowledge in these two semesters. Years of experience in these two semesters. I feel like I work 10 times harder to be where everybody else is. But then I feel like I’m better at other things. But they got six years of modern, and I’ve never taken it. But I’m fierce. I’m feisty. So I can just see the growth. That’s what I’m proud of (Sef 3:1.)

Tae then discussed his family and his relationship with them. He emphasized how he decided that he needed to put parameters on communicating with his family because they often distracted him from school.

My family is beautiful, but they’re too much to deal with. All this commotion, it can interfere with my school work. My friend Kevin died from a shooting. They told me in class, that really affected me. That’s one of my best friends, and you gotta tell me while I’m in school? You couldn’t tell me when I was done. It affects you hearing stuff like that. I was in dance class and they called. Yeah it’s an emergency, but why when I’m in class. I went in the hallway because I couldn’t breathe. Because you don’t think about people dying like that, especially when they aren’t in a gang. He was just in a bad neighborhood. I just couldn’t take it, and I try not to cry in front of people but this was just too much emotion. So I just burst out. But, I just kept dancing. I don’t know if I’ve fully coped with it. I don’t know, I just keep dancing. So now I just give my family times that they can talk to me because it distracts me from school. (Tae 2:13)

For Tae dancing is a way to cope with the hardships he faces in his life. Dance is what Tae is passionate about and this outlet continues to motivate him to continue working for his goals. Lastly, Tae told me the story of everything he was involved in beyond academics. He included the activism he currently engages in, the leadership position he
holds in various college and community organizations, and the various service ways he is currently involved in his community.

At my college most of the males in dance are white. A few black kids, but most of the people they don’t speak to us. So I didn’t really feel comfortable. I noticed that most of the black people hang around a lot. My friend wanted to start an organization for black people too, a Black Students Union, because he felt we weren’t accepted. We just started having meetings and black brotherhood and community meetings, and I used Justice High School to think about events we can do to help the community. We talked to our college board department and they helped us from there…. The purpose is to talk about helping different communities. Staying social with your people, because you to organize and have connections, strive for the best with our events and study groups and help them with college. This organization is not only black, a lot of Asians, overseas students. One girl from South America. Islanders. The purpose was for Blacks, but it’s also hard for other races at Columbia. I felt good being in the school, but it was too much segregation. We needed something to pull people together. I wanted to be a part of that.

Today I am a second year dance major at my performing arts college and I am an outstanding dancer. I work at clothing store downtown part time, and I will be an intern for Google this summer. I am really excited for that. I am full time dance instructor for the hip-hop community organization in the Justice community that I attended while I was growing up, a mentor for LGBT youth at a community center, and a founder of the Black Union at my college (Tae 3:4.)

Three aspects of Tae’s post-high school story are most captivating for me. First and foremost, I am inspired by the way Tae made a choice to follow his passion for dance through post high school education even though many of his of his family did not support this decision. No one in Tae’s family has a college education, and Tae was the first to pursue this in his family. I was also moved by Tae’s determination to excel in this context and navigate the adversity of being in this new environment that he had never experienced before. Second, not only did Tae find his niche at his current college and
earn the respect of being an outstanding dancer by his teachers and his peers, but he had to overcome failure in his journey to this achievement. After turning his grades around from failing to excellence, today he is an outstanding dance student and a leader for other minority students. Next, Tae has created positive change on his campus by establishing a Black Union to confront the oppression he faced as a minority dance major and to empower others through a collective effort. Tae’s continued service to his college community and his childhood community is inspiring. Lastly, Tae did not leave his home community and move on to bigger and better things, rather he continues to come back to invest and inspire the youth in the Justice community where he grew up. I admire Tae’s attitude towards himself and his life, his confidence, social awareness, and the ongoing ability to negotiate the oppressive circumstances he experiences all the time with tolerance, positivity, resilience, and hope. This attitude towards himself and others has enabled Tae to have control over himself and his life. This young man possesses such strength and power, and his post-high school story shows how he utilized these qualities to transform his life.

**Sef**

Sef began telling me about his path after high school by reflecting on his senior year in high school when he was rejected during the final round of interviews for a full ride Posse scholarship to Lake State University.

So the biggest hardship I faced was with standardized testing. I felt like it didn't reflect who I was and who I was gonna be, and what school I should get and what scholarship money. Because it's so important to score, because that's so important. Because that didn't reflect who I was... it doesn't, like I went to college and even... let's say it's not the top private liberal arts school in the nation. I felt like even if I went to the top one, I'd still do the best because it's all about work ethic. How hard you want it. I want it... so that really
hurt me because it decided a factor of me getting a full ride to Lake State University with uh... Posse Scholars. They wanted me because they knew who I was and how hard I worked during my four years here doing all I can to set myself up for that scholarship. But, my ACT didn't reflect what they wanted. Everything else, but not my ACT (Sef 3:1.)

Then I asked him, So after the hurt, then what'd you do? He replied;

Just like I always do, find... do what I have to do in order for me to really follow my dreams. To look for more schools. And I found, I think. I found Ashland College, the school that... I didn't even care about playing football, I just wanted to go to a good school and then it was just like this might be a decent school for you. Ashland College, like it was... it's not the top school, but it's the small school, it's a new area I was interested in checking out. They offered me money. It added up because the football scholarship was not the highest. NAIA is better than Division 3, but they offer... I wasn't the big name player they'd offer a lot of money to, so I didn't get too much for that. But they gave some for my GPA and all that. Total? I wanna say around $11... probably $10, $11. Then once I went to academic and got the others it was like... so football was like $7 thousand for a year, and other stuff was added. The academic was $8500 so another $15. So it wasn't the best money available, but my scholarship and financial aid added up (Sef 3:1.)

As Sef took a moment to reflect on this moment in his life, he emphasized how much he wanted to get out of his community. In this section, Sef also expresses his beliefs and attitudes towards himself as he explained how the university he was rejected by missed out on a “quality student”.

Sometimes I think “Oh, I shoulda just gone to community college for a year and then went to a university... which is nothing wrong with that, that's not what I'm sayin. I'm sayin' I want the experience I definitely did. I wanted to get the hell out of here and check something new for a change!! They say so-called college is the best 4 years of your life, so I just wanted to get out. And I thought I was gonna go to Wisconsin. They messed up because they lost a leader, a person who was just a hard-working individual and who at all costs will just... Imma do something. It's gonna take some time, but Imma do something. They lost an alumni. That's how I look at it. I did a
lot of things for my college, so I really felt like they lost a quality student who really woulda just kept on growing. Sometimes people need to not look at the score and look away, because I think they lost somebody really important (Sef 3:2.)

Sef’s confidence and self-belief shows how he valued himself beyond the low test scores. This confidence and strength enabled him to be resilient and look for another path that provide him access to his future goals.

Well, I decided to go to a small private liberal arts college that wanted me to play football with, so I started college. In four years I think that I truly learned a lot, not only about myself but, um... a lot of knowledge of what I really want with my future career. Education was good, participated in a lot of activities and events throughout my college time. But, um, you know, did fine. Graduated, and now I’m currently in a MBA program tryna get my Master’s. Yeah, I’m working on my MBA in management. Finance is tricky. It’s cheaper to add it on after you get the management. That’s my plan. I’m at JW University. I’m a grad assistant with the performing arts department. I did three shows. I got my bachelors in international business with a minor in history. I really want to do management, with business. I don’t know what specific field. The stock market... a little bit of consulting. I’m still skeptical but I know I want to manage. I feel I can do that really well (Sef 3:2.)

I then asked Sef, Tell me everything you are currently doing in your life? He responded;

Right now, I am a grad assistant in my second quarter. I’m doing my MBA in Management and Finance. I’m a part-time volunteer chess instructor for little kids. Gigs like ticket sales just to get money. I’m a basketball ref... damn, what else... I reffed in Ohio. Not the YMCA for now. I need to get my referee stuff for this state. It’s a good way to make money. School, work, and more work (Sef 3:3).

The primary thing that stood out to me in this section of Sef’s interview is his resilience when encountering adversity and his strong self-confidence even though different messages were being conveyed to him by his low standardized-test scores and the
university that rejected him. This young man was able to look past all of this
discouragement and disempowerment and still recognize his strength, his value, and what
he has to offer the world. When Sef spoke so strongly of his view of what the university
lost out on when they rejected him, I was deeply impacted and further moved as he
articulated that this did not define him, and rather the university was the one who missed
out on a great student. Beyond this challenge, Sef went on to further his education, leave
his home town, and experience a new and different life. He too, like Tae, transformed
himself and his life just like he had envisioned when he was in high school.

Aeryn

Aeryn began telling me about the present with a story of the events that occurred
after graduating high school.

Graduated June 11, 2011. After that I had to pay tribute to my
summer, I bonded with my friends. Those people you know,
but don’t really know. I got to bond with them and just... That
happened, which is really good. Went to college for a while... in
Wisconsin, my mother was against it because she thought it’d
be too much racism for me to have an opportunity there, but I
loved it. Went there playing basketball and met a lot of good
people, I enjoyed myself (Aeryn 3:1.)

Aeryn discussed how she encountered many hardships after she was taken out of
school after her first semester at college due to financial debt that her mother
refused to pay.

Then I got taken out of school, slight depression you could say.
Moved around a lot. A lot of conflict with my family. I just got a
lot of... my grandmother really would throw a lot of punches at
me for being at home. Nitpick with me a lot, not really
sympathetic. She’s from the era where it’s high school, you get
a job, like that. But that’s just not what I want in life, I wanted
to go to school. When I came home I remember it being so
hard, she was such a jerk. Say I wasn't home or I was at Ms.
Jeremy’s home, whenever I’d be there my sister wouldn’t think it wasn’t okay that I was a bad person.

She got brainwashed that I wasn’t doing nothing with my life, worthless, imma be here forever. My sister wouldn’t clean up, my grandmother would be like “Oh, she’s in school she’s doing something.” I’m like where’d that come from. That’s why I bounced around a lot, because I couldn’t be there. I remember I did coaching at Justice High School. That was cool, helped me get out the house and do what I loved to do. Around a bunch of young kids who were very energetic, and were willing to put the work in and I was willing to help. Shout to Ms. B for letting me be a part of that. I did that for a while helping, being there for the kids. Letting them know about my opportunities. I’m proud of them, you know Ana? This is a freshman when I started, but she’s doing good now. She plays for the McDonald’s Elite team, there’s a couple other girls doing really well (Aeryn 3:1).

Aeryn then discussed how she began searching for jobs so that she could save up some money. In this section she discussed the various tragedies that deeply impacted her. She describes how these events discouraged her from going back to school.

I did that, and then I had been looking for jobs. I needed a job. Leah (fellow peer) called one day saying they were hiring, I got the job so... I’ve been working at Einstein’s a year this Thanksgiving. It’s been a journey, rough. Trying to get back in school, but a lot of things happen. Unexpected things. I was trying to get in school by myself, rather than get help from my mom. I was supposed to go to Houston (where her mother moved to), I was ready to leave but she didn’t end take a job so I missed a semester there (Aeryn’s mother did not take the job that she was offered at that time and ended up staying in Chicago for two more months before she moved to Houston). I was gonna start back this past semester, but my brother passed away so I didn’t wanna do it at all. That was the first time I said no, I wasn’t in the place to put my mind together and do that. Now I’m at the point where I debate going back to school, I really don’t know (Aeryn 3:4.)
As Aeryn continued to describe her uncertainty for going back to school, she told me a story about a time recently when she broke down at her job as she came to a realization that this was not what she wanted for herself.

My mom, other mom Ms Jeremy, was talking school and I was telling her when I went over there or whatever, I went to work one day and I really didn’t wanna to go to work. We all have those days, but I really didn’t want to go. When I went to work that day, it was so bad. I had this mental breakdown, I don’t know. I told my manager I can’t do this. He was like what’s wrong? I just can’t be here any more. Not the life I wanna live. Coming up on the year of me being here, I got a promotion but it’s like I can’t do this. I look around the job and I see how everybody else is. My GM (General Manager), he bounced around different food places. 11 years later he’s a GM, so what? He’s been here since high school. I can’t be put in this position, this is like failure to me. I felt so mentally weak that I couldn’t do it. I knew I wasn’t staying forever, but it was a breaking point. Can’t live like this, need to do more for myself. I can’t continue to live this life. I’m just still kinda confused. I don’t know what I want to do. (Aeryn 3:4.)

Aeryn continued to further reflect on how she was proud of what she did do in college when she went. She reflected on how much she enjoyed this moment in her life.

I’m proud I went to school. My mom, she didn’t get to go right after high school. She got a GED, then she graduated from college in 2007. I used to stay in my room there [at college]. Once I got in the groove, though, I was happy to be there. Getting involved, joining clubs, I just loved it. I just think nobody actually understood that. You went to school to play basketball... It’s cool, but it’s more than that. That school was small too, like 1300 kids. It was a cool school, I liked my teachers, the people I met there. It was a different variety of people and things going on. I tried so hard to get back in that school. I’m happy about that, that I could experience that. (Aeryn 3:4.)

Aeryn’s post high school story showed many things; the strongest thing I saw in what she shared with me was that she was still in a place of figuring out her life out.
The abrupt change in Aeryn’s life when she was taken out of college due to financial debt had a huge impact on her family relationships, the way she views herself, and her motivation. Yet, amidst all of this it is clear that she is not satisfied with her current job and envisions a different life for herself. When Aeryn shared with me the story of going back to Justice High School to be an assistant coach for her former team, I saw the spark of that leader that I had seen when I was her teacher. She still wants to contribute, play basketball, and go to the liberal arts school that she attended after she graduated high school. Furthermore, Aeryn continues to reach out to Ms. Jeremy as a pillar of support and guidance, and this is truly Aeryn's safe place. The fact that she continues to go home (Ms. Jeremy’s home) to her “other mom” (Ms. Jeremy) shows how this meaningful relationship continues to play a large part in her life and the decisions that she makes.

Trinity

Trinity began telling me about her present life by telling me how her pregnancy changed her life and made her care about herself and her unborn child in ways she did not before.

I'm so thankful that I got pregnant. That was a big turning point in my life, I started caring about this person. I didn't really care about myself, afraid to get out of this relationship because I was scared of getting killed. But when it came down to my daughter, I was like she's not going through this. I might be able to take it, but my little infant needs some serious changes going on. That was a big factor. That's a big struggle too, because my daughter is old enough to know about “Daddy’s” and stuff now and she asks and it's like “Oh my gosh.” What am I supposed to tell her? But I tell her that God is our father, because that's what I believe which is nice.

I'm kinda concerned about when she gets older. Like I don't say she has no dad. I say she has a heavenly dad and an earthly dad.
When she gets older though, hopefully she'll have a guy in our life to show her a healthy relationship. That's the most important part is to observe healthy relationship and to stand up for her beliefs. Even if she doesn't have earthly dad, it's more important for her to know how she should be treated. Based on how I let people treat me. That was a big thing... at the time it was like oh my god. But she's awesome (Trinity 3:5.)

It is clear from Trinity’s post-high school story that having her daughter strongly changed her outlook on life and empowered her to value herself so that she could set a positive example for her daughter.

She keeps me motivated now. I'm not telling everybody to get pregnant young, like no that's a bad decision. But if you do it's not the end of the world. You can do it, you just need support. That's one of the main things, it made me successful to have that support. A lot of people who haven't made it don't have that support. Maybe school, but more so family and after school. Having mentors and things for the kids. Parents, legal guardians, and invite whoever is looking after the kids into. One more thing, I noticed when I did hang out with people in the gangs. We'd ditch school, which was bad, but I'd notice that the parents wouldn't be that involved in the kid's life. That's another thing. Parents don't even know because they work so much. That's another problem with poverty, parents are gonna be working all the time. 2-3 jobs I don't know. They won't be in their kid's life as much (Trinity 3:5)

Trinity then discussed the many challenges she faced when she transitioned from high school to college with her daughter.

After high school I went straight to college in 2011. Now it's 2013 and I'm a junior at this state university on track for graduation which is great. The first year I came here, I decided to go outside of my home town. I wanted a new environment, more kid-friendly. That was a big factor, there's a lot less violence in my university community. Especially in the neighborhood I'm in. I felt it would be a better option. I'm at a prestigious university and I challenge myself to do the best I can. When I came to school, it was challenging at first. I just moved straight to an apartment, because I couldn't live in a dorm with a kid. Which was crazy. Adapting to that, and to taking care of my daughter on my own. Before I had two roommates that really helped, taking her to daycare, whatever. That was a challenge. Then just I think adapting to the school
workload and how prestigious it is compared to Justice High School, or even high school in general. It was hard. I ended up getting some pretty bad grades. I did really well in Biology. Chemistry was way beyond my level and it was just really fast-paced (Trinity 3:5.)

Trinity went on to discuss the financial hardship that she faced in high school to make college a reality.

Late in high school it was financial aid. Empower You really helped with that. Set me up with people who could look over my taxes, got referrals from them to get taxes done for free. They worked with the people who did taxes. That process, I ended up finding about the I Promise scholarship at Green State University. That was a big reason I came here too, because it takes care of all the expenses like housing and food that government aid doesn't cover. I heard about that through a college tour. I met a girl who was a single mom in college, and now she's in grad school. She's amazing. I learned about that from her, then I also got kind of a mentor. Whenever I have a question, or want to hang out, she's that person. I got the I-Promise Grant. It's not a scholarship, it's not based on GPA. It's based on income and you have to have an expected family contribution of $0. After I proved I was independent, my EFC was $0. Even if my parents were the ones, it'd still be $0. Empower You definitely helped with that process. I visited the town where the university was located to make sure they had child care for my daughter. She had to have quality care while I was in school, I wasn't going if my daughter didn't have a good quality daycare (Trinity 3:6.)

Trinity went on to discuss her current financial hardships that she faces as a single mom who is a full time college student.

I didn't have much money this summer, and my food stamps got cut off. The government decided they were gonna cut em off now. They claim they sent a card, but I never received it. One day they just cut it off, because it was apparently 30 days past the date on this card that I never got. I recognized, I had a small breakdown because I didn't really have money to spend on food. It was that bad this summer, it was rent or food. I went to get WIC, called a food pantry. WIC is Women, Infants, Children. It assists with food. It helped a little, but it's not like LINK where they give you a substantial amount of money a month in stamps. Now they reduce my food stamps, but it's okay. I can cut down. I've managed to
learn how to spend only $25/week on food. Because you just get your basics and maybe go to a food pantry.

When my food stamps got cut off, I recognized how much in poverty we really were. And even though I'm in college and that's paid for and I'm living in an apartment paid through the government, right now, in this moment, we're still in poverty. Even if you don't feel like it. Even if you're in a safer neighborhood, you're still in poverty. And we're still... the funding can get cut at any moment and there's not much we can really do about it. Like we can advocate and there's funding and grants and that's great, but at the end of the day it's not our decision on what happens to the funding.

I don't think about it that much, especially during school because I have so much else going on. And I know that once financial aid is there it's pretty much constant. There is a possibility that they could take it, but not during the semester. So it's pretty confident… Yeah, I'm happy. I kind of want a guy in my life (laughs). I'm being patient to know that God will provide (Trinity 3:6.)

After Trinity discussed many of the hardships she initially faced, she went on to discuss how she learned from those experiences and has acclimated to university life and changed her academic and career goals from when she entered the university.

I'm trying to get more involved with the university now, because I'm more adapted to the workload and all that. I'm able to balance my volunteering and working and going to school and taking care of my daughter, which is crazy. But now that I'm accustomed to the workload, I understand that certain classes you read the book, some you don't. That's fine, I've accepted that. As a college student, you got too much work, you've got to weed out what you actually need to read and go to class for. When I first came here I was on track to a Bio major. After Chemistry class though, I totally was hindered from that…

I'm still in college. And that I haven't quit. I'm focused on my goal, even as I've had some down times in classes and chemistry wasn't the only bad time. It was just really bad freshman year. I was late to classes a lot, that affected my grades. It was definitely a big challenge. I was able to adapt and say this maybe isn't for me. I liked Bio, I got a 'B' in it. It wasn't worth continuing in Chem to major in that though. Being adaptable and not giving up, and
asking for help from friends and... kind of... taking advice and building my success in college.

I wanna work in social justice actually. Kinda funny because that's what you're questioning about. I'm not sure to what degree my high school impacted that, but I know I like to stand up. I like to advocate for the truth for marginalized and oppressed groups. Destigmatize certain issues. I guess certain things I want to go into advocacy for are based on my experiences, which makes sense. I know how it feels, and I want to limit that.

I look forward to next semester, so I'm considering a dual degree. I'm looking forward to certain classes next semester in psychology. But if I get into Social Work then I have to really make a decision on if I choose one and spend an extra year here for a dual degree (Trinity 3:6.)

Trinity shared with me that she was not solely focused on her academics at the university. She told me about various organizations that she is involved in and how passionate she is about her role in these spaces.

I volunteer at my church more regularly in the kids’ ministry. I like that because it's one of the few chances I get to actually volunteer because my daughter's in the room. Now that she's getting older, I'm considering doing more with her, like volunteering at a shelter. I'm the Treasurer of Orchard Downs. It's at my apartment/dorm complex, it's a student organization. We just, on the first and third Saturday, we do social events where we feed the community pizza, chicken, fruit, vegetables, and give them time to socialize. Second Friday of the month we meet with the community and get input on projects we can do to better the community. I would like to do a lot more with that, continue the holiday toy drive from last year. Because with funding, it's complex: you have to first pay for it or fundraise, and then you get a reimbursement. Certain things can and cannot be funded. We definitely need time to fundraise, maybe in the summer.

During the summer I have to watch overspending, I need to save in case I don't have a good job in the summer. So my daughter can stay at the same daycare. Last summer was too much of a struggle financially. Looking for jobs left and right, and I did have a job but it was like 10 hrs/wk and like $8.25/hr. It was just bad. That's not enough money at all, like over the course of the time I only made like $700 something. That's not anywhere near it. We were living
in our apartment. Lease is year-round. The good thing about university housing, if you miss a couple payments, they don't kick you out. It goes to your account, so when my financial aid kicked in, all that summer debt went away. That was nice. What's funny is, at the summer, I don't get job opportunities because in a college town there's not really many jobs in the summer. That was a big struggle (Trinity 3:7.)

Trinity’s post-high school story is profound for so many reasons. This young woman used her strength, perseverance, and most of all her resourcefulness to establish a life that is safe and healthy for both her and her daughter. Trinity gives credit to having her daughter as the factor that changed her life and made her value herself in a way that she never had. This experience enabled Trinity to desire more for herself, a better life that she never felt that she deserved until she had her child. Trinity experienced an overwhelming amount of violence and trauma throughout her childhood and adolescents, and even so she completely changed her life and her identity. One of the most influential characteristics that Trinity possesses is her resourcefulness; her ability to seek out resources like organizations and/or grants to establish a stable and healthy life for her daughter whether it was food or financial aid to attend school and live in the family housing dorms. This quality enabled Trinity to re-envision herself as a mother and a college going student, and this enabled her to actually go off to college and change her life. With the support of meaningful individuals in Trinity’s life and the various resources that she acquired, she was capable of transforming her life.

**Edwin**

Edwin began telling me about his present life with a story of his time in college. He explained his transition from Justice High School to a local state university. Got accepted to State University and I just went from one school to another, transitioning to college life. Commuted all four years just
because of the expense of dorms. I learned a lot about train systems, before it was just a straight shot bus ride to Justice High School. But it takes like an hour on 4 buses to my university so I had to learn how to wake myself up. The good thing is you can pick your classes, so you know when you can start. But you can have like an 8 am class so I wake up at 5 to leave at 6. I always end up at class 30 minutes early. But that was something new, because you pick your own schedule. Justice High School, we all started and ended at the same time. The state university is like you have to make your own decisions. I'm glad I had a good first semester schedule. I ended before I every day, granted I had to start at 8 or 9 but I'd rather do that then stay there late night. When I got to college, I was like look at all these people. There's thousands of people at the school. Justice High School had like 40 in the senior class. It was kinda of racially flipped. A lot of Asian and Caucasians at my university, but not many Latinos or African-Americans. It was like a complete 180 of Justice High School. Plus you had to find your own way. The good thing is that my friends and I went a week early to learn the buildings. We didn't want to be the noobs looking at the maps. Me and Dia got lost a lot during summer (laughs). Later on I was like, it's school and I just graduated and I'm 18, but you gotta do things on your own here. The teachers don't care if you go to class. You'd be wasting money. They care to an extent, at least some teachers do. Some don't give a damn. You have to motivate yourself (Edwin 3:1.)

Edwin continued to tell me about how hard it was to transition to such a huge university where he constantly felt academically challenged.

At Justice High School, I was used to being a big fish in a small pond. Then at my university I was like great, now I have to compete with these people. I came in as a pharmacy/biochem major. I liked the idea of it, but the science they taught at Justice High School. Some prepared me, but at Justice High School I just treated like class. I didn't retain much information. Then at the university, it's like “crap, Chem 101 and I don't know half of this.” My first year was really stressful. I did well most classes, but some I got Cs. I’d never got a C in my life, how does this work. I didn't tell my parents because they'd freak out. They wanted me to do well. My freshman year, my grades were in between. I felt out of my element. I wasn't used to not knowing, not excelling. At least in academics, so it was freaking me out. I'd just got a C, at least it wasn’t a D or F. I was scared, I didn't know how to deal with it properly. I just said I'd do better, but this little voice in my head
was like “Are you sure you're gonna do this in four years? Are you sure this is the path you want?” That was stressful (Edwin 3:1.)

Edwin discussed how he was capable of doing better his sophomore year because he learned from the mistakes he made his freshman year and made the necessary changes so that he could be more academically successful.

I got it together more sophomore year. I had to change study habits, how I take notes, how I participate in class. I participate all the time, even in high school. I was good at the discussion classes. My skills in math, that was my lowest ACT, so I had to take a non-credit math course because my ACT Math score wasn't as high as the other 3 subjects. When I was taking the non-credit course, there were a lot of people in there. So it wasn't like my math skills were the only ones that weren't the greatest. Liz and Dia were there, so at least I had people I knew. Math came easy freshman year, it wasn't until calculus sophomore year. I felt I need extra help after freshman year, so I signed up for a 6-week program at Student Services because I didn't want to be in danger of having a below-average GPA. I had to go once a week, and it didn't really help in the sense that it taught me new things. It really helped realize there's places I can go and there's people here to help you out.

At Justice High School, we had teachers we could go to for help. But I always felt like I didn't need that at Justice High School. Then at the state university, it's like crap there's so much on my plate and teachers don't care how many exams are on the same day. They don't care about how many papers are due that week, because you should've already been doing the paper. So I had to learn to pace myself, thanks to that class I learned to focus myself more. It's terrible, I knew my GPA was kinda low. Like above 2.5 and below 3 because of freshman year. If you fuck up then, it's hard to get your grades up. Once I got into my second semester, I had to kick it into gear. Couldn't waste time or this opportunity that people don't always get. I had to put everything in. I feel like I settled for mediocre because it would get me past where I needed to go. I felt like this time I couldn't be mediocre anymore. I had to progress. That class and my Chem classes, I signed up for the study groups that were led by students who'd already surpassed the class. Those supplements helped me. At the end of my four years, luckily I'm able to finish my new major in time so I wouldn't have to waste money staying at the university, but I was able to graduate with a degree. Picked up a lot of skills (Edwin 3:3.)
After graduating college, Edwin joined the workforce and discussed his future academic possibilities in this in the next section of his interview.

I joined the workforce. My first job was sophomore year at a department store. I learned a lot about how rude and crazy people are, but also how some are really nice. After that, I started working with Trina (friend from high school) at the furniture place. I learned about sales. Things I didn't think I'd ever be learning I started to pick up on. I'm really good with people, so I thought I do psychology. My friends were like, “Oh, you're good at listening or at giving advice.” So I changed my major from Biochem to Psychology. That was one of the best decisions. I liked science, but I don't want to do science. There's a difference and I realize that. I wish I could get a major on Biochem, I spent a lot of time in those classes, but I feel I can always go back if I really want to and finish. Not now, I need to focus on getting ahead and graduating. I am most proud to graduate in four years with a bachelors in Psychology and a minor in chem with the plan from the beginning (Edwin 3:3.)

Edwin then reflected on his graduation from college and how proud he was to be the first in his family to achieve this. He told me the story of his college graduation day and how his whole family came to support him, including his father.

Even at Justice High School... like do you want to do two-year. Or do you want to do four-year? So you need a certain amount of hours and credits and time devoted into that field. I'm happy I could do it in the four years. And then obviously because my parents never had a child who'd graduated. I remember at graduation everybody was texting. We were all on our phones during commencement half-listening. My sister said they were behind me. Seeing them there was so weird. Growing up, my mom would go to my earlier graduations but my dad didn't. He'd be working or be tired from work. Seeing them there and my sister, it was awesome. And I made a whole bunch of friends, and I found something I like to do. Enough to pursue. Sometimes people leave and don't know what to do. I feel like if that's the case, it's not like I don't know what to do. It's more all the stuff I can possibly do (Edwin 3:4.)

Edwin discussed his decision to take a year off after graduating college and how he why he decided to work for a year prior to applying to graduate school.
I'm taking a year off, I want to save money before grad school. I don't want loans to pay off in 20 years, especially with the shaky job world. There's not a lot of certainty, so if I do it I want to do it right. Plus I feel kinda burnt out after 16 years of school. I did preschool too, even though that was fun. That's where I'm at now. Saving money and experience things I couldn't when I was a kid. Go out, hang with friends, chill for a few days. Even right now, my feet are moving around. I've never been able to stay still for a long period of time. That's just how I am (Edwin 3:3.)

I then asked Edwin about his current relationship with his father. I asked him if he had discussed his sexuality with his father again at this point in his life. He replied:

Because my dad is a lot older now and I feel like I've matured from where I was. Even if we don't talk about my sexuality, I'm 99% sure he knows. He has the mentality that if you don't talk, I don't have to deal with it. Sometimes I'll do things... but back then it'd be, not taboo, but surprising. Like that's a feminine trait, whatever doesn't go according to what he grew up with. Before he'd change the channel when Ellen came on TV. Now, I'll watch TV and some random scene will happen and he'll watch it. He might avert his eyes, but he's more... because he's older, I feel like when we all get to a certain point, we say we can't let this be terrible. You might not be able to accept it, but you can tolerate.

He's at a point now where he says, you're 22 now. He still tries to baby me as much as he can because that's the way he is right now. He's more like... I have more liberty than I used to. I think about it now, the place we get our hair cut. We go together because I pay for him now. He used to pay for me. The place we go now, the owner is a transgender woman. He didn't know, but I knew right away. She has male features, but long hair and she behaves in a very womanlike way. I don't want to say that, whatever that means. She has a really deep voice, he'd say. 2 weeks ago, my mom laughs about it. We were leaving, and he was like "I think that she's a man." I said duh (laughs). The fact that he still goes and lets her cut his hair sometimes, that at least is a big thing. Even if there's no direct correlation to me. If he can be okay with that, then I'll give him as much time as he needs. If it takes time, I don't mind letting him do that. I'd rather him take his time getting there than me yelling "Go here." Nobody likes to get pushed around (Edwin 3:5.)
Through Edwin’s post-high school story it is clear that Edwin’s relationship with his family is a primary influence for his empowerment, his success, and his achievements. These stories show Edwin’s deep love and respect for his father, and this is a strong factor in his life. Edwin’s father has influenced him greatly as he struggled in college and resiliently navigated through these difficulties to achieve success. Edwin’s relationships with his family and his friends are something that he emphasizes throughout each of his stories, and for Edwin these connections enabled him to overcome much of the adversity he faced. Edwin, like all of the participants, shows strength, positivity, and a focus on the future possibilities rather than the limitations in his life in his post high school stories. This outlook of hope is also something that is present in his stories of having a more open and honest relationship with his father concerning his sexuality. Edwin’s acceptance of his father and vice versa has provided a him with an even closer relationship with his dad that continues to motivate him and empower him.

“I Just Keep Dancing and I’m Gonna Be Ok”

After each of these interviews I asked the participants the question, “With all of the hardships you have encountered in your life, many would argue that you weren’t supposed to make it. How did you make it?” The following section will show the various ways participants answered this question. In these stories they discussed five major themes as the facilitators in their life that enabled them to overcome all of the struggles they have faced. These themes include: self-motivation, realizing consequences, control over life, passion, and role models and support.
Self-Motivation

Trinity and Aeryn discussed their self-motivation as a key factor that enabled them to create change in their lives. Trinity described the shift that took place in her life as a conscious choice that she made. Her motivation to move out of poverty into a more stable and healthy life was something she chose to do for herself and her daughter and re-socialize herself in a new context.

But, I also think there's a problem with that statement because I chose to get out... the main thing is getting out of poverty. There's many ways of doing it. I believe that a lot of people who go into drugs and gangs, it seems like a way out. They want to make money to buy nice things, like my mom couldn't afford, so I stole, because she couldn't have nice things. So how much more bad is that than selling drugs for nice things? I don't see any difference in that. I could've got caught but I didn't. Looking back I'm like why did I do that, but there's a strong urge. Nobody wants to be in poverty. Nobody wants that life. It gets socialized, especially with teens (Trinity 3:2.)

Aeryn discussed self-motivation through her conscious choice to do better. She attributed much of her current achievements to her family relationships and described how their negativity and low expectations motivated her to positively change her life.

I just... I'm passionate about trying to move on and do better. When you got so many people against you, you can't do nothing but try to do right. Those statistics about getting out, I believe it. Shoot, yeah it makes you not wanna do nothing. They will see it. That's why I gotta do it, I can't be around it no more. Nothing about where I'm at in my life makes me happy. I'm not satisfied. like, “Oh 30 years old with your grandmother still.” I'd go crazy (Aeryn 3:3.)

Both of these participants emphasize how they chose to change the circumstances in their life, and their self-motivation was inspired by the negative conditions they had both been immersed in for so long. For Charity and Aeryn poverty and the negative interactions
with family and peers strongly motivated them to envision an alternate future and transform their lives.

**Realizing Consequences and Controlling Their Lives**

Many participants discussed their understanding of the consequences that were possible if they made certain life choices that many of their peers made. This realization is another factor that enabled these participants to commit to the long and difficult path towards their goals. This realization is another factor which enabled them to endure the adversity they encountered on this journey. Sef described how the consequences many that his peers encountered deeply influenced his life choices.

> Seeing those individuals, most of my peers. Seeing that… you're like forget that. Imma do what I have to do, but I'll take the necessary steps. I didn't want to sell drugs or go to jail. Sitting in a cell for 22 hours. I just didn't want to be in that situation. If I didn't handle my business, they'd send me back [Sef’s parents would send him back to Eritrea](Sef 3:5.)

Similarly, Aeryn talked about people she knew growing up and how their stories impacted her. She reflected on these stories and how she could never accept a life in which she could not live with dignity and respect. This motivated Aeryn as it did the other participants to choose her path towards continuing her education and working a full time job until she goes back to school.

> People going to jail for life not snitching on the homie, but when the last time that homie came to see you and put money on your books, or took care of your kids?

> I could be a drug dealer and get easy money. I just couldn't do it. You still gotta come back to the same place and the same people, now that you got money they want more from you and expect less of you. I can't be in that position at all. I just couldn't. I couldn't have nobody looking down on me (Aeryn 3:2.)
Trinity not only realized the consequences if she did not change her life, she even knew the statistics of single mothers who attend college. The realizations she came to after acquiring information of her own demographic motivated her to move beyond the limiting factors the statistics implied.

I'd agree. Statistically, I'd not be in college. 1% of single teen moms in college graduate before 30. Not the greatest statistic. Also, the stuff I've been through, it's surprising I'm living to be honest. Just the stuff I put myself in and then the stuff I didn't have control over. That was a big one that made me realize I had to change my life (Trinity 3:4.)

Edwin and Tae discussed their own control over their life, and the power they held in making their own decisions and learning from their experiences. These two participants discussed their power and control over their life as one way they transformed their life. Edwin discussed self-sufficiency as one way he controlled his life and the path that it took.

I had to be more self-sufficient, and you learn that through your own experiences. Just doing things on your own. I talk to my mom about it. She's the more vocal parent, the one I talk to easier. She's like God forbid something happen to her or my dad, but I'd have to learn to grow up. That's something I'd keep in mind all the time (Edwin 3:3.)

Tae described with an overwhelming amount of emotion how he has had to work so hard to get to where he is today. He recognized in this moment just how hard it has been for him and as he cried tears of joy and pride, he knew that his choice to pursue dance was the primary factor that has enabled him to grow and flourish beyond all of the struggles he has faced.

(crying… and then smiles) I have a lot of support. I don’t know… I just don’t talk about it. It distracts me. I’m sorry… (crying). My friend, he was so surprised because I’m always smiling. But they don’t understand that I’ve had to work so hard just to get here,
(crying) because I know that it’s all against me [“it” meaning his race, his gender, and his sexuality] I just keep dancing and I’m gonna be ok. I just gotta keep dancing (Tae 3:6.)

Because these participants were socially aware of the consequences they could face if they made poor life choices, they resisted this and rather invested themselves even more in their vision and goals for their future. These participants learned from the mistakes their peers made and their own mistakes they made during their childhood and adolescence. They utilized their strengths to move beyond their mistakes and to re-envision their life and their identity.

Passion

Many participants discussed the role of passion in their life as something that propelled them to taking advantage of opportunities that were daunting and scary. For Trinity her passion for her daughter, her faith, and the Empower You program provided her with the determination to embark on her college journey, as a single-parent in a small town that was far away from anything she knew.

Also, my daughter and my faith. Definitely helped. Also the Empower You program. I strongly believe in that program, I’m such an advocate. I might work with them to expand it. It needs to be whoever applies should get in to it. There shouldn't be such a limited amount of people in it, it needs to be more widespread to get people on track to college. Majority of students in that program are still in college on track to graduate, even got help to write apps for full ride scholarships (Trinity 3:5.)

Aeryn shared a story about her passion that was different than Trinity. For Aeryn, her passion stemmed from her closest family members who did not believe that Aeryn would be able to achieve her dreams. These barriers for Aeryn became facilitators as this negativity motivated her to show them that she is capable and strong.
The people that don't make it out the hood are the ones who don't have anyone making them passionate. My grandma makes me passionate. If she wasn't hounding me or talking bad, I wouldn't be passionate. My father makes me passionate. If he wasn't the deadbeat guy he was or the anal person he is, he wouldn't make me passionate. If I didn't lose so many people I wouldn't be so passionate… (Crying)… Bumping heads with my mother. Those people, they have people who are like do what you wanna do. Continue to do this. A lot of those hood stories, the reason they make it out is because they have somebody telling them this is not okay. I don't want you to do that. It takes somebody to tell them no to make it. If I get to a million 'no's to get to one 'yes' then that's what I gotta do (Aeryn 3:5.)

Tae’s passion which empowers him is dance. This has been the way he has changed his life and transformed himself. Through dance Tae has pursued a college education, become a respected dance teacher in his community, and provided youth with guidance through his mentorship and contribution of dance in his community. Dance is also his escape, it is his power, it is the place where he can unconditionally express himself, and it is the place that gives him validation and recognition that motivates him. He stated it best when he said, “It’s my purpose”.

I don’t know… (long pause). (cries…) I don’t know (cries)… These are proud tears, because you just like said every stereotype that I go through. And I’m not supposed to make it. You said I broke statistics… (crying…) I think it’s dance. That’s all I do and think about. If I’m not dancing I’m not living. It’s my purpose (crying). I feel invincible (Tae 3:5.)

These participants passion for something that was deeply important to them manifested into a strong determination to achieve their future aspirations. The fact that these participants felt so passionate about going to school and changing their lives, they were capable of overcoming the most difficult struggles.
Role Models/Support

For Sef, his parents were a strong supporting force that motivated him to pursue the path he is currently on. Their presence significantly shaped Sef’s choices and his mindset. In addition to this, Sef’s older brother was and continues to be a very strong role model in his life.

If I didn't handle my business, they'd send me. I'd understand, because they don't want me in this bad situation. Plus my brother did well. I had that role model. I won't tell him till we're older, but he had a huge impact on... changing my mindset (Sef 3:2.)

Similarly, Aeryn discussed how Ms. Jeremy’s influence on her empowered her to aspire to do things that could potentially change her life like going to college. In this she said that by seeing Ms. Jeremy’s home and the community where she lived made her “hungry” for success. This exposure to both colleges and Ms. Jeremy’s life really made an impact in Aeryn’s desire to change her life.

I can't live by myself. That cliché that is takes a village to raise a child is true. I pay tribute to everybody, even the ones that hurt me. I'm hungry for it. When I went to Ms. Jeremy’ home, and seeing those things. It's not things to them, but that made me hungry. When we went back from there, me and my sisters (friends from Justice High School) were like “Man, living good. Doing good. I want me a house in a suburban community.” It's just crazy. You're hungry for stuff like that. Why they kinda in college and they take you on college trips. They want you to see it and make it reality. Everybody don't get to see that (Aeryn 3:5.)

Edwin also discussed his family as a factor that has empowered him to transform his life.

He discussed his social and personal responsibilities with his family and he sees himself as a positive influence on others, specifically his father. Because of his re-envisioning of their relationship, he was capable of being responsible for his family and continuing to transform their collective life and relationship with each other.
But now it's at the point where I know they care and love. While I might not be able to do what I want now, eventually I will. It isn't like I'll never be able to do this or that, because like I'm helping them and that's okay. That's enough for me at the moment. Eventually I can do whatever I want, and it'll feel better. Even now if I'm out, it's like he's gonna call asking for me at 9. One day I'll go out and he'll stay up for me. I'm okay with it. I'm a lot more, not educated, but more cognizant of why and I feel like it's okay. I'm good. It'll be there.

Even if, God forbid, he were to pass away without fully getting understanding me and my sexuality. At least I know he was aware of it, and that's a lot more than some people can do. Some don't until they are 50. They've been repressed and never feel like they can do it.

If he doesn't wanna talk about it, that's fine I won't. I know he'll at least leave with a better idea of who I was as a person. And that still I'm the same person, it's not gonna change who I am. It's just a small piece of a giant puzzle of who I am, and he gets that more. Hopefully I've been able to positively inspire him, or have him thinking he can do something positive. Not thinking so negative (Edwin 3:6.)

In these responses, again each participant shows how important relationships were in the decisions these participants made in their life, in their self-perception, and in their dreams and aspirations for the future. Each of these response shows how much of an influence close family members and mentors have positively empowered these students to continue to believe in themselves and the possibilities their futures hold. These participants drew strength and hope from these relationships that inspired to believe in themselves.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this process I had to make sure to not show any emotion or opinion so that these participants would take me into any aspect of their life they wanted to. It was at this moment in every single interview I was internally overwhelmed with emotions. Looking at each of these participants life trajectory, where they started and where they are
currently, I feel a tremendous amount of hope. I feel privileged to have had these participants share these stories of adversity and triumph with me. These stories make a statement towards how wrong our assumptions can be about what students are capable of. Many would never think that students encountering such oppression in their lives, both during their childhood and during high school, but also in their current lives, could become the positive, profound, socially aware, and intelligent individuals they are today.

Most of us have never encountered the oppressive experiences these participants discussed. Yet they continue moving forward in their lives. During high school they did this collaboratively with their families and the teachers and staff at Justice High School. Beyond high school, they still have found a way to overcome the hardships that continue in their lives including poverty, failure, fear, and an existing uncertainty of their future.
Chapter 7: Youth Empowerment

Introduction

Many stories that participants shared with me both during and after high school demonstrate the way in which the process of youth empowerment took place. Justice High School played a key role by providing each participant with strong support, spaces where they were acknowledged, multiple opportunities to pursue their passion, outlets to express themselves, and a place where their lives outside of school were not ignored. Although each participant’s present life is very different from one another, the outcomes of their experience are similar across the stories shared with me, and these commonalities include the emergence of personal strength, critical consciousness, social connectedness, action, and hopefulness. The first of three main sections in this chapter will discuss these five dimensions and how together they create a process of *youth empowerment* that was reflected upon by each participant. In the second and third sections I will present two additional analytical points that emanate from this study: the importance of *relationships*, and the synergy across *individual and collective* empowerment.

Five Dimensions of Youth Empowerment

What is clear in the existing scholarship is the absence of a concrete definition of empowerment in youth (Bailey, 1992; Czuba & Page, 1999). Czuba and Page (1999) define empowerment as a process and an outcome of social and individual change. My research supports this definition and further builds upon it by providing a more cohesive and multidimensional definition of youth empowerment.

Out of each participant’s experience as presented in chapters five to seven, an empowerment process emerges defined by five dimensions. These are personal strength
(self-belief and attitudes towards self), social connectedness (deep and meaningful relationships), critical consciousness or conscientization (knowledge), action (what they engage in as agents in their own lives, individually and collectively), and hope (the feeling that developed and, in turn, drives their continuous development and engagement in this process). (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1: Five Dimensions of Youth Empowerment**

Figure 1 illustrates the five dynamics of youth empowerment that enabled each participant to change and transform their lives. In their experiences at Justice High School, and in their lives beyond high school, participants developed *personal strength* and positive attitudes of themselves. Concurrently, participants were also deeply engaged with the school and the outside community and further developed strong *social connections* with their peers, teachers, staff, and community members. They gained
critical awareness and knowledge (critical consciousness, or conscientization)\(^6\) of themselves and their environment, and learned how to engage in inquiry, question and problem-poser in their world. They engaged in action on the individual and collective level to create change in their lives and in their communities. Lastly, they developed a sense of hope, which enabled them to overcome adversity, be resilient, and continue to engage in this multidimensional process of empowerment even when they experienced failure, challenges and/or disappointment.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between each dimension of the youth empowerment process and suggests how these five dimensions are interrelated. The double-sided arrows linking each component of youth empowerment to each other shows the dynamic nature of this process. This dynamic process of youth empowerment and the interactions between the five dimensions can be exemplified through Trinity’s lived experience that she shared with me. Trinity understood that her mother’s home and her community were unsafe and unstable for her and her daughter. With a clear and deep understanding of the conditions of poverty in her life, the instability and lack of safety in her mother’s home, and a deep desire to transform her life by pursuing a college education (all examples of critical consciousness), she then engaged in action to make a change (action). Action that is informed by theory (critical consciousness) is praxis (Freire, 1970), and leads to change that is sustainable because it addresses the structures of oppression. She joined the Empower You program, she filed papers stating that she was independent from her mother so that she could receive full financial aid and scholarships, and she acquired family housing on campus at her current university after

\(^6\) Critical consciousness and conscientization are used synonymously to describe the development of critical awareness and knowledge.
verifying that this setting would be a safe setting where her daughter could attend school year round (praxis). Engaging in these experiences strengthened Trinity’s belief in what she was capable of (revealing personal strength) while instilling her with hope for the possibilities that she continues to dream of. Hope is a very important component, and one not often talked about in the processes of empowerment; it motivates them to keep moving forward, to overcome adversity, and to take more and more control of their own lives and to effect positive change in the lives of others. Trinity’s child will not grow up in the same structures of oppression in which Trinity grew up because she has propelled her life into another space where they can both thrive.

From Trinity’s example, we can see that individual transformation or praxis is clearly present. Structural transformation might come, but we don’t know. Praxis happens at two levels, individual and collective. The result of praxis on the collective level, structural transformation, was not seen. Although Trinity’s engagement in multiple protests organized by the school was an example of collective praxis. It must be noted that the ultimate goal of empowerment is social change, or the alteration of mechanisms and institutions within society that foster societal oppression, yet this was not something that was observed explicitly in this study. The youth who participated in this study did not create social change on a large scale. They did, however, change the environments of their own life contexts.

Next I will discuss the various dynamics of youth empowerment in more depth. In this section I will describe the way each component of this process contributed to youth empowerment.
Personal Strength

Personal strength can be seen through each participant’s stories in the way they developed their individual beliefs about themselves, their personal goals and characteristics that ultimately shaped their identity as students, their identity as members of their community, and most of all, their self-concept. Through the stories of the past and the present, all of the participants describe their childhood experiences as difficult. Most participants describe their life as not having much of a childhood experience because the conditions in their lives forced them to mature at a very young age. They all had to deal with major issues like poverty, violence and homelessness early on in their lives. These conditions placed an immense amount of stress on these participants. They shared stories about traumatic experiences they survived during their childhood and how these experiences have affected them in their lives. Most participants describe the impact of these experiences as moments that made them feel negative about themselves and that created a sense of hopelessness in their lives. These experiences challenged their confidence, their feelings of self-worth, and their ability to dream of a positive future.

When these participants were in high school a shift occurred in which they all began to envision the possibility of a hopeful future. Trinity was able to see the possibility of taking care of her daughter and providing her with a safe and stable life, unlike her own. For Sef, this was seen in the way he talked about failing in 8th grade and seeing high school as a second chance to change his life and identity. During high school, his goal was to academically excel so he could establish a career that would enable him to help his family move out of poverty. For Edwin, it was being the first in his family to go to college. For Aeryn, it was in the way she envisioned being a student-athlete in college
and wanting a beautiful and safe home like her role model Ms. Jeremy. And for Tae, this was seen in his drive to pursue his passion for dance through higher education and go on to college even though he never thought it was possible before entering high school.

Each participant’s schooling experience helped them develop a confidence and passion for their lives along with dreams for their future. The personal strength each developed becomes apparent in the ways they present themselves. They articulated how capable they are of countering the negativity, fear and doubts resulting from failure or the limitations they face in their lives. When each of these students failed, they did not allow this to define them. They overcame these failures and rejections and continue to pursue their goals. This was seen when Trinity developed a deep-seated belief in her potential through the support of the Empower You program and her high school teachers. A similar experience was evident in every participant’s story. When encountering failure or rejection they demonstrated resiliency, which was seen through their pursuit to figure out another plan so they could achieve their vision of success. Aeryn displayed this resilience when she spoke of how she was pulled out of college and how this feeling of failure, although causing her depression, did not stop her from believing that going back to college was a possibility. Similarly Sef, upon rejection from the Lake State University, found the support necessary to continue to pursue his dream of getting out of his hometown and going to college even though he was devastated by the rejection when he lost a full tuition and room and board scholarship due to his low ACT score.

The resilience, confidence, and passion each participant so clearly described in their stories was shaped in part by their experiences in high school and the supportive community networks that surrounded these students on a daily basis. These two domains
provided each participant with experiences of validation and recognition that gave each participant a sense of capability and accomplishment. Aeryn and Edwin discussed this in vivid detail as they described their graduation day and how they were deeply moved on that day because of how many people believed in them and their potential.

The support, the opportunities, the ongoing recognition and the validation each participant received, influenced them deeply. One of the most powerful stories that depicted this was when Sef told me the story of his rejection for a full ride scholarship to State University. During this story Sef told me with such strength and certainty that his ACT score did not represent who he was as a student. He went on to explain how this number was an inaccurate representation of what he would have brought to the university if accepted, and furthermore that “the University missed out on an outstanding leader and alumni” who would have positively contributed to the University. This resilience and confidence Sef had—his personal strength—enabled him to cope with the rejection he faced and figure out another plan rather than allow this experience and this ACT score to define him and his future possibilities.

In so many of the stories the participants shared with me they described how individuals from the school or community helped them realize their ability to work through the hardships they faced. These individuals helped each participant overcome their struggles. This support validated these participants and assured them they were not alone. They had people who were invested in their success even if it meant sacrificing their personal lives like tutoring them during the summer months, as Trinity described. The support each participant had beyond their families gave each participant the outlet that promoted the positive development of their psychological strength through the
meaningful relationships they created within the school and community settings. These relationships are the manifestation of social connectedness, the next dimension to be discussed.

**Social Connectedness**

Social connectedness refers to the connectedness each participant had with their peers, their school, their community and the neighborhoods they live in. Throughout the interviews each participant reflected on how they were deeply connected to multiple communities beyond their high school. These stories showed how participants experienced community through established groups and spaces in various neighborhoods. These spaces included youth programs, community organizations, the school, apartment buildings where participants resided, and all the other spaces where participants were deeply connected and committed.

Each participant told me so many stories about mentors and role models who offered them support during both difficult and happy times. The fact that each participant had this support in addition to their family members and peers had a profound impact on the way they coped with the many hardships they faced. These healthy and positive relationships evolved over time and became complex and deeply meaningful. These relationships enabled a feeling of social connectedness.

The deep connections and relationships that result from the small school structure at Justice High School, and ongoing community initiatives both inside and outside of the school, lay the foundation for the development of principles that promote student involvement and awareness in their community and society. This pointed them in the direction of looking beyond their individual desires and needs. It is one element that
influenced these participants’ social connectedness as well as the school culture and climate. The school culture became more like a family rather than a school within the small school structure. One strong example of this was seen in the way Aeryn talked about her peers and mentors from her school as family members, referring to them as her mother and sisters when in actuality they were her peers and teachers. This openness on both Aeryn’s part and the individuals she was referring to shows the closeness of their relationship, the trust that was established between them, and the value she places on these individuals she encountered in her school.

The many meaningful relationships and experiences each participant told me about provided them with resources, opportunities and access to the larger world where they could take action to change their lives and impact others positively. Tae described the way this occurred in his life with a story that described how high school enabled him to envision a college-bound future that he had never considered while supplying him with a means to secure the funds to turn that dream into a reality. The school and family support, the knowledge he gained about this process, the multiple opportunities he had access to, and the guidance Tae described throughout this process were the reasons he was capable of changing his life trajectory. The deep connectedness he gained with his school and community through the influential relationships he fostered during high school, gave him the tools he needed to pave the path to his current performing arts college. Furthermore he was able to advocate for the minority students in his college by establishing the Black Student Union.
Participants also engaged in student activism in high school, which further strengthened their social connections. One experience that many participants reflected on was the role of activism in their schooling. As students were encouraged to engage in activism that confronted injustices that directly impacted their lives, they subsequently developed a voice along with the skills necessary to create change in their community and their lives. Trinity and Aeryn both talked about a student led walkout in protest of the school district’s budget cuts that they both participated in. They discussed the sense of power and importance they felt when they represented their school and community to oppose this injustice. By becoming activists, these participants emerged as leaders and joined others in fighting for change; they engaged collectively in a movement that was bigger than their own personal life space. These experiences and stories showed how they changed in these moments and became active community members rather than children who were ignorant to the issues affecting their lives and their schooling.

Even as these participants told me stories about their present lives, it was clear that most of them have continued to stay connected to their community even though they do not have their high school to facilitate opportunities for activism or organize community outreach. Every participant described multiple ways they were still connected with their community. Tae showed this in his continued activism for the LGBT community in his community. He continues to be a youth leader and mentor for LGBT youth at a youth center near his former high school. He is also a permanent master dance instructor at the youth organization in the Justice community in which he participated throughout his childhood and adolescence. He continues to be a leader and organizer for the Black Student Union at his college. Sef is a voluntary youth chess instructor for
students between the ages of five to seven years old. He is a basketball referee at the park
district and often keeps in touch with his high school teachers and staff to support their
sports program and help coach current students. Aeryn was an assistant coach for a while
at Justice High School and continues to take part in the basketball camps offered in the
Justice neighborhood. Trinity is an active member of her church, teaching the youth
ministry and organizing fundraisers for her apartment association at the state university
that she attends. Edwin continues to support his parents and live with them so he can help
them navigate their community as they do not speak English. Edwin’s family continues to
rely on him for support, and even though he has graduated from college, he continues to
live with his family to help them financially, emotionally and socially.

Although some participants were more involved in their communities than others,
they all show how they are principled beyond their own achievement and success as they
engage with multiple communities and their families. They all have extended themselves
beyond their own lives to make an impact on others. This demonstrates how these
participants view themselves and their relationships within their families, communities,
and the larger society in which they live. They continue to build their futures and work
towards their individual dreams, but they also show their responsibility toward others and
continue to be socially connected in their current lives.

Social connectedness is also one component that contributed to the development
of critical consciousness for each participant, the next dimension if youth empowerment
to be discussed.
**Conscientization**

One component of empowerment, in a Freirean sense, is conscientization—
*conscientização*—or critical consciousness. Conscientization (Freire, 1970) can be defined as the development of a critical understanding and awareness, or consciousness, of one’s world and the way power is distributed and assumed within society. This knowledge and critical awareness, according to Freire (1970) and others (Zimmeran, 2001; Giroux, 2005; Banks & Banks, 2007), is a way to empower marginalized groups to engage in action for the purpose of creating individual and social change. This critical consciousness was evident with each participant in various ways. Critical consciousness was observed in the way participants described the relevance of their education to their lives. It was also evident in the way participants described how they were empowered to question knowledge and truth through their classroom setting and given multiple opportunities to engage in research and inquiry related to issues they felt were significant to them. Critical consciousness was most evident in participants’ recognition of the bittersweet or contradictory nature of their world and their lived experiences. This consciousness expanded participants’ social awareness and in-depth understanding of themselves and their world.

Through this process, participants were seen to develop a belief in a greater purpose for themselves and their education. Critical consciousness enabled each participant to make a shift in what they believed was possible for themselves and for others who came from the same circumstances. I was able to see participants’ critical consciousness emerge most strongly in the stories of their present lives. The way each participant talked about their choices, life decisions and their sacrifices all illustrates how
they continue to be leaders or individuals who are driven by their critical consciousness, individuals who contribute to their community, and are positive and hopeful. Another way each participant developed critical consciousness is through the deep relationships they established during their schooling experience. They all expressed such a deep sense of appreciation and pride for their school and community. Even though each participant was aware that their high school was not the highest performing school and their community had many problems and challenges with violence and safety, they all emphasized that the students who came out of Justice High School were amazing individuals who shared a strong sense of self and purpose.

Every one of these participants reflected on their school as a place they loved, appreciated, valued and missed because of the people who influenced them during that time in their lives. This experience was greatly influenced by the social connections and relationships that were established. There were many experiences each participant shared with me describing the multiple ways they were impacted by these close relationships through the support they gained, the resources that were offered and the access they had to the larger world. These relationships strengthened their critical consciousness in the way they supported each participant to cope with the hardships they faced in their lives and move beyond.

Aeryn stated it best when she described the difference between her high school and others: “It was very unique. Nobody had made a school like us. Nobody was doing things like us. You had a variety of kids ... but it was different, nobody was doing things like us or was like us.” Every participant echoed similar thoughts as they told me stories about their high school experience. Some participants talked about how the school was
unique because of its teaching style. They all discussed how important teacher relationships were with students and how unique these close relationships were. Many participants talked about the social justice content and curriculum the school taught and the activism they engaged in. Others discussed the different environment, the small school structure and the unique sense of community that was established there. Overall each of these stories showed that the schooling experience at Justice High School was so much more than an academic experience. It was an experience where students united with each other and the community outside of the school to pursue their education, impact their community, offer their voice and their talent, and grow and contribute to both of these spaces. It was a place where the school community was empowered to expand and develop their critical consciousness. These unique experiences contributed to each participant’s transformation to recognize something that is more collective.

The academic curriculum at Justice High School was a part of the process of development of critical consciousness. Each participant described the strong academic skills learned in school as being very connected to their lives and their future. They cared about what they were learning because they were given opportunities to express who they were in the classroom while also learning content that broadened their understanding of their current place in the social structure, particularly, in the structural patterns of social inequality. I heard stories about how different the curriculum was, how rigorous the content was, and how relevant the coursework was to their lives. This element of students’ learning enabled each participant to find a sense of purpose and passion not only for the knowledge they gained in the classroom but also in linking this knowledge outside of the classroom.
Through critical consciousness, students were able to access and actively engage in the larger world. They were able to find opportunities, gain exposure, and establish networks beyond their high school walls. They learned things like the Korean language, enrolled in dance courses at a local performing arts university, attended college trips across the country, got their taxes done so they could submit their FAFSAs, and even were able to experience life in a more affluent community where they could get to know life outside their low-income neighborhood. The desire and ambition to continue learning beyond high school was strongly present in all of the participants’ stories. By accessing the larger world they were able to acquire resources, find mentors, engage in academic and professional networks and support systems that they continuously utilized during and after high school.

The development of critical consciousness propelled participants to engage in praxis, or action informed by knowledge. Action, the next dimension of youth empowerment will be discussed next.

**Action**

Action is the fourth emergent theme present in participants’ lives both during high school and after. In the interviews I conducted, each participant shows strong leadership qualities that they demonstrate through the various family, community, school, and professional roles they have taken on. The many stories they shared show how active they were within their community during high school and in their present life. Many of the stories participants shared with me focus on how they engaged in action both inside their high school and outside within the community. It was clear through the various experiences the students talked about that social action and social responsibility were
strongly emphasized within their high school education. The school and staff facilitated many opportunities where students could not only understand their world, but also further engage in action based on the knowledge they had gained. What was most interesting about many of their experiences was they continue to engage in action within their community in their present lives.

Many of the participants told me stories of past and current experiences where they engaged in action, emerged as leaders and became role models for their community. They told me stories about being activist during school budget cuts, a community dance teacher/choreographer, coaching basketball, advocating for and mentoring LGBT youth, refereeing in the park district, teaching chess to young children, organizing a Black Student Union on a college campus, leading a youth ministry, and the list goes on. Even when these ways of acting don’t all directly promote social change, they represent the students’ efforts at moving beyond their own worlds, entering other spaces in society, and moving toward developing skills and experience in self-directing their lives toward possibilities for broader social action and social responsibility. Through their social action they continue to maintain their connection to their community and the larger society in which they live.

These stories also showed how each participant’s conscientization manifested through the different ways they chose to actively engage in their community for the purpose of creating change by positively impacting youth. One strong example of this was when Trinity discussed the very hopeless statistics of single-mothers graduation rates in college and in this moment she recognized that she and her daughter were still in poverty regardless of the funding they received from her university. She understood the
conditions of her society and her place in it, and actively fights to change her life and
defy these statistics. Trinity’s conscientization is seen through her knowledge, her choice
of academic study, the way in which she reflects on her past, being a mother and a full
time student, and the way she involves herself in her community. Similarly, Aeryn told
me a story of going to a college fair with her younger sister. During this moment she
attempted to advise her sister to accept a full-ride scholarship from a university who was
trying to recruit her. Her sister did not want to attend this out of state school as her main
priority was staying close to home. Aeryn was very upset by this because she did not
want her younger sister to encounter the same barriers that Aeryn did by depending on
her mother for tuition, an experience that Aeryn faced. Tae also shows this in the very
end of his post high school interview when he discussed how his path thus far has been so
hard, and as a Black, homosexual, male, he has had to overcome so many hardships that
most people can even begin to understand. In this moment he cried tears of pride and
happiness as he reflected on all that he has accomplished despite all of the barriers that
stood in his way. This deep understanding that each participant has of their life
circumstances—their families, their communities, their society, and their places within
these contexts—shows how aware they are of the contradictory nature of their world and
their conscious choice to fight for a better life.

It must be noted that the action the students engaged in both during high school
and afterwards extended far beyond what is typical in most schools. Additionally, the
leadership opportunities they engaged in are ongoing and long-term commitments they
are passionate about because of their commitment to positively impact other youth.
Participants were not required to engage in activism, protest, or community outreach during their time at Justice High School. These students chose to participate on their own. Through action participants developed the skills necessary to create individual and collective change. These experiences provided a strong sense of hope for future possibilities and future change. Hope is the last dimension of youth empowerment which will be discussed next.

**Hope**

Throughout this process of gathering data I had the privilege of listening to stories of pain, betrayal, failure, hope, transformation, and success. My former students shared so many of their personal experiences with me, and I can honestly say I was quite surprised as to how much these students remembered about high school and how profound some of these moments were for them. Their stories enabled me to see how life-changing Justice High School and the interlinked community organizations were for each of them.

The most profound aspect of the empowerment process that emerged from this research is participants’ hope amidst their difficult life circumstances. Even though they have dealt with so much adversity, tragedy and trauma in their lives, today they continue to be strong and hopeful about their schooling, their family issues and relationships, their career goals, their futures, and their beliefs about their community and their society.

Through personal strength participants developed hope and ambition. This was seen when students talked about their personal career goals, future aspirations, possible academic focuses, and their determination to establish a better life. This hope enabled participants to set goals for themselves and act on them, explore the many options that
were open to them, and consider, dream and envision the possibility of following a path that is unknown, with faith that they will ultimately undergo change for the better.

Another influence on participants’ hope is seen in the way each participant draws strength and experience from the multiple communities they are involved in. The meaningful relationships and connections established within participants’ communities provided them with a strong support system that was present for them. These support networks are built out of mutual trust and care. Many of these supports offer friendship, guidance, resources, a safe place to deal with their life issues and cope with the hardships they face, and now many of these participants have become leaders in this same community. We continue to see the hope in each participant as they come back to their community and continue to engage with it. All of these participants show their hope for youth who are just like them and for the community as a whole as they continue to stay involved and be present within their community.

The participants also exemplified hopefulness in the way they currently live their lives as active citizens and community members. Through their ongoing action and activism I was able to recognize how their experiences during high school and in their community created a generation of youth who are hopeful and believe in the importance of impacting others, contributing to society, and influencing change. Through this engagement in action, it is evident that participants found their voices and made them heard through the active roles they assumed. The choice to continue to serve their community in various ways illustrates their belief in the principles of social action and social responsibility. Their continued involvement shows how these participants strongly believe that their involvement and contribution can promote positive change. Participants
expressed their belief in collective action as a mechanism that can impact youth and create positive change. This hope continuously empowers them to stay connected and involved in their community.

Lastly, through the development of critical consciousness, these participants were hopeful as they connected their education and their self-identity to a larger purpose. This enabled participants to become passionate and motivated to engage in action that could alter their lives and the conditions in their community. By deeply knowing and understanding the conditions that were caused by the circumstances in their life, these students experienced empowerment as they chose to overcome them. The participants did not accept these conditions and rather aspired for more. Critical consciousness provided the participants with a deeper knowledge and understanding of the conditions that poverty, race, gender, mental illness, and so many other factors have placed on their lives. The hopefulness shown by every one of these participants makes it possible for them to not only endure the many oppressive conditions they continue to experience in their lives, but also to effectively navigate through these conditions while continuing to make progress towards a better future for themselves and their community.

While hopefulness enables forward momentum, having a social space within which to do the work of empowerment is also key. The next section examines that space, which is made by rich relationships.

**Relationships: School and Community**

The integral relationship that connects the individual students, the school environment, and the community creates a social space within which empowerment is developed and experienced (See Figure 2.) The integral school and community dynamic
offered youth a unique experience and various opportunities that shaped their identity and future path. These two spaces were meaningfully aligned and continuously working together to create experiences that reinforced social justice principles while engaging youth in the process of empowerment on an ongoing basis. (See Figure 2.)

**Figure 2. Relationships.**

I used a cycle chart to represent the unique and meaningful way in which the school and community domains worked together in sync to support and reinforce students in both contexts. The two parts of Figure 2 representing the school and community are presented as working together in sync as each gear fits into the cogs of the other. A gear that interacts integrally with both of these domains concurrently also represents the individual. Also, the individual represents a vital component that is interlocking with each space by playing a role, gaining knowledge, contributing thoughts, contributing their actions and voice in both domains. The relationship between the school and the
community was extremely important in engaging these youth in a process of
empowerment. This strong and overlapping relationship between Justice High School and
the surrounding community provided a robust foundation for participants to transform
their lives and re-envision their future. The intersections of all three parts of this
relationship are critical for this process. This is not just about the empowerment of the
students, however. Individuals cannot become empowered if the communities (including
schools) are not also empowered.

**Individual and Collective Empowerment**

Much of the scholarship about youth empowerment in the US context focuses on
the empowerment of the individuals (Zimmerman, 2000; Speer, 2000; Bandura, 1989;
Keifer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Parsons, 1991). Some suggests that there
is a linear and unidirectional relationship between empowerment of the individual and the
community (Zimmerman, 2000; Speer, 2000; Keifer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport,
1988; Rappaport, 1981; Prilletensky, 2003). International scholarship, however, presents
a more dynamic and synergistic relationship that positions each type of empowerment as
dependent on and influential toward the other. That is, individuals cannot become
empowered if the communities within which they participate are not empowered, and
communities can only become empowered when the individuals within them are
simultaneously empowered (See for example Monkman; 2011). Below is a contrasting
view of individual and community empowerment that illustrates that relationship between
both domains as overlapping and interlinked, a contrasting view to the US based
research. (See Figure 3.)
The study shows how individual and collective empowerment were overlapping and happening concurrently for participants as they engaged in the school and community spaces. This view of empowerment reflected by the data is fluid and deeply connected providing a contrast to the way in which individual and collective empowerment have been discussed in US based research (Zimmerman, 2000; Speer, 2000; Keifer, 1984; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Prilletensky, 2003). Empowerment in this study was not one-dimensional or isolated, instead individual empowerment and collective empowerment were overlapping and synergistically linked.

There is a literature that argues you can’t have empowered individuals in a community that isn’t empowered, and vice versa. The school is a key part of that empowered community, and the process of empowerment is seen working at both the
individual and school level simultaneously and synergistically. Empowerment is changing the relationship of power. The history of this school is so unique that it created a space where change can happen and it did. The curriculum of this school created spaces where power structures could be altered, and they did. Teachers created a structure in their classrooms through the curriculum and content where students could change the relationship of power and did. Lastly students actively engaged in school life that created a synergistic cycle between both domains of empowerment. If these students chose not to engage within this school space, this would have negatively impacted the teachers and the overall structure of the school. The students made choices and took an active role in their empowerment and subsequently the empowerment of the school community.

The community is a more complex space, and this study didn’t focus directly on it. The community organizations that worked with the school and the youth, could very likely also be empowered and empowering. However, the broader community—neighborhoods and the city in which the participants attended high school—may not be as positively influenced, in part due to less shared involvement in the making of social connections, development of critical consciousness, and engagement in action. It is likely, therefore, that empowerment of that broader community didn’t take place in the same ways, but this was not explored in this study.

**Conclusion**

Participants’ lived experiences in their school and integrated parts of community engaged them in the ongoing process of youth empowerment. Through this process participants were capable of changing their lives and contributing to change within their communities. Through the development of personal strength, social connectedness,
critical consciousness, action, and hope, these participants were empowered to transform their lives. As each participant continues to engage in this process, and continues to move closer to their goals and dreams as shared through their stories, their stories provide educators with hope and inspiration through to see beyond the limitations and barriers that youth such as Tae, Aeryn, Sef, Aeryn, Trinity, and Edwin faced in their lives and rather look towards the possibility of change through the process of youth empowerment.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

Introduction

These students are the roses that grew from concrete. They have worked so hard to transform their lives and pursue their goals and dreams, and their current accomplishments were that much harder to attain and took so much more strength and effort than for students who have more privilege, access, and power. The stories included in this study are inspiring because they show us how an individual’s life circumstances influence but do not define their life trajectory or their future path. We must believe that all students have just as much to offer the world as anyone else and are capable of great things. It is our job to provide them with options, opportunities, and an education that can empower them and liberate them, even if it means extending curriculum and academic relationships beyond normative boundaries.

The purpose of this study was to examine youth empowerment through providing participant reflections of their experiences after they had attended a social justice high school and to better understand how this experience contributed to the way they were empowered during and post high school. These stories provide insight into the way this school and the community created safe spaces where students could flourish, develop a positive self-identity, and acquire the tools necessary for empowering individual and collective change. To conclude, I will revisit the existing literature on oppression and power to show the ways this research informs these bodies of scholarship. Following this I will discuss the way this study also informed the literature on social justice education and empowerment. I will then return to the research questions that guided this study and respond to each of the questions. Next I will discuss how this study engages social
reconstructionsm. I will then overview issues arising from this study. I will follow this section with implications for practice. I will then end this chapter by discussing implications for future research.

**Revisiting Oppression and Power**

It was earlier established in the literature review that oppression provides major limitations and barriers for youth (Delpit, 1995; Anyone, 2005; Sleeter & Grant, 2007). Prilletensky (2003) argues that some of these barriers are caused by societal oppression when it is internalized and results in silence, an absence of a positive self-belief and an outlook of hopefulness. Delpit (1995) describes this oppression as silence and fear in schooling through the emphasis of compliance that further disenfranchises low-income youth by instilling feelings of powerlessness—disempowerment. This study illustrates how conditions of oppression can be countered in a high school setting that is founded on social justice principles.

One of strongest points coming out of this study is the importance of relationships in confronting and dismantling oppression through the process of transformation and empowerment for each participant. Some research on oppression states that low-income youth are unable to create strong bonds because of oppressive conditions (Wilson, 1996; Figueira-McDonough, 1991). My research not only challenges this notion, but also further provides insight as to how strong and meaningful relationships and social bonds can be fostered within school and community spaces.

Wilson (1996) and Figueira-McDonough (1991) argue that the adversity that youth face in low-income neighborhoods is connected to the lack of social connections within these neighborhoods. Prilletensky (2003) also argues that oppression creates
conditions of silence and hopelessness that limit individuals’ abilities to develop meaningful and trusting relationships. In the study herein, participants provided a counter narrative to this discussion of poverty and oppression by showing how they experienced deep and meaningful relationships in their school and community that empowered them to transform their lives. This research offers insight into how school and community spaces can be places where students can be empowered when strong, organic, caring and meaningful relationships are established. These stories illustrate the ways in which participants gain power through “shared power” experiences or “power with” (Rowlands, 1997, p. v; see also Czuba & Page, 1999; Lappe & Dubois, 1994; Kreisberg, 1992). Their relationships with their teachers, school and organizational staff members, peers, and community members were transformational because they were supportive, collectively empowering, on equal footing, and enabled learning from each other. These relationships were critical in these participants’ process of empowerment.

It must also be stated that most of these relationships were not planned, forced or assigned. Over time these relationship organically grew and trust was established. In existing empowerment research, there are many proposed models for youth empowerment that use assigned mentorship as one element intended to foster empowerment in youth programs (Chinman & Linny, 1998; Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward & Green, 2003). It cannot be assumed that the same results would emerge in such programs that do not provide the time and space for organic relationships to develop.

Furthermore, in the literature concerning empowerment practice, it is argued that individuals can be empowered through a power-over method through counseling or intervention (Rose & Black, 1985; Day Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005). This study
illustrates how changing this power dynamic between students and teachers had a profound impact on the development of meaningful relationships and ultimately youth empowerment. Although teachers and students have relationships that are inherently unequal, it was clear in this educational setting there was a conscious choice by both educators and students to change this authoritative power dynamic. This study shows that youth empowerment requires altering power relations (Rocha, 1997). In this study students experienced a number of teachers, staff, and community members who opened up their personal lives and used their power for the benefit of their students. In this case, authority figures within the school embraced and valued these participants for who they were and everything they offered, while encouraging them to use their lived experiences to inspire them to achieve more.

**Social Justice Education and Youth Empowerment**

Social justice education has been described as a response to empowering silenced groups (Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Lund, 2006; Giroux, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004). Greene (1998) describes traditional schooling as individualistic and further discusses how students must be taught how to connect, be compassionate, relate, and advocate for each other to become principled beyond their own self-interest. Justice High School did exactly this as reflected by the five participants who took part in this study. Sleeter and Grant (2007) argue that SJE is the best approach in education to empower low-income youth. My research builds upon the work of Sleeter and Grant (2007) and further supports their argument.

In this study empowerment emerged in multiple ways. This study illustrates how these five participants accessed power through their school and community experiences
and ultimately used this power to transform their lives as well as impact others. Even though some participants had strong families that supported them, each of them still struggled with issues like poverty, violence, trauma and tragedy. Upon entering high school they were profoundly changed by their school and community experiences through the development of personal strength, social connectedness, critical consciousness, action, and hope. These mechanisms, collectively, enabled them to confront the many issues they faced while acquiring the tools necessary to have control over their life and the ability to redefine and to re-envision their life and their identity.

Participants showed many dimensions of personal empowerment, for example, development of skills, self-confidence, self-acceptance, political understanding (or civic and political knowledge), personal ability to take a significant role in decision-making, The political dimension of empowerment is evident in citizen participation, activism, social connectedness, and community engagement (Rowlands, 1997; Wilson, 1996; Stromquist, 1995; Rose & Black, 1995; Berger & Newhaus, 1977), and control over resources and environments (Kiefer, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Stromquist, 1995). Cognitive empowerment is demonstrated through their critical consciousness (Stromquist, 1995). While economic empowerment (Stromquist, 1995) is the fourth dimension, it is harder to see in the lives of youth, as they have not yet become economically self-sufficient. A follow-up study would reveal whether this dimension has been developed, and perhaps inspired by their high school experience.

This study also revealed how individual and collective empowerment are linked and overlapping. This fluid exchange and synergy between individual and collective
empowerment created a unique experience for participants that showed the development of both domains of empowerment concurrently. This unique experience was enabled within the school and community’s synergistic relations and how they both intentionally worked together in sync to provide safe spaces and opportunities for youth.

In existing US-based research, the connection between community and individual empowerment is absent. These two areas of empowerment are predominantly discussed in isolation from each other. Most of the literature focuses on only one type of empowerment or the other, but doesn’t link the relationship between them; it does not recognize the importance of the fluid exchange and overlap between individual and community empowerment. The importance of this relationship between individual and community empowerment is one of the most significant aspects of each participant’s experience. Because of this tight and meaningful relationship between the school and the community, students engaged in both areas of empowerment which together fostered the positive development of individuals as both academic students and citizens of the larger society in which they live. Ultimately, it is this relationship between individual and community empowerment that enabled these participants to transform from powerless youth to active members within their community. This was seen through participants’ social awareness, their passion for their community, their pride and confidence in themselves, their continued active contribution to multiple communities (school and neighborhood), their family, and through their pursuit of their academic and personal goals described in the stories shared with me about their post high school paths.

Lastly, Freire’s ideas of empowerment are evident in this study. This was characterized by the development of critical consciousness, engagement in action, and
hope to support and drive the ongoing process of social and individual change. Through their ongoing engagement in this process these participants continue to deepen their knowledge, take action against the ongoing oppression in their lives, are open and willing to undergo change and to motivate collective change, and continue to overcome the barriers that stand in their way of their dreams.

Each and every one of these participants is the first in their family to go on to accomplish various achievements, including college and athletics. I believe it is accurate to say that each participant did not have a foundation that provided a clear path for success, or even in some cases, very little support for their future. Through the ongoing engagement in this process participants were capable of navigating through the challenges they faced and the oppressive conditions they encountered to become the strong and flourishing young adults they are today. Their hopefulness enabled them to continuously come back to this process and re-engage in it, even if when they experienced disappointment, failure, and rejection.

In the third interview when each participant told me stories about all of the things that they have achieved since high school and their future plans, their confidence and belief in their dreams was absolutely inspiring. Most people would never believe that these participants had ever encountered the instability and trauma that they shared with me during their first interview that focused on their childhoods. It is the dimension of hope within their empowerment process that enabled them to continue to pursue a path that was not set out before them and to take the risk of exploring the unknown.
Returning to the Research Questions

I posed two research questions in this study with multiple sub-questions. My first question was, **how does a SJE empower students in their life beyond high school?** I will first respond to the sub-questions and then return to the larger research question.

1) **How do students identify social justice and empowerment within their lives?**

Each participant defined social justice in their life as the ability to inspire and help others. Some participants discussed social justice as fighting for what was right and as standing for what was just rather than ignoring this. One participant defined social justice as helping individuals who could not help themselves. Participants discussed various ways they felt they had been empowered throughout their lives within the stories they shared with me. They discussed the ways in which they took advantage of opportunities, believed in their abilities, and many described empowerment as having power in their lives and in their community. Many participants discussed how they experienced empowerment by positively impacting others, getting involved with organizations and their former school to impact youth, going to college to furthering their education, and making choices that they believed in. For these participants empowerment was directly linked to action.

Additionally, empowerment emerged in participants’ ability to individually and collectively transform in addition to their acquisition of critical consciousness, their engagement in action, the ability to change, and their hopefulness. Because these participants’ were capable of re-envisioning themselves, their identity, their surroundings, and even their relationships with those closest to them, they were empowered and further liberated because they believed they had the power to change their lives.
2) What do students identify as outcomes or results of their high school SJE experiences?

One of the biggest outcomes or results of these participants’ high school experience was the many strong relationships they established with their peers, teachers, and the community. They all focused on how important these relationships were after high school and in their current lives throughout the stories they shared. Participants developed a network of support from their high school experience that continues to be present in their lives even today. Additionally, their high school shaped them to be resourceful and resilient and this was emphasized through the various ways participants discussed how they continue to overcome hardships.

Justice High School offered multiple opportunities for participants to express themselves, while validating and recognizing their talents and strengths, which ultimately shaped their self-concept. Today all five of these participants are confident and hopeful young adults who continue to believe in their future goals. Even though they know they have to work harder than most, this does not discourage them. They all perceived themselves to be leaders and as having much to offer.

Lastly, these participants have embraced the principles of social action and social responsibility. Each participant discussed how involved he or she was in their community in their present lives. Their stories of the present truly show how these five participants have become agents of social change as they engage with their community to impact youth and to contribute their knowledge, skills, and talents towards social issues, community issues, and to empower others while being role models for low-income and marginalized youth.
3) What trajectories have their lives post-high school taken, and how are these trajectories related to empowerment?

Every participant’s life after high school has followed a path that they re-envisioned for themselves. Although their path is uncertain, they continue to make progress and work towards their ultimate personal and professional goals. On this journey all of them have faced failure and rejection, yet they possess hope and continue to work towards changing the circumstances in their life. From continuing their education, working full time, volunteering, impacting youth, contributing to their former high school, and even participating in this study, each participant has chosen to change their lives and impact others in various ways. Although all of these participants are still in poverty and deal with many difficult life circumstances, this does not hinder them from continuing their work.

Overall, this social justice high school empowered these participants in multiple ways. In reference to the larger overarching question, the social justice high school was a key mechanism in engaging these participants in the process of youth empowerment. After high school, they continue to engage in this process as reflected by the stories they shared about their post high school experience. It is clear that Justice High School had a lasting imprint on their lives and the way they continue to engage in this process of youth empowerment in their current lives.

The second research question that I posed for this study was, how do social justice students negotiate oppressive societal conditions? I will again first respond to the sub-questions and then return to the larger research question in the end.
1) In what ways has individual and community empowerment emerged in these students’ lives?

There are various ways that individual and community empowerment emerged in these participants’ lives. From their attitudes and beliefs to their individual goals they each have transformed into hopeful and ambitious young adults who are constantly working towards their long-term goals. Their personal strength and their determination are evident as they discuss where they are today and how they perceive themselves.

Presently, all of these participants are involved and connected to their community in various ways. Many participants have emerged as leaders in their family, in their community, and in their post-secondary institutions and have shown how principled they are beyond themselves. All of these participants have deep connections to multiple communities and have actively engaged collectively to create change. It is my belief that they have further empowered their communities through their involvement, their leadership, and in the ways they have created change. As young adults coming from the Justice community, they have a presence that is respected because they understand the social conditions of growing up and going to school in the Justice community. Their presence in the Justice community and their stories and voices offer youth support and inspiration. As these participants continue to be dance teachers, coaches, LGBT youth mentors, former Justice High School Alumni coming back to share their stories, they are continuing to impact and empower the youth in this community.

2) What kinds of barriers or facilitators condition the ways in which empowerment emerged?
There are multiple barriers and facilitators that conditioned the ways in which empowerment emerged for these participants. Many of the barriers consisted of their life circumstances, poverty, homelessness, violence, betrayal, trauma, and tragedy. These barriers created feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness in each of these student’s lives. Some of the participants continue to have feelings of hopelessness and frustration that result from the hardships that they face, yet their engagement in the process of empowerment enables them to navigate through this adversity and overcome it.

Their were many facilitators that conditioned the way in which empowerment emerged for these participants. These facilitators were their mentors, the school, the strong relationships they had with peers, teachers and staff, the multiple opportunities they had to access the larger world and resources, their social connectedness with their community, and their critical consciousness. Additionally, by engaging in action and activism participants acquired the tools for creating change both in their community and in their lives.

Overall these participants who experienced four years of social justice education during high school learned how to negotiate the oppressive societal conditions in various ways. One thing that was common amongst all of them was their resiliency to overcome failure and their attitudes of hope and belief in future possibilities. Second, each participant negotiated these oppressive conditions by being open to change. Each participant’s ability to transform themselves and their lives is key in the way they overcame the adversity they faced. The facilitators in their lives—the school, relationships, family, friends, and community organizations—all contributed to the development of these aspects of youth empowerment.
Social Reconstructionism

There are multiple ways this study speaks towards social reconstructionism. Social reconstructionism is a framework that emphasizes the belief that social transformation is possible through education (Thomas, 2010; Freire, 1970; Sleeter & Grant, 2007; Rugg, 1939). This study supports this belief and emphasizes the importance of providing students with a social education as well as an academic education specifically that engages and empowers low-income and marginalized youth. The stories that were shared with me illustrate how these five participants were deeply impacted by the social justice content and curriculum taught at Justice High School. Through this school students are capable of connecting academic content to their lives, developing their social awareness of local and global issues that impact them, creating a school climate and culture where students can develop deep relationships with their peers and staff members, and by providing multiple opportunities for students to connect with their community and engage in action. The non-traditional education focused on so much more than just academic skills. This school provided participants with a platform to emerge as leaders and a safety net that supported them if they did not succeed.

Second, this study shows how important it was that the teachers and the staff within this school were given the freedom and the space to teach a non-traditional curriculum and create learning experiences that explored ideas of social justice, social action and social responsibility. The many stories they shared about attending protests, empowering students to create change within their school by equipping them with the tools and the knowledge necessary to do so, and even providing various opportunities to have a voice within their school to express themselves, all showed how these experiences
positively changed them. This type of education is not common in schools, and furthermore most educators do not have the freedom to teach such a curriculum in educational setting. It is important that we learn from these narratives and begin to consider how a social reconstructionist approach towards education can foster empowerment and liberation through the classroom and through community spaces as seen in these students lived experiences. Also, this study illustrates that educators need to envision ways to empower youth in classroom spaces through curriculum and instruction that extends beyond academic content.

**Issues Arising In the Research**

For most of my career I have been interested in understanding the impact of SJE. One of the things that drove me to conduct this narrative inquiry was the clear absence of student voice and their narratives in research concerning this form of education and its impact on low-income and marginalized youth. Yet there are some issues that arise from my research that must be noted.

Some might argue that my former relationship with these students may have caused them to reflect positively on their schooling experience. This is a valid concern as I was their former teacher. Yet, I would respond to this concern with a few points. These participants discussed various aspects of their life concerning their high school experience and beyond. When discussing their high school experience, they discussed both positive and negative aspects of this experience. This was seen in the way some participants believed that Justice High School could have provided a more rigorous academic curriculum comparable to other high schools in the area, or other participants’ critique that Justice High School did not recognize all minority students as much as
African-American students. Also, many participants discussed violence that was often present in their high school. These were just a few examples of the way participants’ shared their negative and positive stories concerning their high school experience. It seemed they were not limiting what they shared. Furthermore, I am no longer an educator at this high school and have not been for a few years. I have no direct connection to Justice High School anymore aside from communication with my former students. This aspect was something that each participant was well aware of during this interview process.

My relationship with these students also provided a foundation of trust. In addition to learning about their high school experience and the way this impacted them in their post-high school lives, participants also shared stories that described the intimate and personal memories and experiences of struggles, failure, trauma, tragedy and betrayal. They also shared stories of success, happiness, pride, accomplishment, and hope that define who they are today and what they have done since graduating high school. I shared their vivid stories in this research so that educators and researchers can hear their stories directly, make their own interpretations, and have insight into how these participants’ high school education ultimately impacted their empowerment during high school and beyond.

Next I will discuss the future implications for practice in the field of education, and the insight that research offers to educational practice with specific emphasis towards schools in urban communities.
Implications for Practice

1. School assessments and accountability systems miss much of what is important to the education of students. Students’ high school data falls short in telling the story of their experience, their growth, and even their accomplishments during and post-high school. Furthermore, the school data overall could never illustrate the impact of this educational experience on the youth attending this school. Through this study we get a glimpse of the way in which these students transformed with the help of their school, their community, and their families. The impact schooling has on youth, beyond what is shown by numbers, is of the utmost importance and the current evaluation systems in the school district overlook the voices of students and their experiences. The absence of student perspectives in educational scholarship directly shows how little we value their stories and their experience. This narrative inquiry provides five strong voices that describe in great detail their lived experiences and the primary elements within their lives that empower them to transform and redefine themselves.

Policies that limit the resources and constrain certain schools often hinder the empowerment and liberation of low-income and minority youth. Justice High school is a unique teacher-led institution where teachers are empowered to create meaningful learning experiences as described in participants’ stories not only of the content and curriculum of this school, but through the caring and meaningful relationships that they had with teachers and staff. Current evaluation systems have prioritized academic skills over social education. Standardized tests and the current teacher evaluation systems shift the primary focus from the student as a whole person to students’ test scores; this
narrowed evidence can have a profound (and negative) impact on a school’s future and teachers’ jobs.

2. Social justice education matters. This study illustrated the way these former students used their social and academic knowledge years after their high school experience. This view of each participant in their current life was necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the way they reflected on their education. Five participants had a window of time beyond high school to use what they had learned; this showed the long-term impact of social justice education on these young adults. This view allows us to understand just how strongly these participants were influenced and continue to be influenced by their high school experience.

3. Context, and a full understanding of it, matters. Teacher education and teacher education programs should include a deep analysis of urban contextual influences, and enable teachers to be able to know those contexts. Public and urban schools in low-income areas serve a population of students that are strongly impacted by their environment. This study illustrates how violence, poverty, instability, homelessness, tragedy, and trauma can affect youth. These circumstances impacted these participants in various ways that the school was capable of acknowledging rather than ignoring. Teachers, staff members, and even students roles were redefined in this educational setting for the purpose for being responsive to these conditions. Also, students gained power through their schooling experience because they were valued, they were not viewed as deficient or disadvantaged. They were empowered to take on leadership roles both in school and in the community. Teacher education programs must empower pre-professional teachers to move beyond academics. They must learn how to facilitate a
class not dominate or control a class. Furthermore, we must break down notions of fear and otherness in all pre-professional educators teaching in Urban settings. We can no longer allow educators to further oppress youth through the classroom setting. Instead we must draw youth even closer to us so we can begin to truly understand who they are and how they plan on making their mark on this world. Such learning is imperative in creating authentic experiences where students can transform their lives and ultimately liberate themselves.

4. Educators must understand concepts deeply and critically. The terms social justice education and empowerment are commonly used terms within education that are often unclear and undefined. These concepts are deeply rooted in strong principles and beliefs. Without a critical understanding of these concepts, they become meaningless, and only a superficial practice of social justice education and empowerment can be expected.

5. Educators must possess cultural competence. We can and should educate teachers to have the cultural competence to work with students such as the participants in this study. This provides implications for higher education and educational policy. Cultivating cultural competence for pre-service teachers and teachers in general is vital for youth empowerment. Cultural dissonance causes students to fail as our own beliefs and values may function as barriers for students. Without attention to cultural competence within universities, educational policy, and elementary, middle, and secondary educational institutions, educators will continue to perpetuate oppressive conditions within their classrooms.
Implications for Future Research

1. One of the primary elements that this study did not address was the ambiguity over what is social justice education. In existing research this is an area that is underdeveloped. We need future research exploring the various forms of SJE and the way different schools implement this as well as its impact on students. This research would provide great insight to the social justice educational scholarship and the ways different communities implement social justice principles in the context of schooling.

2. Next, a longitudinal study following students through high school and beyond would provide insight into how students engage in empowerment processes during different stages in their life. A longitudinal study would provide more insight into how youth engage in the process of empowerment and how this process is fostered year to year.

3. I only interviewed five participants in this study. I recommend that more narrative inquiry studies be conducted to learn from various lived experiences from youth who engaged in this form of schooling. Also, continuing such work to see how SJE impacts future generations would continue to provide us with insight as to how SJE is impacting youth. I am also curious of how SJE implemented in affluent areas would impact students; much of the SJE-related research is in urban struggling schools.

4. I believe that research exploring both a SJE high school and a military academy—contrasting forms of high school education—would give us insight into the impact of this opposite perspective of schooling on low-income and minority youth. I am curious as to how schools implementing opposing principles, missions, and visions affect youth empowerment.
5. Last, I believe that there needs to be more research into how hope relates to youth empowerment. I believe this research is extremely important to inform educational practice in urban schools and the development of empowerment programs serving low-income and minority youth.

**Conclusion**

This study presents the stories of five students who have been empowered in various ways by experiencing a social justice high school and its surrounding community. Through this study, a clearer, more coherent and multi-dimensional definition of youth empowerment is offered. The process of youth empowerment is defined by five dimensions including: personal strength, social connectedness, critical consciousness, action, and hope. Together these dimensions create ongoing change and transformation. Through the shared stories of each of participant’s lived experiences during their childhood, high school and post high school, these dimensions of youth empowerment were common across the stories that were shared with me. Furthermore, these dimensions of youth empowerment also describe the positive impact a social justice education and the surrounding school community had on participants’ empowerment and their ability to negotiate the oppressive conditions in their environment.

SJE is one way in which oppressed youth are empowered to challenge the status quo and actively involve themselves in action countering oppression for the purpose of creating societal change. Although these students often do not follow the traditional path of matriculating through their education in four years as I witnessed in my own experience, this study shows how SJE had a profound impact on students’ lives in overcoming oppression in the many ways they were empowered throughout their
educational experience and their civic involvement in society. Often, as educators we tend to value a student’s experience of their educational process less than their GPA, standardized test scores, and where they go on to pursue higher education. The impact of social justice education on oppressed youth cannot be measured by this data.

Additionally this study offers a view of individual and collective empowerment that is synergistically linked and fluid. This close relationship between both areas of empowerment together provided participants with experiences where individual and collective empowerment emerged concurrently. This view of individual empowerment and collective empowerment as inherently linked provides a contrasting view to the way these areas of empowerment have been explored in the US based research.
Epilogue

This research thus far presents the stories of five students who were deeply impacted by a unique school and community. As a former teacher at Justice High School, I must also bring to light one aspect of this story that has not yet been shared or discussed. This one element of the story has to do with my own personal experience as an educator at Justice High School. From the students’ perspective it is clear this school was doing amazing work with low-income youth and marginalized youth. But the truth remains that most of the educators at the school, like myself, parted ways with Justice High School. One of things that was so hard about this research was hearing the impact of what I chose to leave behind, a school that’s doing everything I believe in, and this has been very difficult for me to face throughout this research.

My choice to leave Justice High School was an outcome of many conditions within the school that personally became too hard for me. Although I do not know the personal story of every teacher who left Justice High School, I do know that many teachers have chosen to leave this school. When looking at the turnover we are faced with a reality illustrating the truth that, as great as this experience was, there were also many hardships that caused outstanding educators to walk away from this school. For myself, there were many contributing factors to my decision.

The day I resigned from Justice High School I was overcome with feelings of guilt and sadness as well as feelings of relief. I do not believe I could have continued to serve my students to my fullest capacity my personal feelings and the short-staffed environment of the school. I was becoming numb and loosing sight for why I pursued this career. I chose to leave because I felt like Justice High School was no longer a place
where I could serve my students. In short, I felt unsupported. I’m sure my story is similar to the stories of others, but what is most difficult about my story is that even though this school was a tough place to work, it was truly a place where students could change their lives.

This study has been bittersweet for me as I opened up the door to seeing, feeling, experiencing, and further understanding students’ educational experiences that I, at times, was a part of. Their stories have inspired me and given me validation, but at the same time filled me with the guilt I felt on the day I left this school. The work we did at this school was amazing and it profoundly shaped these participants’ lives as well as mine. This research has taught me that social justice education can empower students to believe in themselves and to engage actively in their own lives individually and collectively. This research shows the power, influence, and the potential of one social justice educational model, and this initiative empowered low-income and minority youth to transform their lives. This study shows that social justice education profoundly changed the students in this study in a positive way, and additionally enabled them to continue in a cycle of empowerment to continuously overcome the struggles they face.
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview I (Life History)

1. Describe your childhood and where you grow up? Can you tell me a story about your family and/or your neighborhood?

2. What kind of hardships did your family deal with while you were an adolescent? Can you tell me about a time your family dealt with something difficult?

3. What were the types of things you did in your community? Tell me a story about one of these experiences.

4. Describe what you think makes a community strong or successful. Is there a specific experience that you can remember that where you either saw the strengths or the weaknesses, or both of your community?

5. Describe your peers in your community growing up. How do people outside your community describe its members. Do you have any specific memories of individuals who impacted you in your community? Tell me that story and why…

6. Did you participate in any of these organizations? If so, to what degree? If not, why not?

7. *What type of activities or events did people participate in or organize within your community?*

8. What was the hardest life issue you faced while you were growing up before high school? Tell me a time where you were faced with this hardship. What happened? How did you react to this situation?

*Possible probing questions:

Interview II (Schooling Experience)

1. Why did you choose to attend Justice High School? Tell me the story of how you picked this school and your first days at Justice High School?

2. Tell me about your favorite class while you attended Justice High School? Why was this your favorite class? What topics or issues were discussed. Tell me a story showing me what you experienced in this class?

3. How do you define social justice? Tell me about an experience where you experienced this through your school?

4. How do you define empowerment? Tell me about a moment when you experienced this at Justice High School?

5. What specifically about Justice High School was meaningful to you? Or if none, what was least meaningful to you? Tell me a story of a moment when you realized this?
6. Your school stated that it prepares young people to be active in society? Can you tell me a story of how you were taught this while you attended the school?

7. What oppressive conditions affected you most during high school? What social issues affected you most in high school? Can you tell me a story where this struggle impacted your life?

8. Do you believe that Justice High School is different from other public schools? If so, tell me a story about how Justice High School was unique to you?

9. Do you believe Justice contributed to your liberation and empowerment? Tell me a story about a time this occurred?

**Interview III (Present Life)**

1. Tell me the story about your path after high school until now? What are you most proud of? What are you least proud of?

2. What social issues impact you most today? Describe to me a recent experience that brought the awareness of this issue and its impact on your life? How did you cope with this?

3. How do you deal with these stereotypes and limitations people in your society place on you? Tell me a story of an experience where this has occurred and how you dealt with it.

4. Describe what you feel are the most important tools you have taken away as a result of attending Justice High School? Looking back on your high school experience, what was the most important thing you learned at Justice and tell me a story of how you utilize this knowledge in your life now?

5. What are your thoughts about social action as a goal of learning? In what ways has this impacted your life today? Can you tell me about an experience in your life after high school where you engaged in social action.

6. Do you think learning about social justice is an important tool for youth who come from communities like yours? If so, why? Tell me a story of how you or someone you know has been either positively or negatively impacted by SJE?

7. What are issues that you face in your community or as a minority youth growing up in an urban setting that you feel social justice makes or could make the difference?

8. In what ways did Justice High School serve the community?

9. Considering your experience in the program and what you’ve learned, is there anything that was not covered that you felt needed to be? If so, what and why?
Appendix B: IRB Approval

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Services
Institutional Review Board
1 East Jackson Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2201
312-362-7593
Fax: 312-362-5554

Research Involving Human Subjects
NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION

To: Anita Thawani, Graduate Student, School of Education

Date: August 1, 2013

Re: Research Protocol # AT061813EDU
"Looking for a Solution: Social Justice Education and Its impact on Adolescent Empowerment"

Please review the following important information about the review of your proposed research activity.

Review Details
This submission is an Initial Submission. Your research project meets the criteria for Expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110 under the following category(ies):

"(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes."

"(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

Approval Details
Your research was originally reviewed on July 10, 2013 and revisions were requested. The revisions you submitted on July 23, 2013 were reviewed and approved on August 1, 2013.

Approval Period: August 1, 2013 – July 31, 2014

Approved Consent, Parent/Guardian Permission, or Assent Materials:
1) Adult Consent, version July 23, 2013 (attached)

Other approved study documents:
1) Recruitment letter and email, version July 23, 2013 (attached)
2) Mental Health Flyer, version July 23, 2013 (attached)

Number of approved participants: 15 Total
You should not exceed this total number of subjects without prospectively submitting an amendment to the IRB requesting an increase in subject number.

Funding Source: 1) None
Approved Performance sites: 1) DePaul University

Reminders
- Only the most recent IRB-approved versions of consent, parent/guardian permission, or assent forms may be used in association with this project.
- Any changes to the funding source or funding status must be sent to the IRB as an amendment.
- Prior to implementing revisions to project materials or procedures, you must submit an amendment application detailing the changes to the IRB for review and receive notification of approval.
- You must promptly report any problems that have occurred involving research participants to the IRB in writing.
- If your project will continue beyond the approval period indicated above, you are responsible for submitting a continuing review report at least 3 weeks prior to the expiration date. The continuing review form can be downloaded from the IRB web page.
- Once the research is completed, you must send a final closure report for the research to the IRB.

The Board would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation and wishes you the best of luck on your research. If you have any questions, please contact me by telephone at (312) 362-7497 or by email at jordman@depaul.edu

For the Board,

Jennifer Ordman, B.S.
Assistant Director of Research Compliance
Office of Research Services

Cc: Karen Monkman, Ph.D., Faculty Sponsor, School of Education
References


Empowerment as Fostering Positive Youth Development and Citizenship.

*American Journal of Health Behavior*, 27(Supplement 1), S66-79.


