SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE FROM BROKEN YOUTH TO A BROKEN SYSTEM: DISMANTLING DEFICIT-BASED NARRATIVES OF YOUTH WITH HIGH ACES THROUGH A POST-QUALITATIVE DECOLONIZING APPROACH

A Dissertation
by
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Abstract

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE FROM BROKEN YOUTH TO A BROKEN SYSTEM: DISMANTLING DEFICIT-BASED NARRATIVES OF YOUTH WITH HIGH ACES THROUGH A POST-QUALITATIVE DECOLONIZING APPROACH

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This study interrogates the deficit-centered policies and procedures in education and reveals how they continue to oppress, code, and label youth with high ACEs, positioning them as broken and defective. In this post-qualitative study, I use decolonizing theory to deconstruct the relations of power and dominant discourses that label and flag our students as "*at-risk*" and "underprepared" for a world of stereotypes that we (as a society, as individuals from dominant groups with naming power, and as institutions) continue to fuel. This study employs the work of Eve Tuck and her conceptualization of deficit-based theory. This theory takes into position that decolonization is a process which questions and immerses imperialism and colonialism, while aiming to gain more of a critical understanding of the underlying assumptions and motivations.

This study is a form of critical inquiry and resistance as activism, written from within my own experiences as I witnessed these policies and procedures continue to

label my students as *throwaways*, hindering their opportunities, spirit, and self-worth. Using a "thinking with theory" approach, I critically deconstruct the dominant discourses and power relations that shape the way we teach and view students with high ACEs (generally labeled as "*at-risk*"), while considering how these deficit-based approaches produce and preserve power structures and maintain systems of oppression in education.

Finally, I reflect on my own reflexivity and (re)production of knowledge as it relates to my decision to become an educator, and how I can resist these dominant discourses by standing in the gap, planting seeds where tough conversations will grow, and opening up possibilities for equitable change within our classrooms and our communities.

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Finally, I am thankful to be a part of this doctoral community and to be surrounded by co-hort members who are going to change the world of education.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my students. A little bit of each of you will always be a part of me. My wish for you is that you see the light in this world, the light in yourself, and the light in others. I see the light in *you.*

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Chapter 1: Introduction

It is our work as educational researchers and practitioners, and especially as community members, to envision alternative theories of change, especially those that rely on desire and complexity rather than damage (Tuck, 2009, p. 422).

It was a snowy winter morning in Vilas, North Carolina, where I stood in front of twenty-five eighth graders. As I divided the bags of Twizzlers, tubs of icing, and a tote full of candy pieces I explained to them that they'd spend the morning in the trenches of sugar creating an animal cell model. Every child came to school that day with a bag of supplies eager to share among their peers. They had waited all week to create a masterpiece that would capture their learning and fill their tummies with joy. My teacher heart felt full when I scanned the room as students laughed, commented on their peers' handy work, and worked together to build each other up and encourage each other. I was quickly wrapping up my student teaching experience with these students and though I had been allowed to grow here and develop, I was eager to have a classroom of my own where I had the freedom to use my own teaching style and set my expectations for classroom management. It wouldn't be too long, though, until I was handed the keys to my next adventure.

I had received an offer from a brand-new magnet school located in Granville County, North Carolina. I specifically said yes to this opportunity because it was unlike any other offer I had received. The school was a pilot program and would be *teacher-led*. This meant that the teachers hired would be fully in charge of all parts of the educational system including education, schedules, discipline, policies, and procedures. If I paused here in my retelling, my story would sound like a fairy tale, a dream job, a place to evolve and take

ownership and answerability, a place to be reflective and implement change when needed to benefit the entire learning community. The tricky part of this adventure came with the word *magnet.* The focus of the Granville Magnet School was reading. As a science teacher, I thought this would be a great opportunity to incorporate and cultivate a skill for understanding and comprehending as we embarked on our science curriculum.

I pulled into the parking lot with new school supplies in tow, busting at the seams to make my classroom my own. *Wait, this can't be* it, I thought. *I must be at the wrong location; this building resembles more of a rundown office building than a school.* The entire interviewing and hiring process had taken place over the phone and through digital applications so I had no reference point if I was in the correct location. There was no signage, no flower beds, no inviting mottos or murals, nothing but broken and dirty tin, and a makeshift entryway. No amount of brand-new teacher supplies was going to fix this situation. If this is how I felt entering as a teacher, how would the kids feel? What kids will be filling the halls of this eerie building? What I didn't know is that to the kids that would soon fill my classroom, this building would be a solace, a shelter, a place where they received two meals a day and their toes were warm. The pilot program did focus on reading, but there were a few details left out on contract-signing day. For years, Granville County had been experiencing a deficit; teachers were concerned because students who were promoted to middle school were testing on a K-2 level. After years of interventions, a large percentage of students were struggling in core courses because of their reading and comprehension skills and not being appropriately nurtured to their developmental level. Ultimately, reading and comprehension gaps in the district was why Granville Magnet School was formed. A lottery soon opened up and was available for any 5th-grade student who tested below a 2nd-grade

reading level. The magnet school would take in 100 students per year who met the requirements and eventually fill grades 6-12. In our first lottery, we had over 1,000 students who qualified and applied. Those were the students who would soon fill these halls and makeshift classrooms. I quickly learned why the school was portrayed to me as an opportunity, why the interview and hiring process was conducted online, why they strictly recruited brand new "fresh" teachers, and why they interwove the words *teacher-led* as a bargaining chip. Nevertheless, I was committed, and I was determined to use this opportunity to do what I do best: connect and educate youth to love and develop a passion for the natural world.

All of my teacher preparation courses, and textbooks could have never adequately prepared me for the next 180 school days. I grew more that school year than I have in my entire adult/working life. It took me five minutes into my first teaching period to realize my privilege. I am a woman who immediately held a degree of authority over these students because of my middle-class upbringing. To say that my view of the world and experience with family dynamics and cultures was limited would be an understatement. Not to say that I moved through life without any traumas, but I was very well taken care of and provided for. I grew up in a one-stoplight farming community, where the majority of families were nuclear and had two household incomes. Here I stood in my Chanel black pumps and freshly pressed argyle dress as the only female in my classroom. Later that afternoon I took my newly purchased teaching wardrobe and packed it away. Designer brands and fancy work bags were not going to do anything other than perpetuate the culture of power that is enacted within classrooms.

From day to day, some of my students would come to school early, standing patiently for me to unlock my classroom door so that they could have heat and use the bathroom water to brush their teeth and wash their faces. They'd stay late to help me clean my classroom so that I could follow them home as they walked the block where their best friend was murdered in a drive-by shooting a few weeks earlier. I'd take their clothes home and wash them, spend extra on classroom supplies so everyone would have the same fancy pencils and pens, and even had a fully stocked pantry of snacks and hygiene items that they could access and utilize anytime they didn't have food or soap at home. I remember how scared I felt when the police showed up to question if a student had been involved in gang activity related to a homicide, not scared for my own life but scared for his future. Somewhere and at some point in these first few weeks of school, I began to realize and recognize what childhood adversity entailed. This understanding hadn't been fully developed yet as I was at a place of processing and developing the challenges my students carried with them into the classroom. I started to unearth the traumas that came to the surface when they spoke about a parent being incarcerated, losing a loved one to gang violence, or the weight of being their sibling's caretaker while their mom worked nights to keep them the lights on.

At this intersection in my career and lived experiences, I had no knowledge of what adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were or how they impacted a child's development or emotional regulation. I did fall back on my teacher preparation program and child development courses where we learned about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) --that needs are *prioritized* in order of importance. If a child's basic needs are not met, they are unable to prioritize their education. I realized a student couldn't learn if they didn't feel safe, if they were hungry, if they were tired, or if they were worried about the circumstances in

which life has thrown them. My teacher prep program prepared me for many things, but the year I spent with those 6th graders prepared me for far more. It's one of those things that you don't really understand until you've lived it or seen it play out before you.

I thought back to my student teaching experience and how this experience was a totally different world. These students had parents who likely couldn't donate candy for the classroom experiment; their parents and caretakers were fighting to keep food on the table. How could I expect students to come to class ready to learn or hold themselves accountable for their learning when they were potentially worried about so many other basic life needs? I could paint my classroom walls bright green, throw out all of the desks and install flexible seating. I could stock the largest classroom closet with food and clothes, but no amount of worldly things was going to hide the pain and trauma these kids had endured in their short lives. The only way I was going to make a difference in their lives was to love them, to believe in them, to be a person in their corner cheering them on, to value them, and to try to take what time I had with them each day and lift them up to where they could battle any challenge life handed them.

Educational institutions and society labeled these students as "*at risk"* -- at risk for failing and dropping out, at risk for developing a substance addiction, at risk for becoming homeless and living off the system, at risk for spending the rest of life in a jail cell, at risk for becoming a harm to society. But not to me. To me, these kids were my reason for being and my insight into how unjust and cruel our world is to those who do not perform and meet our standards of success. If we were comparing life circumstances to a deck of cards, these kids would never be considered aces by society, but *ACEs* -- adverse childhood experiences -- were much of what they were dealt. Though each of them entered the schoolhouse doors

each day with their own set of challenges, these kids were (and are) resilient. I didn't have the knowledge to view it as resilience at the time it was occurring (as my reflexivity and own view of knowledge is fluid and growing), but I saw how innovative and creative they were in their motivation to overcome. They wanted to succeed and thrive, and they wanted to put their best foot forward and show up ready to learn. Their caretakers may not have been able to donate extra resources for classroom projects but they made up for it in other ways, they too wanted what was best for their children and were inventive in their contributions to their child's success.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study posits that deficit-centered policies and procedures in education continue to oppress, code, and label youth with high ACEs and position them as broken and damaged. I draw on the work of Eve Tuck whose emphasis on labeling and coding is especially useful to my analysis. To this end, Tuck's conceptualization of deficit-based theory is generative for grasping how students should not be viewed as *"at-risk"* and labeled because of their background or life circumstances. The theory takes the position that decolonization is a process that questions and immerses imperialism and colonialism while aiming to gain a more "critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices" (Smith, 2012, p. 606). Decolonizing work belongs to all of us, it asks us to analyze and think about our relationship with Indigenous lands that were wrongly claimed by colonizers, it asks us to move past accepting fault and instead, embrace responsibility. Decolonization is a path that moves us forward by creating systems and policies that are just and equitable, it addresses inequality through education, communication, and action. Decolonization is a push back on colonial narratives, it is a powerful tool for

analyzing and deconstructing the colonial influences on education and knowledge. Decolonization is a call-to-action for deconstructing settler-imposed systems that maintain oppression, eliminating the power hierarchies that code communities by their deficits (deficits which are created and fueled by oppression). Tuck's approach allows us to consider the long-term impact of documenting a person as broken or defective and substantiating the oppression and pain of Indigenous communities, urban communities and others who have been disenfranchised. It is those with the most power, the ones who are the majority, who must take on the responsibility for initiating the process of dismantling colonial domination. The purpose of my study is to use decolonizing theory to bring attention to and dismantle the educational policies and procedures that create and maintain oppression. In this post-qualitative study, I will use decolonizing theory to deconstruct the discourses and challenge the ideologies that continue to flag our students as "*at-risk*" and "underprepared" for a world of stereotypes that we (as a society, as individuals from dominant groups with naming power, and as institutions) have fueled. Our deficit driven language and ideological paradigms position and manipulate minoritized and marginalized youth as deficient and broken, as so, continuing to sustain a system and contribute to the repressions educators seek to eliminate. The analytic questions that guide my inquiry are:

1. What are the dominant discourses about students with adverse childhood experiences and how do relations of power produce these dominant discourses?
2. Within these discourses, in what ways does a deficit lens shape the narrative about students with ACEs (i.e., as broken, defective, unworthy, etc.)?

3. How can educators resist these discourses within their classrooms and hallways?
4. How might this resistance create opportunities, possibilities, and reform for teaching and trauma-informed education?

This work is significant because it is both a form of critical inquiry and resistance as activism. I am writing this from within my own classroom walls, as an insider who has seen these policies and procedures continue to label my students as *throwaways,* continuing to hinder their opportunities, their spirit, and self-worth. We cannot continue to sustain a broken system. In order to begin addressing the so-called achievement gaps that place the onus on students to access equitable systems on their own, we must first address the issues of systemic racism and inequity that are built into the foundations of our nation's schools. I intend to critically deconstruct the dominant discourses that shape the way that we teach and view students with high ACEs (generally labeled as "*at-risk*") and how these deficit-based approaches produce and preserve power structures and maintain systems of oppression in education.

Subjectivity and Role of the Researcher

Patel (2016) proposes a set of core questions that researchers should ask before embarking on any research endeavor: "*Why this?", "Why me?", "Why now and why here?"* (p. 57). While it is important to understand, contribute to, and find gaps in existing research, we are equally responsible for our approaches to and repercussions of our work. Postcolonial research deconstructs the history of power and the discourses that are created within social structures. A researcher's role is to identify their own subjectivities and intersectionalities

within a discourse and to discern that complete objectivity is impossible. These subjectivities or positionalities are socially and culturally constructed, ultimately influencing how one perceives the surrounding world. These subjectivities may change or alter as one encounters new experiences, but once adopted, these positions in which we settle can impact our thoughts and observations. In this section, I reflect on my subjectivity and positionality as it relates to my decision to become an educator and my role as researcher.

I became an educator because I wanted to situate myself in a position to be a change agent; to create a more equitable and effective educational environment and to make an impact to improve the lives of students. I approached my career as a call to action to stand in the gap, to plant seeds where tough conversation will grow, to improve our systems and accelerate towards equitable change within our classrooms, our communities and our country. As I work to identify areas of need and address systemic barriers for my students within my own capacities, I have to be mindful to engage in continuous self-reflexivity and to not think of myself as a White savior but instead as an *undoing* of my own socialization and assumptions. As I move through this process, I hope that my own reflexivity and (re)production of knowledge will continue to spark tough conversations and contribute to the raised awareness and activism of other educators.

I am a , cis-woman who was raised on a 30-acre tobacco and cattle farm in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. My childhood was embodied by White privilege, growing up in a settler-colonial nation sustained by a racialized system of power. Ingrained from an early age was the notion that academic achievement equates to success, and that my contributions to society were dependent on how well I excelled within the classroom. It was often that I would hear the phrase, “if you want to grow up and have a successful career and

not live paycheck-to-paycheck, then you should take your academics more seriously." I grew up on a family farm, there was certainly no lack of grit or work ethic in my bones. My brother and I were expected to pull our weight of the load during planting and harvesting season. One of my earliest memories of my childhood is following behind the tractor on our hands and knees as we carefully cupped the tobacco plant with our tiny hands to shelter it with soil.

In school, I was one of the hardest workers in my classroom; I often worked extra-long on assignments and projects to make sure that I had successfully completed all parts of the rubric before turning it in. I was motivated and dedicated to earn college admission, but I was never at the top of my class and my graduation gowns were not garnished with metals and honors. I continued to push and to scrap my way through college while struggling with physical and mental challenges because I could not and would not let myself fail. Failure was not an option in my household because education was expected, and it was the only path for a successful life. It wasn't until I began my work in the Education Specialist (Ed. S) program at Appalachian State University that I realized my worldview was constructed on settler-colonial, White supremacist and heteropatriarchal perspectives. I was readily unaware that the land beneath my home was not mine. The soil my brother and I used to cover the plants, the ground that our elementary school was built on, the land that housed the buildings my parents worked -- was all stolen land. I continue to own, live, and work on stolen Indigenous land. The push for me to succeed in school to secure the American Dream was a lie. The knowledge that I went to school to learn was a one-sided construction that implied there was only *one* reality, *one* truth, and *one* path to knowledge. It wasn't until four years ago that I began to question this reality and to recognize that truth and reality didn't come from

textbooks and written history. I started to become *unsettled,* to begin to "open up static fields of habit and practice" (MacLure, 2009, p. 277).

In my work as middle school science teacher in a predominantly African American and low-income community where I was the only White person in my classroom, I was continually reminded of my privilege and compelled to touch-base with my own positionalities and subjectivities (though, I wasn't conscious of what I was doing at the time). It was through this daily work with the students within my classroom that I noticed their struggles breach the surface and as they slowly shared their experiences, I realized that my own knowledge and being were upheld by White supremacy and domination. Up until this moment I had very few complex conversations with African American and Black people. There was only one African American family in my home county. As a result, my upbringing was one-sided and continued to paint the narrative that income inequality plaguing African Americans was due to their work ethic and lack of academic achievement. My own experiences with my students and their families taught me otherwise. These families who were labeled as inattentive and uncommitted worked hard for what they had, probably harder than their White counterparts, but they did not have the access to the family and social resources that those with higher incomes had. According to reardon (2012), highly educated parents or caretakers are more likely to efficiently provide resources and opportunities for their child to develop cognitively and academically when compared to parents with limited education. The forces that work against these students and families continued to shift my knowledge and normalized view, and reinforced my belief that I had been miseducated about the people that I share the world with. As an educator and researcher, it is imperative that I recognize my positionality and my assemblage as I continue to develop and reflect on my

identity. It is equally important to recognize the consequences of an inequitable society and continued misrepresentation and exploitation of the silenced is detrimental to our students' wellbeing; continuing to sustain inequitable systems affirms and upholds the colonized mentality and subjugation.

My parents grew up with a grounded belief in helping and supporting our local community and families, both had a soft spot for children in need. When I was two years old, we were expecting the grand arrival of my baby brother, but our excitement quickly turned to grief when he was stillborn. The loss of a child that you had carried for nine months who was perfectly healthy until the moment he came into this world, completely rattled my mother and her mental health. In an effort to help heal her heart, she wanted to turn a traumatic situation into a positive one. We had a baby room set up and filled with little boy's toys, clothes and newborn gadgets. My parents decided to apply to become foster parents and love on someone else's little one until they could be reunited with their birth parents. Shortly after completing foster care training and earning licensure, my mom received a call in the middle of the night asking her to take in three siblings. She hesitated at first. She wasn't sure she could handle three siblings and then myself, and she was a bit confused because they had agreed to foster children 0-12 months. The siblings' ages were: thirteen months, three years old and eight years old. Could they provide for three children? She wasn't prepared with clothes, shoes and beds for three children but she said yes anyways. The siblings showed up just a few hours later with nothing but their pajamas on their back. The older boys stayed with our family for three months, their emotional and physical needs required them to be placed in separate homes where they could be cared for individually. The baby sister stayed with us for two years, and even at a young age I was able to pick up on how her traumatic

experiences had impacted her social and emotional needs. She would pull her hair out when she became frustrated and would try to hurt herself when she was told to stop a behavior or that she couldn't have something she wanted. My parents were able to keep her and provide care for her until she was adopted. However, even with a loving mother like mine and supportive father, her mental health was a deciding factor that turned many prospective families away. She was eventually adopted and stayed in the same county that we lived in, so we were able to stay in touch and watch her grow up. I wasn't aware of ACEs at the time, but as we watched her grow up (and even during the two years she was in our home), we knew that her experiences in those thirteen months before she came to live with us played a large role in how she perceived and navigated her emotions and the world around her. Early on, she was diagnosed with developmental challenges and my mom was told that she would likely never be able to communicate. At the time, there was little work being done around trauma exposure and mental health in our community. Looking back, many of her outbursts were a result of being triggered and if we would have had the proper tools and the knowledge of trauma-informed care (and known what experiences she might have been through), could we have helped her work through those and seeked professional therapeutic help?

The number one reason children are pulled from their homes is abuse or neglect followed by behavior issues, lack of parental care due to an illness or death, or disability (American Society for the Positive Care of Children, 2018). This immediate uproot and trauma can lead to a unique set of emotional, social, and academic issues for the child that unfortunately last into their adult lives. Their family circumstances and adverse childhood experiences cause multiple issues in the primary and secondary academic years but make transitioning into higher education or adulthood even harder because of their lack of family

support, lack of financial assistance, poor life skills, and unstable housing. Education and academic achievement are directly correlated with easier life circumstances including job stability, physical and mental health, and social integration.

The lived experiences that I accumulated as I watched my foster sibling grow up inside and outside of our home was the initial spark that drove my research project. It continued to be fueled as I entered my professional career as an educator and saw first-hand how my students were impacted by adverse childhood experiences. My personal experiences and identities as a White child from a farming family who believed in meritocracy, as a woman teacher, and as a foster family all relate to my role as a doctoral researcher and scholar as I embark on dismantling the discourses created by systems and policies that construct children, families, and communities as both the 'cause of' and the 'solution' to complex social problems.

My lived experiences and identity markers do not exist independently of each other. Each plays a role in the ways in which I view and navigate the world around me, as well as how others view me. I hold myself accountable for my privilege and I seek insights from mentors who also hold me accountable, as I undo research and teaching habits that are grounded in settler colonial White supremacy, and as I continue to (re)produce my own knowledge and modes of thinking. I recognize and acknowledge that my lived experiences and viewpoints as a White woman impede me from fully understanding the lived experiences of my students. As I enact my own refusal, I have chosen to not share their first-hand stories of pain by interviewing participants for this project. Instead, I will dismantle systems of power and oppression based on my *own* experiences working as an educator within various systems. I do not claim that my experiences are more valuable than my students or that my

voice is the only one that should be heard, but instead I will attempt to undo and re(learn) as I analyze the experiences that I witnessed. As I examine the discourses surrounding ACEs and damaged-centered policies and practices, I must recognize that my research is connected to my *own* unsettling and undoing.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

Education, like the institutions and societies it derives from, is neither culturally neutral nor fair. Rather, education is a culturally and socially constructed institution for an imagined context with purposes defined by those who are privileged to be the deciders, and their work has not always been for the benefit of the masses [understatement]. Education has its roots in a patriarchal, Eurocentric society, complicit with multiple forms of oppression… (Batiste, 2013, p. 159).

Labeling Youth

Spending any time in a public school system in the United States offers a realization that the entire K-12 system solely operates on coding and labeling structures. Prior to students even walking through their Kindergarten classroom doors, they are screened against a set of *normal standards* to identify where they land on the developmental charts. The purpose of these screenings is to identify if the child is developmentally ready for Kindergarten and what additional support structures may be needed. Students are screened against progression charts for communication skills, cognitive skills, fine motor skills, ability to interact socially with peers and adults, independent functioning skills, vision, and hearing. Before all of those proud parents snap countless photos of their child in the front yard with their pigtails and over-sized backpacks, holding a chalkboard "*My First Day of Kindergarten*" sign, we've tagged them with the amount of additional support that is required to catch up with their peers who are proficient. Sadly, these identifying markers of weaknesses don't stop at the elementary schoolhouse doors but continue throughout their entire academic career.

Deficit perspective has become a popular topic at many professional development conferences for educators, and how this way of thinking and talking with and about students

is grounded in our perception of the student's weaknesses instead of their strengths. When an educator uses this language and holds these perspectives as a way to communicate with their students, it corrupts the expectations that are set for students and prevents educators from seeing and valuing their talents (Ford & Grantham, 2003). The labels that we stick to our children become instilled in their daily lives. These labels eventually define who they are as a child, how others perceive them, and how they value themselves. Labels often define who they'll *become*. Sadly, labels don't end there. As these students age and move from elementary to middle school if they don't fit the *well-behaved* mold, or if they don't have the proper support structure at home then more labels are attached. Labels rapidly add up over the course of a child's academic career and with each label comes another damaging consequence. In a school setting, you will often hear labels like "*at-risk,*" delinquent, neglected, troubled, disadvantaged, and unmotivated. Even more concerning, educators toss around phrases such as "the-school-to-prison-pipeline" (Kim et al., 2010) without thinking about how these words further oppress and stigmatize students. The dominant narrative surrounding "*at-risk"* students is that they are more difficult to educate, self-destructive, lack interest in their academics, truant, disconnected, and disruptive.

These labels are constructed through social norms and depict students from low-socioeconomic neighborhoods or homes of single (or incarcerated) parents as less than or troublesome. This deficit framework is a byproduct of imperialism, an instrument used to socialize citizens and to accept a variety of oppressions including educational inequities (Shields et al., 2005). This game of victim-blaming casts a large shadow on entire communities and groups of people based on a single identity marker. Students are divided up and labeled based on their assumed psychological abilities, academic skills, and cultural

deficits (Ferri & Connor, 2005). This ideology operates under the assumption that inequalities are a result of behavioral, moral, and cultural differences in deprived communities instead of being the result of systemic racism and unfair social systems (Brandon, 2003). These stereotypes paint a picture that those in poverty don't value education and are unmotivated to work their way out of their circumstances. Research, however, tells a different story. Rank (2004) refers to copious amounts of research that show individuals in poverty are no less likely to value education and no more likely to abuse illegal substances compared to wealthier individuals. The author uses labeling as a way to distinguish between us vs. them. The *Us* is the nine to five blue-collar workers who follow rules, abide by laws and social structure, and are morally decent. *Them* are the carefree, lazy, criminals, who don't hold true to ethics or morals. These binaries continue to marginalize and exclude people of Color, women, low socioeconomic families and treat them as unworthy and undeserving (Gorski, 2008).

Transgender youth are not victims of gender identity; they experience judgment and criticism and are marked as outsiders or *others*. Autistic youth are not victims of autism; they struggle with communicating their social and emotional needs and thrive in a routine environment. This act of "othering until fixed" seems to be a comfortable and convenient way for youth organizations, schools, medical facilities, and district courts to label and separate youth while supervising them. It is important as educators and leaders that we think critically about the power structures that influence our policies and procedures, and deconstruct the convoluted stereotypes that drive our daily educational practices (Annamma et al., 2012). By pursuing this topic and deconstructing the discourses around labeling and coding youth, I will interweave my subjectivities as an educator and researcher. My intention

is to dismantle the systems of power that stigmatize our youth and open up the door for a mindset shift with asset-based policies and practices.

It does not escape me that my research is focused on the discourses surrounding students with *high ACEs*, and that the ACE model can be viewed and used as an act of labeling itself. The original model is solely focused on a set of ten childhood incidents that are directly related to adversity; it does not take into account many traumatic experiences that youth from urban areas may experience such as racism and poverty. Throughout my work, I will be intentional in using a peripheral lens that harnesses *resilience* from both ends of the spectrum, negative and positive outcomes. It is important to be reflective on how language can create a shift in action. How we perceive our world is grounded in language and the words we use to describe experiences. To ask someone to take an ACE survey, distills their lived experiences into a number, and that number not only can be used as a label but it doesn't fully take all aspects of their experiences into account.

Understanding ACEs

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, originally conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente from 1995-1997, is one of the largest tools used to analyze childhood traumas and spotlight their connection to physical and mental health in adulthood. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events occurring between 0 to 17 years and include but are not limited to: having a loved one attempt or succeed at suicide, witnessing a violent act or acts, experiencing abuse or neglect, having a household member in jail or prison, substance abuse, or mental health issues. Sadly, ACEs are very common with over 61% of adults in 25 states experiencing at least one ACE and 17% of American adults reporting four or more ACEs (Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention [CDC], 2020). The consequences of ACEs not only have negative effects but tend to last for a lifetime and can increase the risk of mental health issues, STDs, teen pregnancy, chronic diseases, suicide, and death from cancer, diabetes, or heart conditions. The greater the score on the ACEs test, the greater the likelihood of health problems as an adult (CDC, 2021). Dr. Vicinent Felitti, one of the most prominent researchers on this topic, suggests that ACEs are "the leading determinant of the health and social well-being of the nation, and the major factor underlying addictions" (Karatekin, 2017, p. 36). ACEs researchers are not looking to blame a parent or guardian for the trauma youth were exposed to, but hope to use this information in health care facilities as a tool for understanding emotional and physiological change. Unfortunately, this isn't a one size fits all problem and can't be analyzed from only an individual level since ACEs can be hereditary and multi-generational (Kinner et al., 2017).

Childhood adversity can have significant short- and long-term impacts for youth; it also raises questions about how ACEs affect the development of the brain, and what healthcare professionals and early childhood educators can do to help promote resilience. Resiliency -- the capacity to quickly overcome or "bounce back" -- can be developed in childhood by harvesting protective factors (Luthar, 2006). Luther points out that there are three core protective systems that aid in a child overcoming adversity: a person's individual capacities and capabilities, having caring and positive people in their lives that they can bond with, and a protective community and environment. Together these protective systems provide opportunities and support for reducing ACEs in future generations and with the primary goal of eradicating complications from ACEs (Narayan et al., 2021). Early childhood educators have the opportunity (and are in a unique position) to recognize and

soften the impact of ACEs through quality childcare and emotionally responsive interactions. Simply providing basic needs such as quality nutrition, a safe and loving environment, routine and structure, physical activity and peer interaction, and exposure to stimulating play are essential to the promotion and development of the brain and emotions. Childhood trauma, neglect, and maltreatment, however, cause disruption in emotional regulation, high levels of cortisol and disturbances in the central stress response systems (Tarullo & Gunner, 2006). Experiencing neglect or other forms of early life adversity -- witnessing violence on a family member, substance abuse, living in poverty -- all have systemic impacts on a child's biology and can alter the brain pathways as well as change how they view and interact with their world. Bruce McEwen (2012) said "We can't reverse the biological embedding of early adversity, but we might be able to redirect it" (p. 17812).

All levels of the educational sector are an important piece to the third protective system, *community.* ACE studies are contributing to the creation of programs and policies that address and prevent ACEs within the community and within our societal systems. Mortensen and Barnett (2006) suggest that "enhanced teacher training, integration of a trauma-informed-perspective of care, structuring child case as a community of support for parents, and supporting policies that encourage collaboration across systems can better position child care within a coordinated network of settings and professionals" (p. 77). By enacting a community approach to maltreatment, it offers an opportunity to reach, serve, and support a wide range of children and families and not only those who are in the child welfare system. Administrators and educators can buffer the impact of ACEs by increasing the awareness of ACEs' impact on the developing brain and the long-term health impacts through enhanced community efforts and reform. While the ACEs model has helped us to

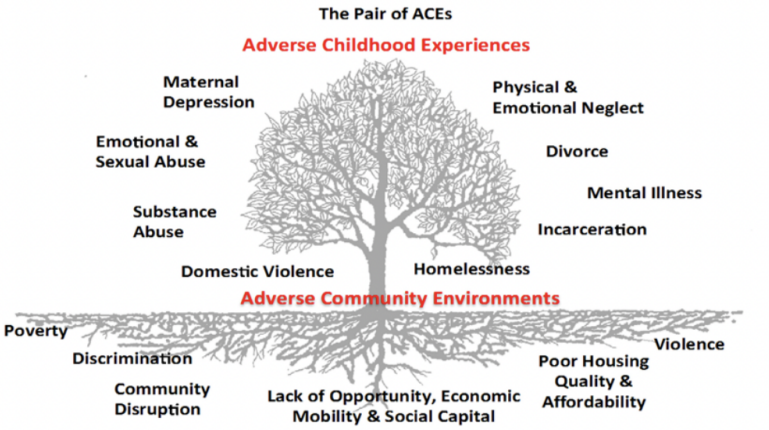
discover the long-term effects of trauma on health and social well-being, it is not without its criticisms, leaving out the link between racial trauma and systemic forms of oppression created by institutions.

The landmark 1998 Kaiser-Permanente ACE model depicts factors of trauma exposure and how these experiences are connected with poor health outcomes. The model examines the implications of childhood abuse and neglect, household substance abuse, mental illness, parental separation and household violence and criminality. Despite clear evidence that poverty and racism are major life stressors for children, the ACE model neglects to include the influence of economic hardship and race on cognitive development and health. Researchers criticize the model might lead to important socioeconomic conditions and factors left unnoticed -- creating a major blindspot in ACEs research (Taylor-Robinson et al., 2018). Childhood maltreatment had been directly linked to economic factors with unemployment and living in poverty being the main connection point (Doidge et al., 2017). There is a direct correlation between ACE scores and socioeconomic disadvantage (Marryat & Frank, 2019), but does previous research attempt to explain ACEs with childhood socioeconomic conditions in mind? Economic redistribution is disregarded in the ACEs model. As a science teacher, this would be similar to me teaching about climate change and increasing atmospheric temperatures but not mentioning the destruction of our global forests and tree cover loss; these issues are directly linked and should be addressed within the model.

An image titled “Pair of ACEs” created by Building Community Resilience was developed in order to combat the need for addressing the missing link between childhood adversity and adversity within the community.

Figure 1

The Pair of ACEs



Ellis, W., Dietz, W. (2017) A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model. Academic Pediatrics. 17 (2017) pp. S86-S93. DOI information: 10.1016/j.acap.2016.12.011

In the "Pair of ACEs" illustration, the tree canopy represents the characteristics of ACEs that are typically picked up on by a health care worker, educator or social worker. Although the tree's branches and leaves take up a bit of surface area and are extremely important to its ability to thrive, most of the tree's nutrients and stability are impacted by its large root structures. When a tree is planted in inadequate soil that is inundated with systemic inequities and oppression, it is deprived of necessary nutrients that support a growing and thriving habitat. It is easy to see through this depiction that the effects of institutional and systemic oppression including, living in unsafe housing, community violence, limited access to geographic or economic mobility and poor health care, increase the risk to ACE exposure and limit a child's full potential to thrive (Ellis & Dietz, 2017).

New research is beginning to focus on racial disparities that are intertwined with adverse childhood experiences and traumatic exposure, improving the health and development of our racially segregated communities. ACEs focuses directly on a set of indicators and responses surrounding specific incidents in childhood but only nicks the

wounds' surface when we look at the influences and relevance of racial discrimination on a child's development. Racism is omnipresent in our society, often taking on the form of discrimination. According to Jones (1972), racism is "the exercise of power against a racial group defined as inferior by individuals and institutions with the intentional or unintentional support of an entire culture" whereas racial discrimination is "behaviors and practices of racism that enact and reinforce the beleif that one racial group is superior over another" (p. 117). ACE research continues to contribute to the understanding of the multiple challenges children may endure, however, many of the solutions to these challenges --specifically those that are related to racial and economic disparity -- surpass the discourse around ACEs. An adapted model presented by Bernard et al. (2020) titled "C-ACE" (culturally-informed adverse childhood experiences) takes a culturally informed approach to recognizing and understanding the intergenerational effects of racial trauma on youth and considers it to be a risk factor for ACE exposure. Young children are unable to achieve the equity of opportunity if explicit attention is not directed towards the interwoven societal challenges of poverty, adversity and race (Bruner, 2017). Adverse social conditions molded and sustained by historical and institutional systemic oppression affect and amplify a child's pre-existing vulnerabilities and disturb the cognitive and behavioral development pathways (Harris et al. 2010); positioning youth from low-income neighborhoods and communities of Color to be increasingly susceptible to ACEs and health implications.

In education, there is very little emphasis on the impact of environmental conditions on a child's development. Instead, policy focuses on intervening the behaviors and complications that come to the surface due to trauma exposure and does not address the complex societal and environmental issues from which they arise. Creating and insisting that

labels be used to identify and code youth, in order to "intervene", is driven by social policy and often incentivized by reimbursements (e.g., mental health services and special education interventions). These interventions are seen as a quick fix solution to bring the student up to par with their "normal" peers but fail to consider these colonizing educational practices as oppressive and deficit-based. To account for these adverse childhood experiences and the larger context of societal oppression and inequities, I will utilize decolonizing theory to dismantle the systems of power and policies that position our youth as defective and unworthy, amplifying trauma exposure.

Theoretical Framework: A Tale of Two Theories

The framework for this project is a coupling of postcolonial and decolonizing theories. Specifically, I will analyze the ways in which knowledge and educational policies are deeply embedded in the strata of imperial and settler-colonial practices. Nayer (2010) defines postcolonialism as "the academic, intellectual, ideological and ideational scaffolding of the condition of decolonization" (p. 1). Decolonization is the process of locating, analyzing, and deconstructing colonial systems and structures of power (Smith, 2012). It refers to an array of strategies to aid us in thinking about our present as an independent body, an imperative step for epistemic reconstitution (Nigam, 2020). The theory originated from political activism in Asia, South America, and Africa, and further developed into a framework for academic practices. Edward Said, a literature professor at Columbia University and a key founder of postcolonial studies, was a critic of culture and authored *Orientalism* (Said, 1978). His book is believed to be the flame that ignited the fire for postcolonial studies as a discipline and as a theory. Edward Said centralizes his concern with the relationship between language, politics, and power. Said uses the term *Orient* to denote a

system of depiction bounded by political pressure to create a hostile image of Eastern cultures and view them as frail and depraved. Orientalism, as a theory, is described as the stories and experiences about the Orient by settlers who aimed to conquer and control the narrative and the people. Said defines Orientalism as "a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, the Western Empire" (Said, 1978, pp. 202-203). Through the discourse of orientalism, Eastern identity was ultimately subjugated and orientated to be something *othered*. Said's work influenced the first generation of postcolonial studies by identifying Orientalism as a power dynamic used to dominate and control anyone who wasn't European. Later studies used a Saidian framework that had a strong focus on colonial discourse, colonial domination, stigmas and stereotypes of native cultures, and how languages and stories are told in colonial cultural contexts (Nayer, 2010).

Many publications credit *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) as the epi-center of postcolonial theory, but it is important to note its evolution occurred during a poststructuralist era. This era was marked by French philosopher, Michael Foucault, and his theories of power relations as a form of social control. Edward Said created a path for postcolonial studies but his work references Fouauldian paradigms as he launched an attack on how the Western world constructed the Orient as the "other" (Nayer, 2010). The reader cannot understand Said's arguments and ideas without first understanding Foucault's concept of discourse and power relations. For Foucault, discourse is not about the language and who is speaking the language but rather a *way* of thinking and talking. Discourse constructs the codes that dominate our society and limit our perceptions. These perceptions and representations are produced by

systems of power. Said emphasized that even though colonialism has ended, colonial systems of thought and power relations still exist.

Tuck and Yang both write about the importance of extracting the true meaning behind decolonization and argue that it is often associated with *settler innocence* --a position that settlers take which frees them of their responsibility in colonizing Native American land and communities. Tuck and Yang also caution against the popular move of settler innocence that heavily relies on the notion of "decolonizing your mind, thinking or knowledge" (p. 19). Though settler innocence may be a powerful tool for critical consciousness, and it may aid us in crafting curriculum, educational literature, and pedagogy, it cannot be utilized as the only tool of decolonization. Tuck and Yang emphasize that "until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism" (p. 19). Decolonization isn't an across-the-board term that captures any social justice movement, it is alive and active and aims to secure Indigenous futurity and sovereignty. It requires that all parts of society be deconstructed and calls for the demise of the persistent power structures that uphold oppression. Decolonization calls for society to face our challenges head-on and to discontinue admiring Western philosophers and theorists, expecting them to save us with their colonizing frameworks. Decolonization is grounded in interdependence and challenges us to realize our existence is embedded in our roots and relationships within our communities. We can only accept this challenge when we are open to reference other social and political theories other than those of Western descent; we must think across traditions and generations to locate the pristine source of knowledge. From a global perspective, decolonization has gained momentum in educational research over the last decade. However,

its long-standing history is much harder to label and define within a chronological margin compared to other theories.

Decolonization seeks to dismantle colonialism. Colonialism is the process by which a nation dominates another territory, a situation that leads to the subjugation of the territory's people. Colonialism, like imperialism, leads to political, social, and economic control over a territory. This typically involves the transfer of a population to this new land or territory where the population became permanent settlers while remaining politically loyal to their home country. Imperialism refers to the manner and way in which one country utilizes its power over another including settlement, sovereignty, and political and economic control (Young, 2001). Settler colonialism, unlike colonization which focuses on natural resources, goods, and humans, is built on the foundation of owning land (Wolf, 1999). The land is essential to life, and settler colonialism sought to acquire this ownership and split it with only a few. This logic is completely transposed when compared to how Indigenous cultures view the land which involves linkage to the land through their ancestors, a source of life and living, and a teacher of spiritual traditions (Smith, 2012). Settler colonialism quickly delineates which lands are worth desiring and which people are capable of owning land based on their worth. The land is considered a finite resource which means those that have it are wealthy, and this act of seeing the world around you as property only continues as settlers view other entities as wealth (Patel, 2016).

Settler colonialism oppressed Indigenous peoples by stealing their properties and taking over their communities, ways of life, their bodies, their cultures, and their minds. Colonialism not only encompasses our relationship to land and ownership, politics, and economics, but also consciousness. A central notion of oppressing the native people was to

dehumanize them and attempt to belittle and destroy their culture (Fairchild, 1994). Settlers achieved this by using language that viewed native populations as savage while giving them the same rights as animals. They destroyed their originalities, distinct identities, and sense of self. Settlers wrote about Indigenous people using the term "uncivilized" when compared to the Europeans' superior culture and biology. This led to the "civilized mission" where settlers took action to *save* the uncivilized from their own way of life operating on the foundation of colonialism and imperialism (Paris, 2002). A colonized mind desires Whiteness and preferences, values and behaviors derived from Western Europe, and finds anything from the non-West as repulsive or at the very least, inferior. Colonial education aimed to make the colonized reject their own cultures and belittle it. Native American children who were pulled from their tribes and forced to attend residential schools that operated under "kill the indian, save the man" discourse and forced the children into assimilation where they were forced to abandon their native language and cultural practices. The depreciation of anything non-White took off like wildfire in colonized nations all around the world, resulting in discourse where people viewed anything stemming from Western culture as superior. Settler colonialism set a standard for creating educational spaces for particular groups of people at the exclusion of others, essentially taking ownership of knowledge and spaces for learning.

Although education is often used as a bridge to level the playing field, in historical practice it has solely functioned as one of the primary starting points of societal stratification and the production of social inequality (Anyon, 1980). Education is not only a channel for capital distribution, it represents property, specifically *White* property. Property became conceptualized, codified, and protected for land-owning, elite White men. White property

became a protected resource, creating a societal structure that operated under a larger colonial endeavor. The United States, guided by its public cry for meritocracy, social mobility, and economic justice, is a nation that was originally founded in settler colonialism (Byrd, 2011). Tuck and Yang (2012) describe settler colonialism as a continuous process consisting of three dependent components. The first component was to seize the land, natural resources, and cultures of a desired location. This began with land grabs in the 14th century and continued into the 20th century, the United States was founded by outsiders claiming land and natural resources as their own. In order for these land grabs to be sustainable, the people and communities who make up these lands must be eliminated. The second component of settler colonialism was genocide. Veracini (2010) said, "settler colonialism is not colonialism: settlers want Indigenous people to vanish (but can make use of their labor before they are made to disappear)" (p. 15). The third and last component of settler colonialism, directly linked to White supremacy, is the importation of slave labor. During the events of the European invasion, Africans were captured and transported into slavery then forced into no-wage labor in the fields and homes of the elite. Pieces of this logic still occur in today's society in prison complexes and migrant communities, it is through economic stratification and sequestering that land and property rights remain reserved for elite populations. The United States, with an economy based on chattel, requires populations of Color to act as both property and laborers but not property owners. Property rights of White settlers are preserved in the United States by combining settler colonialism with racism. In 1782, Thomas Jefferson solidified the social construct of race saying, "I advance it, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the White in endowments of both body and mind" (Wynter, 2003). Jefferson's

words were not the first to claim racial superiority of Whites, but it was a tipping point for codification of race and the explanation of racial and economic stratification (Wynter, 2003). Jefferson's actions normalized the belief that Whites were more intelligent, and more human, compared to populations of Color. This discourse became ingrained in histories and stories of populations of Color positioning them as weak and in need of support. This deep sense of entitlement is echoed in educational spaces, deciding *who* gets to seek knowledge and what *knowledge* is taught, reaffirming White supremacy. Opportunity for education is controlled by the dominant race, yet, education is used and displayed as a way to escape societal oppression.

This logic has long impacted our nation. Like the deep-seated beliefs of my own farming family, Americans chase after *The Dream* which corresponds to having a career that allows you to purchase your own home. Tied to that home is the land on which it is built. The settler-colonial structure shaped the American Dream as well as our relationship to the land, our relationship to our neighbors, and how we acquire knowledge. We attribute our education status to our earning potential; it deteriorates the act of learning and creates a dynamic where the learner is seen as a subject of the state and how well they will perform in society (Spring, 2008). When students are brought up to believe that the privileges they enjoy are due to their hard work ethic and inherent superiority and that the opposite is true for those from lower socio-economic status, the colonial logic is echoed through entitlement and disdain. The privileged then embark on the mentality of "*Well, I worked hard for this -- maybe you should work hard, too*" creating limited spaces and low self-worth for those with lower societal status. This colonization of the mind places the responsibility on the individual for their life choices and circumstances, instead of the system of power that sustains systemic oppression.

Colonial power is sustained by implanting thoughts in the mind to make them believe false narratives about themselves and their people, "the greatest weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (Wilson, 2011, p. 152).

Related to this study, the discourse about youth who have experienced traumas of all kinds has the power to shape their experiences and opportunities into feelings of unworthiness and positions them as lacking the capacity to be successful. The discourse of "*at-risk*" youth speaks to the structural and institutional barriers that are created by an oppressive system of power; youth are socialized into the ideology of power through social and educational dynamics grounded in deficit-thinking. Despite the growing trend for classrooms and educators to operate with critical consciousness, there is no disruption of the policies and practices that reinforce the status quo. Teacher education programs may be shifting to support social justice, but institutional and structural components are ultimately decided by those who hold the power in education. Policy and decision makers, shaped by colonial mentality, control the narrative with their deep investments of White supremacy and cultural inferiority (David, 2013).

As I move through my research, I will develop a position that uses the phrases *decolonizing the mind* and *decolonizing discourse* as pieces of a broader picture, where they can both be utilized and understood as a couple instead of in competition with each other. *Decolonizing the mind* refers to dismantling the thoughts and values that were born from colonialism. Decolonizing the mind is easier said than done given the fact that the colonial thread is woven into every fabric of society and internalized in the minds of both the colonized and colonizer. Breaking down the colonial mind would mean resisting the colonial educational system and deconstructing the binaries that are deeply embedded in our daily

lives. This requires constant intention and questioning where our thoughts and knowledge was derived from as well as our biases. Decolonizing the mind begins with recognizing the value of non-Western thought and cultures; dismantling centuries of White supremacy can be challenging, and it will take more than passive awareness to do so. I will emphasize the significance and importance of language in our society, by showcasing the underlying threads that link decolonizing the mind and decolonization discourse and try to position them in close proximity to each other without minimizing the differences. While it is important to distinguish and nuance the two, they are positioned toward liberation and agree on the need to resist colonial domination. By understanding the structures and frameworks of settler colonialism, it is easier to analyze and identify how deeply rooted it is within our societal systems including educational research, policy, and practice.

The language that continues to be used in education risks positioning students and their challenges in ways that blame and vilify them and their families, instead of the social conditions beyond their control. This language is a reflection of the philosophies that guide policies and practices that construct how children are viewed and identified, as well as the school's response to intervene and "fix" them. According to Janzen and Schwartz (2018), "regulating, rejecting, or attempting to 'remedy' some children's identities, misbehaviors, and ways of being in the world, makes attending to power within schools an ethical issue" (p. 120). As I move through this research project, I am intentional about how I view and speak about my experiences with my students. I refuse to engage in discourses where populations are constructed to be both the "cause" and "solution" to complex social problems and injustices.

Making Sense of Our *Own* World

Many of us have experienced adversity in our younger lives and it has a lasting impact on our physical and emotional health, as well as shaped us into the person we are today. In her book, *What Happened to You?,* Oprah Winfrey and brain development and trauma expert, Dr. Bruce Perry, embark on an assemblage of personal stories and brain research that shifts discourse about people who have survived trauma from "*what's wrong with you?*" to "*what happened to you?*". Though subtle, it is a shifting force that profoundly changes how we view trauma, encouraging everyone to understand their own past as well as past experiences of others, clearing a path for the future, opening the door to healing in a powerful way (Winfrey & Perry, 2021). In other words, to truly understand someone and how they interact with their world, it is important to understand what is happening in the brain, and we do so by asking "*what happened to you*?"

Winfrey and Perry (2021) outline that our personal histories, our intergenerational histories, and our collective experiences all play an integral role in how our brains develop. More than fifty million children have experienced trauma and adversity, but that also means there are adults navigating their worlds daily with brains and nervous systems that have been shaped by trauma. Winfrey and Perry (2021) describe the impacts of trauma on the brain and behavior as dysregulation. Dysregulation, also referred to as emotional dysregulation, is the inability of a person to manage and regulate their emotional response to stimuli (Keeshin et al., 2021). This dysregulation plays a role in the workplace, interactions with peers, relationships, and all aspect of life. Many adults may not even realize that they're dysregulated or that their lived experiences have impacted their interactions with the world; dysregulated adults may also not recognize that what happened to them wasn't "normal."

This is particularly important as we think about parenting, teaching, practicing medicine, and in other careers where adults are responsible for children. In trauma-informed care, we frequently communicate about how the actions of parents and caregivers influence a child's development and how those actions are vital to ensuring a child's emotional regulation. However, it is also important to remember that those parents and caregivers were once children themselves, and also influenced by *their* caregivers. "A dysregulated adult can't regulate a child who is dysregulated, in-fact an adult who is anxious, frustrated, and exhausted can't regulate anyone" (Winfrey & Perry, 2021, p. 55).

Another important component of dysregulation and trauma that Winfrey and Perry outline is its ability to be inherited and passed down through generations. Our genetics, family, community, culture, and society are influential pieces of the puzzle that answer the question "*what happened to you?*" To make intentional change at the individual level and at the societal level, it is important for us to understand *what* we inherit and *how* we inherit it. Trauma is transmissible, a biological and emotional contagion. In her book, Oprah Winfrey speaks about how she "caught" her grandmother's fear and carried it with her into her generation, changing her on a cellular level, creating fear every night when she went to sleep. Winfrey and Perry (2021) make this intergenerational transmission of the fear and alert system of the brain to the effects of slavery on present-day African Americans. They point out that the brains and bodies of African Americans have internalized the trauma of segregation, racism, cruelty, and terror over the last four-hundred years, and it has been repeated over and over at the individual micro-level, eventually saturating the macro-level of society (Winfrey & Perry, 2021). The trauma that now resides in the bodies of so many African Americans has been handed down through generations of enslavement and torture.

Resmaa Menakem (2017) states “throughout the United States’ history as a nation, White bodies have colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered Black and Native ones. But well before the United States began, powerful White bodies, colonized, oppressed, brutalized, and murdered other, less powerful White ones” (p. 74).

Colonizers and settlers came to America to escape the brutal conditions in Europe, fleeing years of famine, plague, and crusades. With them they brought their resilience, but they also brought their trauma and trauma responses and continued the cycle of imposing trauma upon others. The “New World” utilized punishments that were common in England, including branding, cutting off body parts, and placing people in stocks with ropes around their necks. Puritans routinely murdered and hung other Puritans who were disobedient or who were thought to be guilty of witchery (Painter, 2010). This “New World” was fueled by cruelty, torture, murder, and oppression and up until the second half of the seventeenth century, these traumas were imposed *by* White bodies *on* White bodies. This trauma became embedded in our DNA. Wealthy and powerful Europeans began to refocus their acts of violence in the 1600s through laws on Black bodies and institutions. White immigrants began to work with enslaved Native and Black people on plantations that were owned and operated by powerful White men. In response to revolts by Black and White plantation workers and in order for the powerful White landowners to maintain their power and supremacy, they gave White workers small acreages of stolen Native land to work. This created an invested class of White peasants, giving them privileges and leadership positions on the plantation, while forbidding Black bodies from owning land. This became fertile ground for entitlement and created an invasive system for viewing the White body as supreme (Menakem, 2017). Racism was being taught given that racism is learned; it is a set of beliefs that positions

White people as more superior than people of Color, and in practice it is about power, domination, dehumanization, and oppression (Winfrey & Perry, 2021). The powerful White elite created formal structures and institutions to reinforce supremacy, and what had originally existed as White-on-White (or White powerful -on- White less powerful) trauma was transitioned into White-on-Black and White-on- "Red" trauma (Menakem, 2017). The beliefs that we hold about each other, and the way that we speak about each other (the good and the bad) are passed down through generations through lived experiences. The centuries of brutalization have created and maintained trauma that has yet to be healed among Americans today. We need to be conscious of the ways in which every aspect of our world can influence us in powerful (often unknown) ways. White people aren't inherently bad, we are humans, and we are born into a society that is conditioned by a toxic culture of Whiteness (Menakem, 2017). Generational transmission of trauma, racialized trauma, and racism can be dismantled and disrupted.

As I grapple with my own generational traumas and begin my own process of healing, I know that I am a person weighted by my ancestors' assimilation and my social inheritance of this culture. This culture plants seeds of bias within me, it affords me privileges based on my skin color and socio-economic status, it often numbs me from others' realities because they are different than my own, and it obscures the histories of others. I know that my learning and unlearning begins within my own brain and body. The concept of healing our society from White supremacy is early in its infancy; it is difficult to dismantle because most of our societal pillars are held up by tenets of White supremacy and racial capitalism. The American Dream is one of these tenets and is the idea that upward social mobility is attainable for all as long as you "pull up your bootstraps" and work hard enough,

claiming that any success is reachable if you put forth the effort. This dream exists on the notion that individual responsibility is a core American value (Churchwell, 2018). With the American Dream comes the bootstrap myth. The bootstrap myth- "just pull yourself up by your bootstraps" is a claim that anyone in the United States can succeed, can pull themselves out of poverty, can make it if they only work hard enough. The American Dream and the bootstrap myth ignores deeply entrenched societal factors such as discrimination and poverty that cause and maintain such disparities.

The bootstrap myth should be considered a response to trauma that resulted from the escape from brutal conditions in Europe and a rugged grit to survive in The New World. It has left a lasting and intergenerational print on American discourse and on people across racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic status. Ultimately, the "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" is a fallacy and a trauma in and of itself, buying into this American narrative that many can never successfully obtain. Though a small handful of empirical outliers will achieve social mobility, the socioeconomic status that a person is born into is the one where most remain. Systemic poverty and lack of access and opportunity play a role for people across racial groups. And hundreds of years of institutional racism create difficult conditions for Black people and communities of Color, and they are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic classes. (Churchwell, 2018). The bootstrap fallacy names them as both the *cause* of their poverty and the *solution*.

American Education and Colonial Ideologies

When students are marginalized, negatively labeled and coded, excluded, and subjugated by normativity, they often experience social injustice through the ways that oppression has been institutionalized within education (Mirci & Hensley, 2011). In the

United States, millions of children are living in extreme poverty, and in North Carolina one out of every five children (under age five) are considered poor (Nichol, 2018). Further, according to Nichol, race concentrates childhood poverty and it has become an American epidemic that is an unfortunate self-inflicted wound. Education in the United States is seen as a path for success, to avoid lifelong hardships and social inequities. Even though newer studies have shown that there are many other contributing factors to one's social and economic stability (Roberts, 2008), education remains the golden ticket. The belief that education levels the playing field and provides equal opportunity for all, is deeply rooted in our governmental policies, procedures, and actions. In fact, inequity in education is so apparent that we have labeled it as an achievement gap, which signifies the variation on measures of educational performance among groups of students -- the gap between White students and students of Color (Patel, 2016) and the gap between low-income and middle- or upper-income students (reardon, 2013). According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, over 40% of the variation in reading scores and almost half the variation in math scores are directly associated with childhood poverty rates (Ladd & Fiske, 2011). Educational researchers have spent years studying this gap; however, the gap still exists and doesn't seem to be improving. reardon (2013) traced the gap between children from high and low-income families throughout the last fifty years and found that it is overpowering and growing, now far exceeding the gap between White and African American students. It is now twice as large as the gap between races, and is referred to as the "zip code" standard (Nichol, 2018). There is a significant rise in the pursuit of researching "*at-risk*" and marginalized youth with policies like the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, as well as data-driven decision-making at the local level. However, these policies view

these populations as broken and in need of fixing, which has long-lasting impacts on their social and emotional health. Will the benefits of the research outweigh the cost? How do these gaps and the discourses about these gaps, continue the legacy of colonization?

The achievement gap seems to be the lead conversation of many educational policy meetings and professional development seminars, yet few people question its meaning or why it is important. In her 2006 Presidential address of the American Educational Research Association, Gloria Ladson-Billings encouraged academic researchers to shift our view and called on us to refer to the achievement gap as an *educational gap* instead. A gap can occur and can be filled without necessarily fixing the conditions that originally created the gap. A debt is owed, and sparks questions of who is owed and who needs to pay out. Ladson-Billings changes this single word to encourage academic researchers to increase and enhance the ways in which educational disparities are constructed and viewed (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In the current educational system, a student's achievement is measured by their performance on annual standardized tests. This is only a small sliver of the pie and does not look at the entire picture, devaluing a student's worth and success.

Students who meet the achievement standards are typically White, middle-class youth. If we look at these same achievement scores through a debt lens and add context to factors at play including their socioeconomic status, ACE score, and even political and colonial perspectives, a different picture is painted. When we look at the histories of oppressed peoples and how their socioeconomic and sociopolitical status create barriers to education, it is evident that test scores only represent one layer of our nation's education debt. These disparities are only a symptom of a larger disease that is wreaking havoc on the American education system (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). Using the term "gap" makes

sense if educational researchers were looking for a single cause-and-effect relationship and then coming up with a solution to rectify the issue. Over the years, social science has singularly focused on one factor and then utilized federal grants and policy structures that not only labeled these frameworks but reinforced and rewarded dysfunction (Lagemann, 2002). Deficit-based frameworks further systemize and structure inequity. These practices accumulate and add up over centuries and only further stigmatize and belittle communities of Color and low-income communities, and create deep stratifications in an inequitable system. This system may bring forth small fixes and solutions, but until we reconcile the larger socio-political practices and procedures that create these disparities and gaps, we can't expect a systemwide change.

A decolonizing framework in educational research calls us to assess the bigger picture, the dynamics of power, and all the factors that may be at play. By considering gaps as educational debts, we bring attention to multiple facets of the social system over generations and geography. By understanding the structures and goals of settler colonialism, it becomes possible to identify how it functions in societal spaces and policies, including patterns of practice in education. In her landmark analysis, Cheryl Harris (1993), argues that White people have secured their superiority and maintained their hegemonic dominance in societal structures through property rights, where property is protected above all else. There are a number of interactions and policies that feed the cycle of White supremacy as a form of property holding, in academics knowledge *is* property. One of the key tenets of colonialism is the ownership of property for only a few. Educational systems have codified knowledge as ownable, protected it, and only allowed those with privilege to seek it (Patel, 2016). Settler colonialism is grounded in the act of erasing-to-replace. This logic is evident in education

through the "land grabs" (aka land grants) of public schools that utilize achievement metrics as a systematic strategy to claim property, characteristically through oppressing, marginalizing and erasing histories and cultural knowledge (Strauss, 2014). The first educational institutions that were constructed were solely built for educating White men. Freire (2000) termed the "banking concept," where privileged students were viewed as vessels and knowledge was deposited, seeds of knowledge were laced with the culture of the colony as they were sown. If we view the banking concept from the viewpoint of the White man, the knowledge is directly related to perspectives and domination. However, for Indigenous people subjected to residential schools the banking concept aimed to erase their lived experiences and cultural practices and were replaced with Eurocentric philosophies and practices. The erasure of experiences, culture, and language of minorities continues today and aims to replace it with academic knowledge, maintaining the logics of settler colonialism. Policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Race to the Top Act (2013) held schools accountable for the progress of all students. Focusing specifically on the performance of particular groups who historically perform on a lower level than White students (English as a second language learners, minorities, children in poverty, and students in special education). These policies are grounded in the act of labeling and coding to identify their "weaknesses" and mark them as delinquent and underachieving. Instead, educational reform should be seeking to rectify systems that operate under colonial and economic stratification and stop sustaining problematic relationships with vulnerable populations (Tuck, 2009).

It is vital that we take into account how intervention research on children and youth services is a damage-centered framework. The goal is to communicate the problems of a

specific group whether that be an ethnicity, a community, a gender, or an economic status, and then create or evaluate a set of interventions to alleviate those problems. Tuck (2009) warns about this type of research because it is writing a narrative that depicts these groups as damaged and broken. Research that documents damage and plays on the pain narrative and then offers intervention strategies only furthers the acts and feelings of surveillance. She cautions researchers to stop asking "how can I fix them?" Her argument isn't only for a shift to an asset-based framework but a plea to stop accidentally portraying "others" as broken and in need of fixing. The research goal isn't necessarily intended to hurt or cause ill-intentioned critiques, but it typically consolidates its participants into "others" and subjectifies them while those that are implementing the intervention are portrayed as change agents. Instead of focusing on the lower-class strata and how intervention policies can provide them with opportunities and experiences that resemble those in higher classes, attention should be directed to the dysfunctionality of our societal systems and how it continues to feed gross system oppression.

Damage-Centered Research

In an open letter, Eve Tuck (2009) calls out to communities, academic researchers, and teachers to stop utilizing and conducting "damage-centered" research and to consider the long-term impact of documenting a person's brokenness and pain. Instead, she encourages holding systems of power accountable for the policies and procedures that create and maintain oppression. Academic research often uses this framework to create awareness and bargain resources for marginalized populations; however, this tactic only reinforces the narrative that these communities are hopeless, dependent, and broken. It uses historical exploitation and colonization to explain the brokenness and pain of communities

experiencing poverty and illiteracy; but is only furthering the damage by labeling and coding their oppression and using it to define them as a whole (Tuck, 2009).

As a researcher, I must be cautious and aware of the ways I could unintentionally reproduce colonial dominations of knowledge and power, and it is even more important to expose these settler-colonial tactics that shape social science research (Calderon, 2016). Straying from these damaging frameworks is an intervention that first begins within ourselves and mandates us to take part in unsettling reflexivity. Before researchers can unsettle our settler-colonial structures and subjectivities, we must become aware of them. Calderon (2016) refers to this as colonial-blindness. Just as colorblind ideologies dismiss the impacts of racism, colonial-blindness impacts how we interact with and navigate systems of power. Engaging in unsettling reflexivity as the researcher, shakes up our social location, bringing forward our settler-colonial subjectivities and moving our epistemic view toward a decolonial perspective (Byrd, 2011).

The time is now for communities and leaders to refuse participation in research that labels populations as damaged and to insist that their stories of survivance and resilience are also included. It is our priority as educators, researchers, and community leaders to utilize different theories of change, specifically those that have a strong focus on assets and complexity instead of damage and deficits.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Thought does not need a method… Method in general is a means by which we avoid going to a particular place, or by which we maintain the option of escaping from it. (Deleuze et al., 1987, p.110)

Introduction

The methodological approach to my work is post-qualitative inquiry. Post-qualitative inquiry is developed, it must be invented by each researcher and is created differently every single time. As a result, no two post-qualitative studies will look the same. Unlike empirical research, the goal of post-qualitative work is not to create a replicable result but to create something new that isn't recognizable within existing structures. Post-qualitative inquiry doesn't rely on a systematic research process; there is no pre-existing design or data collection because there is no methodology at all (St. Pierre, 2019).

Decolonization doesn't consist of a map of attainable goals and steps, nor does it have defined points. This work is a lifelong process, a continual act of dismantling and (re)creation both inside and outside the institutional doors (Zavala, 2013). My dissertation drew on the theories of decolonization and exemplars from literature to engage five research practices: (1) exercise critical reflexivity, (2) challenge the dominant ideology, (3) practice reciprocity, (4) embrace "othered" ways of thinking and knowing, and (5) encompass transformative praxis. Thus, decolonization, through the use of thinking with theory and personal narratives, embodies the potential to dismantle dominant and deficit-based narratives surrounding students with ACEs. In the next section, I discuss the process of analysis that I utilized for this study, describing how I refused method, and instead "plugged in" concepts from

postcolonial and decolonizing theories to an assemblage of personal experiences, allowing me to engage with my analytic questions and see what emerges.

Thinking with Theory

Jackson and Mazzei (2017) describe *thinking with theory* as a process methodology, where concepts are put to work and "we begin to think voice as that which is entangled in the intra-action of things and doings in an assemblage - bodies, words, histories, materialities, affects…" (p. 721) that allows us to think otherwise about a discourse and to understand what has come to be commonly accepted in society. Their work is informed by Jacques Derrida, a scholar labeled as post-structural, who critiqued structuralist systems through deconstruction. Derrida posited that deconstruction (one of Jackson and Mazzei's widely used philosophical concepts) was "not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (p. 3). In my post-qualitative analysis, I used "thinking with theory" to deconstruct and analyze the normative assumptions and processes that label and marginalize youth and expose the interaction between knowledge and power. I engaged with my own experiences and observations at three different positions in my life. I began my assemblage of experiences as a sibling to three foster children with high ACEs and how their adverse childhood experiences shaped how they were viewed and had the outcomes of their achievement predicted by others. I then detail how those foster experiences shaped the way I viewed my students as a White, female educator in a low-socioeconomic community. I complete my assemblage with an exploration of how each of those experiences shaped my growth and theoretical development as a scholar and educator.

This project is not about "collecting" data; instead, I focused on "undoing" as I mapped what emerged within the theory to open up new meanings, possibilities and

connections. According to Spivak (1976), thinking with theory is a series of "plugging-in" as we write and read, and "enter a text wherever you are" (p. 75). Spivak says reading and writing this way creates a practice of internalizing where "our own way of thinking changes so that when we are reading, all of the theoretical reading begins to organize our reading, not because we are applying it" (p. 77). Utilizing the Deleuzian idea of refusing a particular method, we begin to think about concepts as methods, "precisely because they emerge from problems rather than questions" (St. Pierre, 2017, pp. 645-646). Tuck and Yang use refusal in their research to transcend disciplines and generations and perform analytic resistance to settler-colonial discourse. In *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities*, Tuck (2009) writes about her concern with educational research, especially research that asks oppressed communities to speak about their experiences but *only* from a place of pain. Tuck and Yang (2014) argue that this "real" research intends to document the deficit and produce damaged narratives. They "theorize refusal to settler colonialism -- the code beneath the code" and use refusal as an analytical practice to stop using invasive practices for inquiry (p. 812).

Discourse Analysis

I used discourse analysis to guide my approach to dismantle and deconstruct the policies and procedures that were created under colonial ideologies and create race, gender, and socioeconomic bifurcations and barriers. Discourse analysis is a qualitative and interpretive research method that investigates the functions of written and spoken language in relation to social contexts. It focuses on the social aspects of language and communication and analyzes the ways society uses language to achieve a particular effect (e.g., to evoke an emotional response, build doubt, or to manage conflict). Patel (2016) calls for discourse analysis to cause pause and bring awareness to normative discourses that continue to oppress

and marginalize communities. She says that "quieting a prevalent discourse will create space and allow for the imagination and emergence of conceptual and praxis shapes" (p. 88). Using this framework, my work refuses and resists the dominant discourses that plague youth with high ACEs and facilitates social change through shifts in language enabling these individuals to be seen as *at-promise*. In addition to deconstructing the ways in which normative discourses continue to label and oppress students, my research study problematizes the student accountability model that is used in educational policy and practice.

Problematization

Problematization is used to view policy through a critical lens. Problematization refers to the forming of an idea of a "problem" (Gillies, 2013). This approach is focused on how issues are problematized, not how people or society create problematizations. Instead of policies being created as a reaction to solve a "problem," they often play a significant role in initiating the problem. When we look at policies, we dive deeper into how these problems are created and Foucault encourages analysts to question, compare, and rethink these problematizations. Many policies pushed down from the government problematize specific behaviors resulting in the targeting of minorities and population groups (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), such as the No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Acts.

Building on Foucauldian-influenced poststructural theory, Carol Bacchi developed a set of six questions known as the WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be?) Approach. This approach to policy analysis requires us to think with a political lens and critically scrutinize. Foucault's understanding of power aligns with the WPR approach, which looks at the practices and relationships that create problems. In Foucault's theory of power (1998), power is productive rather than repressive. Therefore, policy produces problems rather than

solves problems. Practices that are scrutinized are those that produce "subjects" or "objects". Foucault describes practices as places, where attention is given to *what* is done. Foucault doesn't question if something is real or not, however it isn't labeled until it is produced through practice. The attention shifts from objects themselves to the relations with how they evolved. This way of thinking goes against the "one thing leads to another" traditional view, and looks at a path of events as just a random result. We are simply objects of practice. It is hard to classify or group people, because we are always changing. Drawing on Foucauldian-influenced poststructural theory, Bacchi (2016) created a set of six questions to supplement the WRP approach:

1. What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy or policies? (e.g., "gender inequality", "drug use/abuse", "economic development", "global warming", "childhood obesity", "irregular migration", etc.)

2. What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions (conceptual logics) underlie this representation of the "problem" (*problem representation*)?

3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about?

4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?

5. What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?

6. How and where has this representation of the "problem" been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?

I utilized these six questions to guide my thinking with theory and concepts to help me frame my analysis of the discourses about youth with ACEs. My analysis questions the normative assumptions that these students need saving and that interventions and coding must be used to push students with ACEs to be successful, as well as reassess what success

may look like. Throughout my research, I had to pause to practice self-reflexivity and draw on self-problematization to engage with my own normative assumptions and refusal.

"Data"

I am responsible for the direction that my research takes, and I must be answerable for its impacts. The act of "plugging in" and problematization can open up new possibilities and opportunities while continuing to deconstruct and dismantle normative discourses, but it doesn't mean there are no repercussions to my research. As a researcher, I must be aware of the questions I am asking and my own subjectivities while being mindful that I am not painting narratives of pain. The stories about marginalized peoples in social science research are often written from a place of pain and humiliation, resulting in "territorializing knowledge as property and researchers as claims makers" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). Tuck (2009) calls for us to move beyond damage-centered research and compels us to ask, "*Am I looking for damage and harm*?" This can be a difficult question since one of the first steps in research is to write a problem statement and to assess the needs of the community or peoples being researched. To this end, I refused to use inquiry as invasion and continued to use *refusal* throughout all steps of my study. Tuck (2009) describes *refusal* as a deliberate action to shift the unit of analysis away from a group of people and instead to analyze institutions and power. The design of my study was built on a foundation of refusal and resistance -- to refuse to use my students' personal voices and experiences as a platform for my research. As a result, I did not use interviews, questionnaires, or "traditional data."

I critically analyzed the discourse surrounding foster care youth, how their adverse childhood experiences aren't taken into account when discussing their needs, and how their past is seen as a deficit when comparing them to "normal" children. Additionally, I analyzed

the policies and procedures enacted within the school where I taught to label and code youth and how this deficit-based ideology shaped the way we spoke about and interacted with students and their parents. This study specifically engages with my own experiences with youth who are labeled as "*at-risk*" and how I interpreted their lived experiences in the context of larger systemic structures through my own lens. I share stories localized around social inequity, deficit-and-damage centered thinking, and how systems of power continue to maintain oppression and view youth who have experienced adversity as *broken* and *throwaways*.

In the chapter that follows, I provide an assemblage of my experiences around three themes: *Suitcase Siblings*, *They Taught Me, and Dismantling Me*. In *Suitcase Siblings*, I include my personal narratives and reflections of being a foster-sister to examine what I witnessed and experienced about the impact of specific trauma on children who end up in foster-care. I also examine my own beliefs about their experiences and how early childhood adversity impacted how my foster siblings navigated their world while growing up. The purpose of this chapter is to dismantle the concept of "*at-risk*" by creating conditions to shift the way we speak about our youth and allowing that critical dialogue to come forward. Even though these are my personal experiences with these youth, and not their narratives, these stories hold the possibility to reveal the power relations that uphold our societal and educational systems, positioning youth with high ACEs as *defective*. Through my reading and writing, I examined the impact that these labels and dominant discourses have on youth that they intend to "help" and how these labels maintain power over their lives, while also making them the focus of intervention, diverting attention away from systemic deficiencies that create barriers to opportunity. I "plugged in" this data to the work of theorists about

labeling, child development and traumatic experiences, and damaged-based vs. strength-based lenses.

In the second section, *They Taught Me*, I speak about my personal experiences and reflections of being a White-woman educator in a low socioeconomic neighborhood, and what I witnessed and experienced about the impact of ACEs and societal injustices and how those came to the surface and impacted the students in my classroom. I critically deconstruct, through the use of narratives, the way that we view and teach students with high ACEs. These students are typically labeled as "*at-risk*." I dig into how these deficit-and-damaged based approaches produce and preserve structures of power that reify systemic oppression in educational institutions. In my writing in this section, I grapple with the policies and conversations that labeled my students as destructive, throwaways, and delinquent, continuing to hinder their self-worth and self-esteem. This allowed me to dig deeper and answer my first research question: *What are the dominant discourses about students with adverse childhood experiences and how do relations of power produce these dominant discourses?* I consider how these power relations enforce broader social and economic barriers, securing and maintaining oppression in these communities, and how those inequalities continue to be reinforced and reproduced. I "plugged in" this data to the work of theorists about historical trauma, racism and poverty, and hegemonic structures. I analyze conversations had with staff members and reflected on my own thoughts and teaching to "plug in" the work of theorists such as Patel, Tuck and Yang to answer my second research question: *How do these discourses continue to view "at-risk" students through a deficit lens (as broken, defective, and unworthy)?*

In the last section of the next chapter, I write about my experiences as a developing scholar and dismantled educator and how the Ed.D program created an internal turmoil that shifted my knowledge about power, privilege, oppression, and the colonial ideologies in society and education. I "plugged in" the work of theorists as I wrote and thought about White supremacy and settler colonialism, and how these have perforated the learning environment from a transformational experience to transactional metrics. The process of thinking with theory allowed me to struggle with my own privilege and complacency and how I have taken part in the reproduction of injustice and inequity. I speak about how my previous narratives played a role in "dismantling me," and the ongoing process of becoming unsettled. These highly personal narratives about my own experiences and transformation journey as I learned, unlearned and relearned assist me in addressing my third and fourth research questions: *How can educators resist these discourses within their classrooms and hallways? How will this resistance create opportunities, possibilities, and reform for teaching and trauma-informed education?* I feel that my own successes and failures as an educator will enable and encourage others to shift their mindset and apply the methods I've found to be effective in fostering an asset-based school culture. These sets of experiences were an entry-point that allowed me to think with theory and embrace what shifted as I applied these concepts and deconstructed my own learning and knowledge.

Chapter 4: Through My Lens- An Assemblage of Experiences

As educators, as scholars - really, as readers - the contested engagement is an important part of our work. We must engage with each other, in part, where we each are, and push each other to reach beyond and differently, to unlearn so that we might learn differently. (Patel, 2016, p.83)

Introduction

In this chapter, I present my personal experiences with youth with high ACEs as I navigated my childhood, teaching career, and academic career. Given that I am using a conceptual framework for this study, I will tell and share stories centered around social inequity, deficit and damage-centered thinking, and systems of power that continue to maintain systemic oppression and view youth who have experienced childhood adversity as *broken*. The term "*at-risk"* is a common label attached to youth who are also labeled as foster children, homeless, minority, juvenile delinquents, special education, English language learners and a host of other socially and politically constructed indicators that are designed to streamline awareness and reporting. The purpose of this chapter is to dismantle the concept of *"at-risk*" by creating conditions for shifting the way we speak about our youth and allowing critical dialogue to emerge, through the use of narratives. My research also aims to raise awareness around the reality of the U.S. child welfare system and the culture of mainstream schooling that repeatedly create and implement policies and programs without considering the position of the youth whom these services were created to benefit.

It is important to note that these assemblages are from my *own* experiences with these youth and how *I* perceived their challenges from my vantage point. Even though these are not their personal narratives, they hold possibility to reveal the power relations at work in our societal and educational systems and to counter the dominant narratives that position students

with high ACEs as defective and unworthy. Sadly, the reality is that these labels are directly linked to power, used to define a student's inabilities, directly impacting a student's self-worth and self-efficacy (Leesly, 2008). The key component of this examination is the impact that these labels and dominant discourses have on the youth that they intend to "help" and how these labels hold power over *their* lives; but also how these relations of power are a cyclical process making youth the focus of intervention, diverting attention away from the systemic deficiencies that are the epi-center of the problem (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). I plug in this assemblage of experiences to multiple concepts and theories in order to engage my analytic questions and to allow me to think differently about how we view and educate youth with adversity. Hegemony is a difficult platform to shatter, and in an attempt to do so, it is important that I must consider my own complicity with it and how I've been socialized to comply. There is no quick fix or easy answer, but it is important that our journey of refusal begins somewhere. If we do not start to question and dismantle the power hierarchy that exists within society, if we do not unravel the hegemonic practices, if we do not defeat the deficit ideology, then we have little opportunity to redress and redirect gross systemic inequities. It is my hope that these chapters and the stories of these youth represent their strength and their spirit and that it will spark a shift in the way that we as a society view youth who have experienced and overcome adversity, that we begin to see them and speak to them through a strengths-based lens instead of a deficit lens.

The stories in these chapters are all true but in order to ensure anonymity and protect the privacy of the youth and families in these stories I have altered identifying details, including the names of the children and their family members. Despite these changes the other elements in my narratives are reported as accurately as possible.

This chapter will consist of three sets of experiences: 1) My experience as a foster sister of foster siblings with high ACEs, 2) My identity, positionality, and experiences as a White female educator, 3) My growth in my understanding and theoretical development as a doctoral student. I will preface each experience with a brief statement of relevant background information and demographics about the community. The first set of narratives, *Siblings with Suitcases*, are a recollection of my family's experiences as a foster family. In order to tell these stories as fully and accurately as possible, I sat down with my mom and had an informal conversation about what I remembered as a foster sister and what she perceived as a foster mom. Since these experiences occurred over twenty years ago and because I was very young at the time, I wanted to ensure as much accuracy as I could.

Suitcase Siblings

Nestled in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains, atop a rolling plateau crossed by hills and mountains, sits a small, rural, farming community—Alleghany County, North Carolina. Isolated by its mountainous terrain, the high elevation brings mild winters and cool summers. Locals refer to the area as “God’s Country” where you can wake up every morning and feel like you can touch the sun, while being surrounded by wildlife and family-run farms that have been passed down for generations. Known for its small-town charm and Southern hospitality, Alleghany continues to be a thriving community to live, work and play. The county consists of 11,000 citizens with 95% of the population identifying as White, and a median household income of $37,000 (US Census, 2020). Of the total 1,888 children in Alleghany, 63% live in poor or low-income homes and 26% of those children are food insecure (NC Child, 2022). According to a Facebook post by the Alleghany County’s Sheriff's Department on April 5, 2022, in conjunction with the Guardian ad Litem program, Alleghany County currently has 45 children in foster care and only one certified foster family.

In February of 1991, my family was preparing for the birth of my little brother, Cameron. My mom had the nursery decorated in pastel blues and yellows, stuffed elephants and giraffes were perfectly placed in his crib and the room was full of gadgets and items to help the baby (and my parents) adjust to newborn life. Friends and family had showered my little brother just weeks before and we were all counting down the days until he’d make his appearance. Sadly, my mom never had the opportunity to use the gadgets or lay him among the stuffed animals in his crib; he never came home from the hospital. Cameron was stillborn. Months later, with a broken heart and surrounded by baby items that were never

used, my mom was determined to turn a heartbreaking and sad situation into something positive. My parents signed up to become foster parents and went through the three-hour training once a week for six weeks. With intentions of helping another newborn or infant in need and utilizing Cameron's baby items, they requested children 0-1 years of age. It wasn't too many days later that the phone rang in the middle of the night with a request to take in three siblings. Hesitating at first, mom paused because she wasn't sure she could handle three siblings and me but she leaned in for more information. The siblings were thirteen months, three and eight years old. She only had items for an infant; she wasn't prepared with clothes, shoes and beds for three children, but she said *yes* anyways. Later that morning, the Department of Social Services rolled into our driveway with three children wearing pajamas and holding a grocery bag with one change of clothes. My parents scrambled as they quickly shuffled around the house and Cameron's room to accommodate three children.

The pajamas they had arrived in and the change of clothes they brought did not fit, and with nothing but newborn/infant clothes, my mom inspected each of the tags and made a list of items that she would need for each child. Later that evening, she set off to Walmart (the only store within an hour drive that had clothing items) and bought just enough to get the children through until she could properly size them and purchase quality items that would hold up. At the time, she wasn't fond of purchasing their items from Walmart because she wanted them to have quality items that would last them no matter where they ended up and could survive the brutality of child's play. At this point in my story, I think it's important to note that my mom always bought the highest quality of items that her and my dad could afford; they lived by the philosophy that it was better to pay for quality upfront and have items last longer. They hated waste and to see items only be used a few times before they

were broken or falling apart. She upheld this philosophy with every item growing up, including: clothes, shoes, strollers, mattresses, cars, daycares, etc. She would research and read reviews of every item before purchasing to make sure she was getting the best item for her money. It really bothered her that she didn't have quality items for these kids and she was disappointed that they didn't have the same items that I had at that moment. She made it a point to plan a shopping trip to Winston Salem (a larger nearby city) for the upcoming weekend. Fast forward a few days, and this would indeed be a blessing in disguise.

Transitioning Out of Trauma

My parents had me enrolled in a five-star childcare center, but my daycare did not accept state and federal funds for child subsidy and since Lilly, Drake, and Bo (names have been altered for privacy) were part of the child welfare system, they had to attend a childcare facility that accepted the subsidy. Mom was very disgruntled about this because she wanted all of us to have the same level of care and she knew nothing about this other facility or how they provided care. On the second morning that the kids were in our care, mom dropped me off first at my daycare and then drove to the other side of town to drop off my foster-siblings. She gathered their book bags with extra clothes and their water bottles and hugged them goodbye, telling them she'd be back after work to pick them up. She was very anxious to leave them but they seemed so happy and proud to have something of their own on their backs and their little smiles as she left put her heart at ease. When the clock struck 5 PM she quickly gathered up her items and headed back to the daycare to see how their first day went. The moment she opened the door she was handed a tied up grocery bag and with a confused look on her face she began to open it, but immediately stopped in horror when she realized what it was. There before her, secured in a grocery bag, were the black and yellow Batman

underwear she had put on Drake earlier that morning filled with poop. It wasn't the poop that took my mom for a spin, she did have a four-year-old and knew that children had accidents, but she was in awe that the daycare facility literally bagged up the underwear and the poop and that it had sat out all day long waiting for it to be returned to her, instead of emptying the feces into the toilet. She politely threw the entire bag away and gathered up the kids into the car. When she got home she asked Drake if he had had an accident earlier that day and he simply shrugged like he didn't remember. Thinking this was a one-time event, an accident, perhaps a moment of nervousness being in a new place and not knowing the procedure, she too shrugged it off. For the next four days, my mom received a grocery bag filled with poopy Batman underwear at pickup and for four days she threw it away. After going through an entire pack of underwear, my mom decided that this wasn't a case of nerves or not knowing the procedure for going to the bathroom. At home, Drake never had an accident and not once used the bathroom in his underwear. Out of concern, and again not knowing the daycare staff very well, she sat Drake down and asked why he was using the bathroom in his underwear. Once again, he shrugged. She asked, "*Do you not realize that you need to go to the bathroom? Or do you not have enough time to get to the bathroom? Are you afraid to ask for help at daycare*?" He continued to sit in silence, and she pondered on what might be different at our home versus daycare. She then realized, almost every hour she asked Drake if he needed to use the bathroom just as she had done for me when I was that age. If he did need to go, he'd say yes and she'd take him. If not, he'd say no and she'd ask again in an hour. However, at daycare the teachers took the children to the bathroom at particular times during the day (morning snack, lunch, and afternoon snack) unless a child mentioned that they needed to go. It also came about in conversation between my mom and Drake, that at his

biological parents' house, when he needed to go to the bathroom he just went in his pants and continued playing. There was no routine, no procedure for potty training or for asking for help, and no expectations. After learning about this, my mom now understood why he was having accidents at daycare but not in our home.

She had created a strong routine for the children where she constantly checked in with them to meet their needs. When my mom came home with new underwear the following weekend, she asked Drake if he liked his new underwear and he smiled and said yes. She again asked him if he knew what he was supposed to do if he needed to use the bathroom and how to tell an adult, he replied yes. She then told him that she was happy he liked his new underwear and that even though she now understood why he was not using the bathroom before, he now knows what he's supposed to do and that she will not continue buying new underwear and throwing them away. She then softly replied, "*I understand that occasionally accidents will happen and that is okay, but this should not continue to happen every day when I pick you up from daycare. If it does, we will have to send you to daycare in diapers because I would rather be able to use our extra money to provide experiences for you and do fun things -- not constantly buy and throw away underwear. Does that sound like a plan?*" From that day forward, my mom was never handed a grocery bag again at pickup. This instance was not the only time that my parents realized that these three siblings came from a home with no routine and the longer that they stayed with us, my parents began to realize that they were neglected physically and emotionally, and sexually abused.

During my childhood, baths were a religious part of our nightly schedule. My mom would allow me to play all day long outside and get as dirty as I wanted—but when that clock struck 7 PM, it was bathtime. I never successfully escaped bathtime, no matter how

clean I was. Just like most avenues in life my mom took bath time very seriously, I'm talking full on head-to-toe scrub down nightly. There was no germ or flake of dirt left under my nails, behind my ears or in my hair. When my foster sibling came to live with us, it was a bit of a challenge to get them to line up for the nightly bath time routine. The first few nights they would run and hide, and would do anything to avoid the giant bathtub full of soapy water that awaited them. One night, my mom attempted to persuade them with colorful bathtime bubbles and they were intrigued so they cautiously hopped in. Mom gave them a few squirts and when the suds began to bubble, the boys giggled in laughter. In awe that they were bathing and laughing she quickly ran to go grab their pajamas from the table. When she came back Drake and Bo had emptied the entire container of bubbles into the bath and there were bubbles spewing out of the tub onto the floors and walls like an active volcano. My mom asked if the boys had ever played with bubbles before, and they both shook their heads no. The joy and laughter that filled that bathroom that night also filled our hearts, something so simple as a bottle of bubbles and a nightly bath time routine had suddenly pulled them back into childhood. They never ran or hid when mom started to draw the tub water again. As with the underwear incident, we began to realize that my foster siblings had no routine at their previous home and no expectations or procedures for hygiene. Once my parents began to create a solid routine for them around hygiene (potty training, brushing their teeth, combing their hair, bathing, etc.) they realized how much better they felt, and they willingly participated.

During the first few weeks that the children were with us, DSS was still working on a visitation schedule and set of perimeters, and it was evident that the two boys were missing their parents. Bo would frequently ask my mom if he could see his mom and dad, and she

would try to explain to him that visitations hadn't been worked out yet. One night, in an effort to fill the gap before the children were allowed to visit, she asked Bo if he'd like to write a letter to them and explained that she'd have the caseworker give it to his parents. When she sat him down at the table with a pencil and paper, he looked up and said, "*I don't know what to write*" and she explained that he could start off by telling them what he missed about them if he'd like. She asked Bo what he missed about them, hoping he'd say something along the lines of "playing with daddy" or "going to the park with mommy," but Bo just stared and sat in silence. Considering the major adjustments and shifts he had experienced over the last two weeks or so, my mom left him alone thinking he might need some time to process what he wanted to say. She revisited him at the table a few minutes later and she was puzzled at the blank paper. Maybe he needed some probing, she thought. She said, "*When you were at home, what did you do with your parents? Did you play on your swing set or go to the park? Did you watch movies or ride your bike?*" At this point in our time with my foster siblings, my parents were aware that neglect (specifically nutrition and hygiene) was an appropriate assumption - but what Bo was about to tell my mom was heartbreaking. He looked up from his chair with his big brown eyes and replied "*I've never done any of that stuff. At home, I took care of my brother and baby sister all day*." An eight-year-old child who was fully responsible for taking care of his three-year-old and one-year-old sister. A few days later the caseworker called with a visitation schedule and the kids were to be dropped off at the DSS office bi-weekly for a two-hour supervised visit with their parents. Their biological father never showed up for the visits, but mom did. The boys were very excited to see their mom the first few times but as the visitations came and went, my mom began having a harder time getting them to cooperate to go. It was as if something had shifted in

them and when it came time for the visit Bo would say "*I don't want to go to visit. Can I just stay here? How long will it be before you come get me*?" Mom would try to reassure him that she would be back to pick him up shortly, that the visits were required and that his parents loved him, but it broke her heart every time she dropped them off knowing that he didn't want to visit them. The children were seeing a psychologist in the off weeks as part of their care plan and sometimes the case worker would share bits of information with my mom about their past. The State was building a case for neglect and was trying to put the pieces together of what had happened during their short lives. The psychologist and case worker found out that when Lilly was hungry, she was given a can of peas in her crib. It was unclear if the peas had been drained or who opened them for her, but that is how she was fed, straight from the can. My mom shared with the caseworker that this made sense because she refused to eat with a utensil at our house. Lilly would pitch a fit if my mom wouldn't let her eat with her hands. Lilly spent most of her short childhood in a crib, with little interaction or environmental stimulation. The impacts of this isolation played a role in her brain development.

Up until the 1990s (also known as the *Decade of the Brain*) the role of childhood experiences was under-acknowledged as well as the role that environmental interactions play among infant development (Shore, 1997). The brain develops rapidly during the first years of life and explains why children develop lasting effects of trauma. Infants and toddlers are highly susceptible to negative experiences and continued exposure to negative experiences can cause chronic, permanent changes in the brain. These permanent changes can be linked to the age of the child at the time of the abuse (Perry, 1997). Researchers refer to this timeframe as "sensitive periods" because synapses are being developed at a high velocity, but

the process of pruning synapses increases and if these neuronal pathways are not activated they risk being deleted (Shore, 1997). An example of this would be a child's ability to build healthy relationships, infants have a genetic predisposition to form an attachment to their caregivers but if these caregivers are passive or unresponsive then the child's ability to form relationships during their life might be altered (Perry, 2001). An infant's brain grows and develops as it interacts and learns within their environment.

An infant or toddler who experiences the chronic stress of neglect (hunger, pain, scared) will focus all their brain's energy on survival, activating fear response regions of the brain and simultaneously inactivating other regions of the brain that are involved in complex thought and learning. Neglect is often characterized by lack of food, shelter, and safety but it also includes the failure to meet a child's emotional, social, and cognitive needs. Children need encouragement, validation, and opportunities from their caregivers in order to be able to appropriately master developmental milestones. If a caregiver fails to provide stimulation during the first years of life, the neuronal pathways that were developed in expectation of these sets of experiences become weaker and may die off, resulting in a child not meeting those developmental milestones (Helgeson, 1997). Lilly's main caretaker was her older brother, Bo, a child himself who did the best he could to make sure her needs were met. But, we can't expect an eight year old to know that an infant's ability to thrive is nestled in the crucial interactions surrounding voice, touch, and environmental stimulation. This could have been why Lilly came to us at thirteen months and didn't make sounds that would eventually form words. Without those crucial moments of face-to-face baby talk from her adult caregivers and verbal interactions, her language development was ultimately delayed, and her

neuronal pathways were not activated enough to create a memory for future learning (Greenough et al., 1987).

On top of the malnourishment, the lack of hygiene and proper care, the emotional neglect, the expectation that Bo, a child himself, could care for his younger siblings, it was also discovered that Lilly had been sexually abused. No details were shared about who the abuser was, what acts were involved or how many times in her short life it happened, but it was evident that Lilly had experienced more trauma than the boys. I am certainly not trying to downplay the boys' experiences and neglect, but it was indisputable by Lilly's behavior that she had endured much more. My mom and the caseworker had many conversations around this, she even mentioned that once the boys had an established routine and had two adults who interacted with them and provided for their needs, the boys began to flourish. They boys knew their boundaries and knew what was expected of them, they never fussed with each other, they ate everything my mom made, they didn't act up at daycare or school and they started to show affection and build relationships. Bo wanted to be wherever my dad was, he was fascinated with farming and equipment. If my dad was picking up hay, he wanted to ride along. If the tractor was broken, he wanted to hand dad the parts as he fixed it. He craved male attention and wanted to be right by my dad's side and he loved the farm.

There were many experiences that we did as a family on a routine basis that my foster siblings had never experienced including: going to the movie theater, playing at the park, going to the pool, riding bikes, birthday parties, and going on vacation. Once my mom realized that the siblings hadn't been able to enjoy these simple pleasures in their childhood, she made sure that the time they were in our homes was full of adventure and activities. While we were trying to make their lives as normal as we could and allow them to be

children, there were tumultuous events happening behind the curtain with their parents' rights. DSS had built a strong case around neglect and were fighting to have the parents' rights terminated so that the children could be placed in fostering-to-adopt homes. During the court case, the children's psychologist testified as well as my mom. DSS had first become involved with the biological parents in 1982 and first filed a petition alleging neglect in 1991. The judge recommended that DSS pursue Termination of Parental Rights under G.S. 7A-289.32(2) [neglect] so that all three children could be adopted, alleging that the basis for petition was that the biological parents were intellectually disabled and unable to care for the children. The evidence was heard in the trial court in October of 1992 where a clinical psychologist evaluated the intellectual abilities of both parents in November 1990 and determined that the mother had a full-scale I.Q. of 71 and the father had a full-scale I.Q. of 72.

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), intelligence quotient (I.Q.) tests are designed to provide a rough measure of one's intellectual functioning. An average I.Q. in the United States is 100, diagnosing those with an I.Q. below 70-75 as having an intellectual disability. I.Q. might also be referred to as "mental age" meaning that if a person is said to have the mental age of a seven that they would have received the same number of correct responses on the I.Q. test as a seven-year-old, impacting their performance of intellectual tasks beyond that age. Based on this, the parents of my foster siblings would have the mental age of between 11-12 years old. This is significant because a low I.Q. could potentially impact the basic skills necessary to cope and thrive in everyday life including: self-care and hygiene, cooking and home living, communication, social skills and health. My foster siblings' parents were characterized as

being in the “borderline range of intellectually disabled” within the meaning of N.C.Gen.Stat 7A-289.32(7) and another expert in psychology confirmed the previous findings based on his interactions. He testified that they had no organic brain syndrome or other degenerative mental condition and that there was no evidence they suffered from mental illness.

As I spoke with my mom about the court case and the events that happened during the trial, she recalled how heartbreaking it was for her. As she watched the children’s mother testify and beg to keep her children it was evident that their mother did in fact love them with everything she had. My mom believes this and feels the exact same today; she felt that their mom had no ill intentions and would never purposely deprive her children of care. She truly did love them and tried to meet all the demands of the court (showed up to every visitation, etc.) but she herself was not capable of caring for the children because of her mental capacity. Their mom might not have known that children needed significant nutrition to grow and develop and that she needed to meet their social and emotional needs, she also might not have known that she needed to provide a hygiene schedule and potty training because she struggled with her own needs. These limitations and deficits in adaptive skills could make moving through stages of life difficult unless the person has a caring family member or social support network to provide the appropriate assistance and daily structure. In my foster siblings’ case, their parents limited cognitive abilities significantly interfered with their aptness to safely parent and provide for their children. Approximately two-thirds of states (including North Carolina) have statutes that consider intellectual disabilities as a ground for parental rights termination if the state believes that the parent is unfit to provide care for the child. No state says that intellectual disability can be the sole reason for termination, but it can be the main focus on child welfare cases.

Labeled at an Early Age

As mentioned earlier, Lilly succumbed to much more neglect than her two brothers. The case worker and psychologist believe that this was due to her young age at the time of neglect and the family support system not being as strong after her birth when compared to her siblings. The time and attention it took to raise three children compared to one or two was a significant factor in her neglect. In February of 1992, parental rights were terminated due to significant defects in adaptive behavior. The children were able to be placed up for adoption and as much as my mom wanted to, she knew that she couldn't handle four kids long-term. She agreed with the caseworker that both boys were doing well and were ready to be placed in a foster-with-intent-to-adopt home, but Lilly would still need to be evaluated and further tests completed to determine the extent of her trauma and healing process. A couple that my parents were friends with had been struggling with infertility and had been pursuing the path to adoption. They had heard about the boys and wanted to come over for a visit and learn more about them. Shortly after, they agreed to foster the boys with the intent to adopt and became licensed foster parents. Once a week for a month they came over and visited with the boys to help ease the transition. The family lived about 15 minutes away which eased my mom's heart of letting them go, knowing she would still get to see them grow up and thrive in our community. The day the boys left there was a somber feeling in the air of our home. Lilly, who had been with her brothers from the moment she was born and who had basically been her caretaker up until she came into our home, did not understand why her brothers' laughter no longer echoed among our walls. Originally, the caseworker wanted them to stay unified but as the boys began to flourish and Lilly continued to have significant challenges, it

became evident that she would need a home where she would receive much more attention and care.

As Lilly became adjusted to being the only foster sibling, she was scheduled for many more evaluations and tests and with more time to devote to her mom picked up on areas that concerned her. When angry, Lilly would pull her hair out and I'm not just talking about a strand or two. The back of Lilly's head was almost bald from where she would take her fists and pull as much hair out as she could grab. She struggled with emotional regulation and communicating. She did not communicate at all when she came to our home, and after a few months of working with her my mom was able to get her to learn a few words. She would pick up on names that she heard me call, so naturally she called my parents mommy and daddy. When she wanted something, she would point to it and let out a scream. She loved animals and quickly picked up cat, dog, and cow.

During my conversation with my mom, it was brought up many times how she wished she would have known back then what she does now about trauma and how to help support neglected children during their healing. She treated my foster siblings just as she did me, she made no differences and loved them like they were her own. Even though she didn't know their full stories and the potential impacts of all their traumas, she realized quickly that they had been neglected in multiple capacities and tried to help guide them the only way she knew how…. through love, communication, and routine. My foster siblings, especially Lilly, were easily labeled by their deficits and it was reflected in how the world viewed them and treated their developmental and medical conditions and eventually their pursuit for a forever home. Lilly's medical conditions began to become more prominent the longer she stayed with us.

One night, the two of us were sitting on the kitchen floor playing when her head suddenly dropped and her body went limp, seconds later her entire body began to shake. My mom screamed for my dad who was a first-responder at the time and he recognized the symptoms of a seizure and compressed her tongue and held her head until it stopped. After this scary incident, she continued to have seizures often. My mom took her to Brenner's Children Hospital and after a week of tests it was determined that the seizures were triggered by high fevers. She was prone to ear infections and had several while she was in our care, so after the diagnosis my mom had to be very careful to keep an eye on any sign of sickness or infection.

During the tests at Brenner's, it was also brought up several times that Lilly's growth and development was delayed and that her cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning was concerning. When my mom questioned the doctor about his concern and how she could help Lilly, his response was "*The delays that Lilly has due to the neglect will impact her quality of life from here forward. She will probably never go to college or be able to hold a career.*" My mom was irate about his response, how could he determine a child's entire life path in just a few days of evaluating her? How could the little girl that my family had fallen in love with, the little girl who had already overcome the most difficult of circumstances, not live a quality life? Assigning a label of "*at-risk*" or "less worthy" to foster children shifts the ownership of the problem to the child and their circumstances, reinforcing that the child is a problem within society -- instead of acknowledging that society is a problem in and of itself to the welfare of these children. Power and truth are permeating concepts that drive the practice of labeling youth and determining their individual needs within society (Foucault, 1977). They position youth as needing to comply with these labels in order to be worthy of

societal gains and that their "needs" have already been identified and prescribed. These "needs" are considered truths determined by the dominant culture and aim to reinforce the dominance and affirm, through institutionalized power, the social marginalization of lower-class values and beliefs (Darder, 2012; Freire, 2000). The act of labeling a child as "*at-risk*" and "less likely" has been historically understood within the context of a hegemonic process where those working with youth (in the case of my foster siblings this included their caseworker, psychologist and medical doctors) stood on moral higher ground with the rights to designate the label onto youth - whereas many of these youth are already exposed to the margins of mainstream society within their communities. The flows of power that produce and control these dominant discourses further substantiate the ways in which we view and speak about youth who have experienced adversity and perpetuate social inequalities.

My mom knew that Lilly's early childhood experiences significantly impacted her development and as a result of those experiences that Lilly would have to have more intensive medical care than most children, but she never doubted that those early life circumstances would knock her out of chasing any dream or reaching any goal. Through every doctor's appointment and evaluation my mom continued to be by Lilly's side advocating for her. She worked with her nightly on her physical therapy and her developmental therapy. She read books to Lilly and helped her learn to communicate with the world around her. The label that the doctor had given Lilly only inspired my mom to push harder to fight for her and to help her overcome her early-life circumstances.

My parents had both talked about adopting Lilly but when my mom found out she was pregnant with my brother in the fall of 1992, my dad was worried that it would be too hard on my mom. With a broken heart my mom had a tough conversation with the

caseworker and agreed that Lilly needed a home where she would be the only child, to ensure that her medical and developmental needs could continue to be nurtured and cultivated. Lilly's behavior and medical care continued to be seen as a limitation by the caseworker and psychologist for her finding an adoptive home. Every conversation with potential families was centered around what she needed in a financial capacity and how much time would be involved in helping her meet developmental milestones. The system had already begun to view Lilly as "less than" and it significantly impacted her potential adopters. In our conversation, my mom shared with me that she never complied with the limitations and labels that the doctors and caseworker had labled Lilly with, she did not accept that she was "less likely" to have a quality life or a steady career like a child from the dominant culture (where specific beliefs, values, and ways of behaving are imposed through power) would be expected to do. She was always cautious of how she spoke about her condition around Lilly and was careful to not let her hear the "fate" that others had already decided for her life.

Much like the transition with the foster brothers, a young couple who was interested in adopting Lilly, began to visit our home on a weekly basis. Every week a piece of my mom's heart was ripped out knowing that our time with Lilly was drawing closer and that soon the spitfire of a little girl would walk out those doors and not come back. The caseworker and adoptive parents agreed that it would be best for Lilly's transition if she would be able to remain in our lives and continue to be able to come over for playdates or meetups after a little time had passed. All parties agreed that the support system and relationships Lilly had built was essential to her healing. The transition of Lilly's care that both of our families had been preparing for over a month did not go as planned. The day Lilly left remains one of the toughest days my mom had to walk through. When her bags

were being carried out to the car, she pitched a fit and refused to go. She cried and screamed for us as her new parents put her in her car seat and drove her away.

There is Growth in Goodbye

My mom patiently waited months to hear an update about Lilly or receive a photo or letter to let her know how she was adjusting. It never came. As heartbreaking as this was to my mom, she understood that the adoptive parents needed time and thought that an update would eventually come. A few months later, my parents were in Walmart when they heard a familiar voice come running through the aisles screaming "mommy mommy" and when my mom turned around, to her surprise it was Lilly. Lilly clenched onto her leg with the tightest squeeze as her adoptive parent came over. They chatted for a while and her adoptive parent agreed that they would reach out soon for a visit or playdate, but months turned into years and that was the last time that my mom hugged Lilly or spoke to her. When recalling these events with my mom, she kindly said she understood why the new adoptive parents wanted to keep her away for a while in order to help break the attachment, but she knew that Lilly had built a strong bond with me and really wanted to see the relationship grow and develop through our childhood. Fortunately, even though we couldn't be a part of Lilly's life directly, we did get to see her grow up. Our community is small and that allowed us to see her at school, out and about at town events, dance recitals, sports games, etc. To this day we aren't sure if Lilly was ever told about us or what she has been told about the first few years of her life, she has never come up to us or acknowledged who we are. Even though the entire situation broke my mom's heart, we were thankful that we were still close enough to watch her succeed and accomplish so many goals. Lilly graduated high school and went on to earn an associate's degree.

Unlike Lilly, the boys were old enough to remember who we were, and my mom was able to visit them frequently. Both our families remained friends and we were able to hang out with the boys and watch them grow up. They each graduated high school and obtained degrees from a community college. All three of my foster siblings endured more trauma in their first few years of life than most adults do, even though the exact details of their trauma were not directly shared with my parents it was evident that their experiences impacted their growth, development, and ability to thrive. It is important to note that this set of experiences took place in the early 90s when research surrounding brain development was only beginning.

Web of "Support"

The web of support that surrounds foster care youth and is meant to help fill the gap is influenced by the dominant discourses of "*at-risk*" and "less likely" and as a result continues to perpetuate the discourse and hegemonic practices in society. Policymakers and educational institutions have generally dictated and defined the characteristics and implications of the "*at-risk*" label. These descriptions uniformly place the blame on the child for their circumstances, causing them to internalize the characteristics of "risk," instead of focusing on deficit-based discourses and problems within the system. The therapeutic web that was created to help my foster siblings was influenced by these dominant discourses of "*at-risk*" and "less likely to succeed" and in turn continued to influence how others viewed my foster siblings and essentially validated those discourses. Doctors, caseworkers, day-care staff, teachers, and even family members become part of the relations of power that create a deficit-driven narrative about youth who have experienced adversity and shape the discourse of "*at-risk*." These dominant discourses of "*at-risk*" and "less likely" are grounded in control

and power and create an image and understanding of what is "right," "normal," and "appropriate" behavior for a child. Lilly's inability to talk and communicate with the world around her was compared to a "normal" child's growth at the doctor's office, she was no longer viewed as *capable* and her behaviors were viewed as *inappropriate* for her age. From that point forward, after the label was applied, the trajectory of her life was altered and she was viewed from the lens of her deficiency, not as an individual who had survived a traumatic childhood. Within this discourse, a child's identity, feelings, values, and knowledge are constructed in particular ways and are often not regarded as individuals but are representative of a deficiency of social and cultural systems. The use of labels becomes a way to sort and categorize and often contain these youth within societal systems. The use of labels directly results in exclusion and containment and is a byproduct of a capitalist society that inherently dehumanizes the children as individuals.

Our Words Matter

The narrative surrounding youth who have experienced adversity is grounded in deficit and places limitations on one's ability to grow, thrive, and succeed. Thinking of our children as broken and speaking to them as if they are inadequate has long-term implications not only on the child but on our society, creating systemic isolation and neglect (Tuck, 2009). The way we view and speak to children *matters*; it has the potential to become their inner voice. It's easy to get caught up in *fixing* what is *wrong* with a child, and intentions are often pure to help them live the most "normal" life possible, but if we fixate on one's deficits, we fail to notice their strengths. My mom saw this play out in our time with my foster siblings, she recognized how quickly my siblings were labeled because of their developmental challenges, and how quickly the support system that was built to help fill these gaps viewed

the children's adversity as an obstruction in finding an adoptive family. It is a reality that not all foster and adoptive homes have the capacity to provide care for severe medical and developmental issues, and that each child entering care will have different needs that need to be met in order to thrive. Not every home is an acceptable fit for a child's needs. It is vital to account for these needs and make foster and adoptive parents aware of them upfront and what the expectations might be, but it's also imperative that the words we choose to use when describing these needs should be carefully selected. We say that we believe that all children can learn and accomplish any goal, but do we *actually* believe it? Our words and how we frame a child's challenges say otherwise. In Lilly's case, her needs and the time it would take to make sure those needs were met was the first topic on the table when meeting with potential adoptive families, the conversation was always driven by her deficits, not her resilience and strength. If children hear us speak about their weaknesses before we even introduce them and share their stories, won't they too, see themselves as weak and defective? Focusing on failure and where children fall short does not create a culture of support and it certainly doesn't position us as valuing children and their dignity. We build policies and programs based on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, failure and incarcerated parents, etc. It is difficult to believe that these children have any chance of being successful when everyone they encounter (doctors, caseworkers, teachers, etc.) have been exposed to negative indoctrination that immediately assumes deficits in youth rather than building a foundation on their strengths (Delpit, 1995).

My former foster sibling, Bo, offers a case in point. Bo had a difficult time writing and reading and it took him longer to articulate his thoughts, not because he wasn't able to read or write, but he didn't have the opportunity to practice those skills outside of school in

his biological home. To anyone who didn't know what his life looked like outside of school, this might come across as lazy or an unwillingness to learn and succeed. The reality though was that once Bo came home from school he became a caretaker to his younger siblings. He fed his brother and sister, played with them, put on their pajamas, and put them to bed. Without having this knowledge of what his home life looked like and his abilities outside of school, he was destined to be labeled. What if we flip the script? What if Bo was recognized for his ability to not only take care and provide for himself, but his siblings as well? What if we viewed him for his strength to nurture and take care of his siblings and to get himself dressed and ready for school each day? Shifting the way we speak *about* and *to* our youth doesn't mean that we don't recognize their challenges, it does not make those challenges any less significant, but it does change how we perceive them and how they perceive themselves.

It is important that we as a society begin to have critical conversations around the ways in which the practice of labeling, consciously and unconsciously, continues to feed hegemonic structures that add propellant to social inequity and exclusion. Wall (2008) notes, "children too can be granted, on the perspective, a basic set of rights to be treated with dignity and respect" (p.134). Swadener et al. (2013) encourages ethical consideration of children's rights and recommend an evolution where we move away from deciding factors on behalf of children and shift to listening to them and taking their views and concerns into account, ultimately sharing the decision-making process and power *with* children.

Fostering an Educator

The events narrated above occurred over two decades ago, and even though I was quite small at the time, those events eventually changed the trajectory of my future. I remember my foster siblings and their time with us very well, but I wasn't old enough to

comprehend the challenges that they were faced with or understand how their adversity was impacting their daily lives. Growing up, my family would cautiously warn people to choose their words wisely when critiquing me or a situation involving me. They'd say "*be careful what you say, she wears her heart on her sleeve*" or "*she's a little sensitive, you're going to make her cry*." In fact, I cried so much through childhood that they used the term "crocodile tears" when they thought I was crying to alter the situation or get myself out of punishment. I like to think of myself as an empath, and have always been distraught when other people are hurting - I wear my heart on my sleeve but often I wear others' as well. I think that this was evident while my foster siblings were in our care, I picked up on their hurt and would try to calm them or help them feel loved and safe. I wanted to comfort them, and I wanted them to be a part of our family. My mom would often refer to me as the "helper," if Lilly was screaming because my mom wouldn't let her eat with her hands, I'd say "*Look Lilly, I have a fork too! We are big girls and big girls use forks! Can you try it like me?*" Lilly looked up to me, and as a result, wanted to copy everything that I did. I sometimes would use this fondness to help my mom make her more comfortable in situations and to help distract her from her challenges. During my childhood and adolescence, I felt like we helped my foster siblings find their way and kickstarted them into a better life. But, in reality, it was my foster siblings who helped me find *my* way.

I fully believe that God carefully selects each of our paths in life and that before we've even stepped foot onto this Earth, that He knows *our* heart. He sends people into our lives that will continue to point us in the right direction and no matter how hard we fight that internal pull, we'll eventually find our designated path. My foster siblings helped me find *my* path, though I wouldn't realize this until decades after they left our home. Throughout

primary and secondary school I had aspirations of becoming a veterinarian. With a heart for animals and a love of science, every academic milestone put me closer to reaching my dreams. I specifically chose North Carolina State University for my collegiate career knowing that they had one of the highest accreditations for veterinary science. During spring semester of my junior year, which is typically the year you begin making plans and checking off boxes for graduate school, my path shifted. As part of my application requirements for volunteer hours, I had agreed to work with middle school youth at a local magnet school's after school program. The magnet school focused on STEM, so it was an ideal position to help me engage with scientific content and earn volunteer hours. That fall, in the noisy echoes of the cafeteria, surrounded by my kids designing roller coasters out of pool noodles and tracking kinetic energy, I *fell in love* with teaching. I feel like my love for children and science was grounded in my soul when I entered this world, but I didn't realize how strong God's magnetic field was. A few weeks later, I called mom to tell her about the volunteer work I'd been doing and how much I adored it. I said, "M*om, I think I want to pursue a teaching license after graduation.*" I'll pause here and let you hypothesize how *that* conversation went. During my entire academic career, from Kindergarten up until this very moment I had never wavered from my plans to become a veterinarian. On the first day of Kindergarten when my teacher asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I knew without a doubt. Every single goal my parents and I had set for fifteen years, was centered around that career. So, imagine her shock (and disappointment) when I told her a group of thirty after-school students had repositioned my career plans. It wasn't a "*Well, perhaps you could do that after vet school*" it was a "*Whitney Danielle Greene -- absolutely not*" response. Unfortunately for her, she genetically passed down her temper and stubbornness,

and so I persisted. Those students pushed me back onto the path that my foster siblings had initiated so many years before. After graduation, I attended Appalachian State University in pursuit of my middle school teaching license in science.

During my education classes at Appalachian, I began to learn about child growth and development and how children learn in particular environments. As we were discussing *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, I had a watershed moment. This change of course that I had so suddenly added to my career itinerary, wasn't a mistake or misinterpreted. *This* was where I was supposed to be, *this* is what I was meant to do. The events leading up to this point, had all perfectly aligned so that I was living out my destiny. My "heart-on-my-sleeve" wasn't put there by mistake, it wasn't a weakness, it was a *tool* that would help me serve the children who found their way into my classroom. In the next set of experiences, *They Taught Me*, I will detail the experiences I had as a first-year teacher in a brand-new magnet school that focused on reading comprehension.

They Taught Me

In this section, I revisit my first year of teaching which took place during the 2013-2014 school year at a Title 1 school that was predominantly Black. The purpose of this section is to critically deconstruct, through these narratives, the way we teach and view students with ACEs (usually labeled as "*at-risk*") and how these deficit-based approaches produce and preserve the power structures while maintaining the systems of oppression in education. This section explores how a deficit lens shaped the narrative about my students with ACEs (i.e, as broken, defective, unworthy) and how they were viewed and labeled. This set of experiences and stories are from *my* viewpoint and how I interpreted the challenges that my students and their families faced during my time with them. I am writing this from within my own classroom walls, as an insider who has seen these policies and procedures continue to label my students as *throwaways*, continuing to hinder their spirit and self-worth. In order to protect their privacy, identifying information has been altered.

Along Interstate 85 at exit 204 sits a town six square miles wide. Locals refer to the point of entry as the "ol' train tracks" that was once known as the Oxford and Clarksville Railroad. The median household income is $56,924. According to the 2020 Census, Granville County consists of 61,986 people of which 64% identify as White, 31% Black or African American, 1% American Indian, 9% Hispanic or Latino and 2% two or more races. The town of Oxford is located in Granville County, North Carolina and is home to the first Masonic Orphanage for children. Of the 11,519 children living in the county, 44% are living in poor or low-income households and 19% are food insecure. The delinquency rate per 1,000 youth ages 6-17 is 11% and the rate for abuse or neglect per 1,000 children is 25%. Of

the county's third grade population, only 32% scored proficient in reading (NC Child, 2022). This statistic is where my story begins.

As my student teaching experience was quickly wrapping up at Valle Crucis Elementary School, I was preparing to secure a classroom of my own for the upcoming school year. One particular opportunity stood out from the rest, a new magnet school was being formed and they were hiring for a middle school science position. Since the school building hadn't been secured yet and the administration were only in the beginning stages of planning, my interview was held via phone which I did not oppose at the time since it was a three-hour drive away. On the morning of the interview my mentor teacher set me up a quiet spot in the science closet and wished me luck. As I sat there surrounded by skeletons and microscopes, I answered the questions that Mr. Miller asked (name has been changed for privacy) to the best of my ability and provided how I would respond to each of his posed scenarios. When the conversation slowed, assuming the interview was over I thanked him for his time and told him I looked forward to hearing from him soon. He replied with "*Let's cut to the chase, to be honest I've already spoken with each of your references. I don't need a few days or weeks to think about it, Ms. Greene, I'd like to offer you a position today.*" Taken back by his quick footing, I asked if I could have a few days to think about it. Not that I was nervous or no longer wanted the position, but I'd never been offered a job on the spot and to be honest I didn't want to seem like I was gullible enough to take the first job that was handed to me. I exited the closet, and the look of shock must have remained on my face because my mentor teacher met me with a confused look. "*Well, how'd it go?*" he said. "*You're not going to believe this. He offered me a job today,*" I said. Mr. Miller had already called and spoke to my mentor teacher prior to offering me the interview; he had already

spoken to my references and reviewed my portfolios. The offer was to be part of a teacher-led magnet school which would begin with a cohort in sixth grade and ninth grade in the upcoming school year, each year the magnet school would then add another cohort of sixth and ninth graders until capacity was met. In this particular style, there was no principal. Mr. Miller would be serving as the lead teacher to serve as a person-in-charge in case of emergencies or to handle extreme behavior situations, but all other capacities and decisions would be left up to the teachers to decide as a team. This was intriguing to me as a new teacher, a place where I could be part of the decision-making process and have the autonomy to run my classroom and the school alongside my peers. One key component of our conversation during the interview was focused around the type of teacher Mr. Miller was looking to fill the classrooms, he mentioned words like: fresh, innovative, spirited, passionate and spry. I don't think Mr. Miller had ill intentions towards veteran teachers; we are all aware that veteran teachers are some of the most knowledgeable people in the education field. But, looking back with hindsight, the decision to hire rookie teachers makes more sense because of the climate and culture that the magnet school had instituted. Out of the ten teachers who had been selected for the school (other than Mr. Miller) six had been in the classroom less than three years and three were first-year teachers. It is also important to note here, nine out of the ten teachers hired were White. Traditional methods of teaching were not going to work here, and veteran teachers can be ingrained in their ways (though I fully respect their wisdom and dedication to the field). The magnet school was a new endeavor sparked by the superintendent and operated as a public, state funded school. It was built on a foundational concept using *Common Instructional Framework* that originated at University Park Campus in Worcester, MA. University Park Campus School was a collaboration

between Worcester Public Schools and Clark University, it opened in 1997 and serves students in 7-12 grades. According to the school, many students arrive at their doors (an urban public setting) with limited beliefs about what their future could entail. The school uses group work, team problem solving, develops agency with student-led meetings and activities, low-stakes writing and assessments, and personal reflection to foster their students to take ownership of their actions and lives, and to ultimately believe in the success of their future. The school was rated silver in the *U.S. News and World Report Best High Schools of 2015*. From the years 2010-2015, 8th and 10th graders improved their state test scores by 52%. Since 2012, 100% of University Park Campus students have been accepted into college with 85% actually enrolling (Edutopia, 2022). It is easy to see how this foundational concept would be attractive to educational leadership and why the Common Instructional Framework would be implemented into the magnet school. As mentioned in my introductory narrative of this dissertation, a large percentage of students in Granville County were not meeting state standards for reading and there was a push from educational leadership to remedy these gaps by implementing a non-traditional program at a test-site (Granville Magnet School). The magnet school would use the guiding principles from University Park Campus School and would implement the Common Instructional Framework to help their students thrive.

The adventure that I was about to embark on was going to be the most challenging chapter I would walk through in my career. The gap between my student teaching placement and the first teacher workday was only a month; the magnet school would operate on a year-round schedule and I spent those weeks prepping for my new space. It's an odd practice prepping for a space you've never seen before but the amount of time I spent in Ikea and Staples color coding literally every aspect of my soon-to-be classroom is embarrassing to

admit. Since I would be teaching sixth grade earth science, where the majority of the curriculum is focused around the earth and its phenomena, I had decided on a blue and green color theme to symbolize the earth's land and seas. Naturally, as a new teacher filled with creative mojo, I had also centered my theme around a "science is a real hoot" motto and had secured every owl decoration in my path. I crammed all of my color-coded buckets, bulletin board decor, and fresh school supplies into my car and I headed off full of excitement for the first teacher workday.

I had never seen the building that had been secured for the magnet school, but the building that my GPS took me to that morning certainly did not resemble a school. It was a medium sized building with dirty tin sides and double blue doors that were chipped from years of neglect. There was no signage, no flower beds or fresh mulch, no painted murals or "welcome back to school" banner hanging from the columns. My immediate thought was that I had mistakenly entered the incorrect address, so I pulled out my paperwork and double checked. Yep, this *was* it. If *I* felt this way about entering into the building, how would the *students* feel? Nonetheless, I parked in the adjacent gravel lot and began to carry my boxes into the building. The room that was assigned to me was chosen specifically because it was the only room in the building that had a sink. As a science teacher I was very grateful for it so I wasn't upset that I wasn't part of the "room picking musical chairs" that was going on amongst the other staff. My room consisted of damaged cream-colored walls, stained carpet, a wall of metal framed windows and lots and lots of dust and spiderwebs. I grew up on a farm and was no stranger to hard work, but this space was going to take a lot of elbow grease before I could even unpack the first box of classroom decorations. I knew that this building was in bad shape, and significantly dilapidated, more so than any other school that I had

encountered. The thought crossed my mind a time or two that this shabby building might be a sign that I made a wrong choice, and I admittedly mentioned to my mom that I may have gotten myself into a mess. But, I had signed a contract and "mama didn't raise a quitter!" When I signed my name on that line, I committed to a full school year and so that's what I was going to give this opportunity. Plus, I wasn't alone. The feelings about the building were mutual among the staff and it was agreed that over time (and with a little elbow grease) that we would be able to transform it. The original plan for the magnet school was to grow by grade level each year, if all panned out, the building would only last us for three years before a bigger (hopefully newer) space would have to be acquired. Knowing that, I could see why there wasn't a lot of remodeling or efforts put into making the space more functional prior to this moment.

I spent two days wiping the room down from floor to ceiling, puttying holes and scratches in the walls, washing carpet, and cleaning windows. Everyone else sanitized their rooms but seemed to look over the imperfections on the walls, or they used classroom posters to cover them up. I rhetorically asked Mr. Miller if I could paint my classroom walls, knowing that this wasn't your typical "pristine" environment that the admin wanted to preserve. I painted the top half of the room a bright green and the bottom half a dark blue, leaving the cream-colored molding in between to represent earth's equator. When Mr. Miller stopped by to check on my progress, he smiled and said, "*Well if they're not awake by the time they get to school, they'll be awake by science class. And they'll certainly not forget your name with those green walls*." We both laughed as we could picture the kids saying "*Oh yeah, you need to go to Ms. Greene's room -- you know, the one with the bright green walls.*"

Looking back now it seems a bit theatrical to have such a bold set of colors on the wall, but the kids who were about to enter those four walls would forever change me.

Open House

I was pretty proud of the "fixer upper" of a classroom that I had created in such a short amount of time and now it was time to meet all of my students and their families. All of my classroom tables had been labeled and color coded in a scavenger hunt style game for my students to visit and complete their back-to-school paperwork. To this day, I still remember the sparkle in each of their eyes when they stopped at my door and slowly looked around the room to take it all in. One little girl, who we'll call Anna, hid behind her mom at table 1 and seemed to be a bit nervous. I overheard her mom tell her to look around at all of the owl stuff and that it was a sign that she would be okay. I grabbed an owl pencil and an owl cookie and walked up to the family to introduce myself. Handing her the goodies, she reached out and said "*I've never seen so many owl things before in my life, I love it in here*." Later that evening her mom had stopped back by while Anna was meeting another teacher and said, "*You'll never know what this means to her. We recently adopted Anna and she has some severe challenges that we are trying to work through. She did not want to change schools but we know this is needed for her success. When she came to us from the orphanage, the only item that she had from her biological home was a stuffed owl toy. She fought me tooth and nail to come to the open house tonight, but when we stepped into your classroom and she saw all of the owl stuff, she immediately changed her attitude. You have no idea what that small connection will mean to her or I, thank you Ms. Greene.*"

I wasn't very familiar with the orphanage but prior to the open house, Mr. Miller had loaded us all up on a school bus and drove us from one end of the county to the other. He

thought it was important for us to see where our students were coming from and how they lived. The majority of our students were local to Oxford and lived within five miles of the school, but we did have a few that lived on the eastern and western ends of the county. When we drove by the Masonic Home for Children at Oxford, Mr. Miller mentioned that we would have a couple students who lived in the orphanage and that their caretaker contact would shift. The orphanage is a residential group care facility that utilizes "house moms and dads" that rotate on a bi-weekly basis. The children in the orphanage might be there while they await reunification with their birth family, for re-socialization or behavioral changes, to prepare for adult living, academic remediation, or in preparation for adoption (Masonic Home for Children at Oxford, 2020). Anna was one of the first families that I met that night at Open House and as I thought about what her adoptive mom had said, I knew that this old building and the children who were beginning to fill it were meant to be. Just as Anna saw the owls in my classroom and made an immediate connection to her past, I heard Anna's story and made an immediate connection to my past as a foster sibling. My experience as a foster sister gave me a small glimpse into Anna's world and what rough seas she may be trying to navigate. Mr. Miller would have had no idea about these experiences and my connections to foster-care when he hired me, but it was these experiences that no one else knew about that created such a strong relationship between myself and my students in the weeks and months to come.

The rest of the night moved quickly, and I was very impressed at the number of students and families that had shown up to Open House. With a small exception, I had briefly met every student that would be in my 6th grade science classes. I was most shocked at the kids who showed up and introduced themselves but didn't have a parent with them. I said

"*Oh, you must have an older sibling in 9th grade. Is your parent with them*?" But, I was responded with many forms of "*No, I was dropped off. I'll walk home when I'm done and give them the papers.*" I was a little taken back by this, because a few nights before I had been at the school working late and taking advantage of the copy machine without a line when a patrol officer stopped by. He saw the light on and my car in the parking lot across the road and was worried for my safety. He told me that if I was ever there working late, to call the department and they would make sure that I was escorted to my car. Knowing this, I had assumed that the surrounding neighborhoods might not be safe after dark, but yet, several of my students told me they would walk home.

At this point, I was trying to piece together *why* several of the students showed up without parents. The open house was not only the kickstart to the school year but it was an opportunity for students and families to meet the teachers, to bring questions or concerns to the table, as well as the time to fill out important paperwork. This was also a brand-new school, and it operated completely different from the elementary schools each student had been a part of. It was designed to help close the gap that existed in their reading comprehension scores while supporting them in areas where traditional schooling had fallen short. We were also a year-round school, so we started in July, and it was important that parents had our schedule and realized how our two week breaks (tracks) would work. If I'm being honest, my first instinct at the end of that night was that their parents simply didn't care enough about their child's education to come to the open house. If they had a prior commitment or had to work, wouldn't they have sent another family member with their child to gather all of the important information? Perhaps a grandparent or their spouse? As I reflect on this now, I was assessing the situation through a deficit-based lens. I judged their

families' involvement based on my own experiences and privilege. Keep in mind, prior to the open house, the only information I had about my students was their name, address, age, race, sex, and generally speaking, which area of the county they resided in. I also knew that since they were on my roster, that meant that they had been admitted into the school through the lottery system, meeting the requirements for a reading comprehension below 2nd grade. I was also in a brand-new area where I really knew nothing about the local community or the culture. It's a common practice that teachers and administration encourage parents to support their children's academics at home and in the classroom; according to Lareau (1987), parental involvement is seen as consolidation of home *and* school. Research continues to be conducted and makes connections between academic success for students and high involvement levels of caretakers (Epsetin, 2001), and that lack of parental involvement may result in low success rates in students (Booth & Dunn, 1996).

However, the motivation of parental involvement to increase academic success fails to take into account issues of equity. There are higher rates of parental involvement in upper- and middle-class families than in low-income families (de Carvalho, 2001). When compared to higher-income communities and schools, rates of parental involvement are lower in low-income communities (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002). As a result, students coming from low-income households often receive fewer academic benefits and are "*at-risk*" for lower achievement (McLloyd, 1990). Yet, schools and teachers continue (just as I did) to request parental involvement without acknowledging socioeconomic status of the families they serve, disregarding the needs of low-income children and their families (Lareau, 2000). Despite the forceful endorsement from researchers and educational policymakers on parental involvement, school structure remains most conducive to middle and upper-class parents

(Goodwin & King, 2002). Lareau (2000) argues that low-socioeconomic parents are just as eager to help their children learn and succeed academically and that they value education just as much as their upper-class counterparts. Compton-Lilly (2003) also challenges the mainstream discourse that says low-socioeconomic families don't care about education. She details how these parents and caretakers seek to support their student's academic success from within their difficult social context. This results in their methods of involvement being compared to the mainstream and misinterprets their level of dedication as unresponsive or noncommittal.

Poverty presents unique barriers to traditional forms of parental involvement. It later became apparent to me in my role as teacher that even though our school operated outside the traditional bounds as far as schedule, class setup and curriculum, our expectations for parental involvement *were* traditionally focused. We expected parents to show up during the 2-hour timeframe for the open house that we had scheduled (around our calendars). This was the only opportunity that they had prior to the first day of school to meet the teachers, get supply lists, learn important school information and fill out paperwork. Van Velson and Orozco (2007) explained that work often interferes and prevents parents from committing time to their student's academics; for example, parents may be working multiple jobs to make ends meet or have inflexible work schedules or little time off. Bower and Griffin (2011) stated that lack of transportation or lack of child care may also contribute to families not attending school events. As our developing picture of the community we were serving and as our knowledge grew of the lives of our students' families, our understanding of parental involvement emerged and it began to look different. Parent communication changed from phone calls and parent-teacher conferences to emails, classroom newsletters (paper and

electronic), class websites that listed that day's activities and photos as well as homework, text messages, and conversations in the pickup/drop-off lines. We realized that one communication strategy did not meet the needs of all of our families. We spent time determining the most effective way to communicate with each caretaker based on their work schedules and home life. Several of our students didn't have internet access at home so we would provide those students paper copies and have their planners filled out with important due dates. Some of our parents worked 3rd shift, and to prevent waking them up during school hours, we would send a text message or email with the information we needed to communicate. We began to schedule our monthly parent-teacher conferences from 3:30 - 7:30 PM so that we had a larger window to accommodate caretaker schedules. Caretakers could come and meet with teachers right after school was over or later in the evening. We also allowed parents to schedule a phone-call instead of a face-to-face meeting during those conferencing times. This provided opportunity to parents who didn't have transportation, were commuting, or who had other kids in the home that they needed to attend to. My pre-existing feelings towards parents not showing up for the open house served as a springboard for my own improvement as an educator and how I perceive and communicate with my students and their families from multiple backgrounds.

Structuring for Success

Prior to the first day of school, the staff sat around a table and decided on the daily structure that would best serve our students. We also tried to make decisions that would set the foundation for our school's climate. School climate is defined as the "character and personality" of school life (Cohen et al., 2009). This includes the norms, beliefs, and expectations held by students and school staff, as well as the consistency and the quality of

relationships that exist between the two (Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997). Due to bus transportation schedules and drop-off/pick-up schedules at the middle school located down the road, we had to alter our start and end time. We decided on an 8:30 AM start time and a 3:20 PM end time, allowing families who had children at other schools enough time to get in and out of those car lines. As an educator, I was excited about this later start time knowing this would allow our students to be more awake by the time they came into our building and hopefully boost their academic performance. Typically, a child's wakeup time is dependent on their school's start time and their transportation to school, thus school start times may indirectly lead to poor school performance (Dworak et al., 2007). Children's ability to function throughout the day is based on adequate high-quality sleep (Paavonen et al., 2000). Consequently, children who do not get adequate sleep can show signs of irritability, impulsivity, difficulty focusing, mood disorders, emotional dysregulation, and poorer cognitive performance (Curcio et al., 2006). Buckhalt (2011) stated that there is an increased incidence of sleep deprivation in the context of low-socioeconomic children, potentially because of inadequate sleep surfaces, room temperatures, room sharing, noise, poor sleep hygiene and stress. Based on other research, we also decided to separate the students into gender[1] specific classes to improve their academic performance, reduce distracting behaviors, accommodate learning styles, and improve self-worth (Forde, 2008). Students would be

[1] People and even researchers (like the study I cited above) tend to use the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably. Even though they are connected, the two terms are not equivalent. Gender itself is complex, it is a social construction that has been disguised as a biological imperative. Newborns are assigned a sex at birth (male or female) based on genitals. Once that sex is assigned, we as a society presume the child's gender. Our gender may begin with the assignment of sex at birth, but it doesn't end there. A person's gender is personal and is informed by our unique intersections of identities and experiences. Forde (2008) refers to sorting classes by *gender* to improve academic performance but it is important to note that we actually had *sex-specefic* cohorts baseed on the student's sex at birth.

divided into gender-specific cohorts and they would move with that cohort all day long. We ended up having two male cohorts and three female cohorts. Each day would start off with a 15-minute homeroom, allowing students to arrive at school early and eat their breakfast in class prior to taking attendance and completing any housekeeping items.

One of the main distinctions between the magnet school and other county middle/high schools was the implementation of study hall (taken from the University Park Campus School). In our model, teachers from each subject would assign an assignment that should adequately fill the 57-minute space and that wouldn't require direct instruction. Study hall was conducted at the end of the day and each day of the week was focused on a different subject. On Mondays, all students would work on an assigned social studies assignment. On Tuesdays we did the same for science and so on. The 57-minutes was used as a way to reinforce what they had learned that week in the course, and as a replacement for assigning homework since most of our students didn't have internet access at home. Callahan, Rademacher and Hildreth (1998) state that there should be consistency between the purpose of homework and the type of assignment that is assigned. Some children have home life advantages that aid them in homework completion including available resources and technology, adequate lighting and workspaces, parental involvement, and minimal distractions (Glazer & Williams, 2001). However, low-socioeconomic students must overcome multiple disadvantages that make completing homework more difficult including: limited resources and access to technology, no parental involvement, limited work areas, and noise distractions (Corno, 2000). Taking this into account, study hall time was used as a replacement for homework and allowed all of our students to have equal access to an adult and technology. Friday's study hall time was "Family Friday" and it consisted of a school-

wide club time or school-wide event (assembly, pep-rally, pizza party, etc). Each teacher ran a club based on their personal interest and results from a student survey, each student was required to select one club to attend for that semester. Clubs were not gender or age specific, allowing students to meet and interact with each other. Students were also able to sit with any member of their grade level at lunch, allowing them another opportunity to build friendships outside of their gender cohort. By building this community and creating a whole-school approach it has a positive effect on students' motivation to learn, behavior, academic achievement, social attitudes and skills, and interpersonal relationships (Battistich, 2008).

Another school-wide policy the staff decided on was a strong *no cell-phone zone*. Cell phone use, for any reason, was impermissible inside the magnet school's hallways and classrooms. If a student had an emergency during the school day, they were sent to the office to utilize the office phone. Parents were also made aware that if they had an emergency, they could call the school's office and the message would be given to that child's course teacher at that time. This rule also applied to teachers; we were allowed to have our cell phones on vibrate and able to check them throughout the day but were not permitted to be on them when students were in our classroom.

Muller, Katz and Dance (1999) demonstrated that students shape their own educational expectations from their perceptions of their teachers' expectations. If a student perceives that their teacher has a high expectation of their academic achievement they are motivated to try to meet those expectations and perform better academically when compared to their peers who perceive low expectations (Muller et al., 1999). We used these strategies to create a family culture between the staff and students but to also eliminate distractions and consistently allow students to take ownership of their education and learning. We had support

systems built internally throughout the school day and week. Students were able to build relationships with their teachers, their classmates, their "family," their homeroom, and the entire school body. Parallel to attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1982), positive relationships enable students to feel safe and secure within their learning environment and help them to practice important social skills (Baker et al., 2008). Building these spaces for relationships to occur organically was an essential step in meeting our students' basic needs. Through these peer relationships, students are able to build self-esteem and self-concept (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). When they felt supported at school and had someone they could rely on (whether it was a teacher, a friend, or an older "family" buddy in 9th grade) they began to feel safe and valued.

(Mis)Behavior

One of the central conversations at the planning table among staff was around behavior. As mentioned earlier, the traditional model of schooling was questioned and a new instructional framework put into place, but that also meant that we questioned other components of day-to-day methods. Dealing with behavioral issues was something we knew we would need a strong frontline for, and we all wanted to create a school culture where students, parents, and staff were respected. Schools and educators are becoming increasingly aware that their students may have experienced various forms of trauma and how these traumatic experiences can adversely impact how a student behaves in school. We often think of trauma as being directly related to a single event in our lives that was upsetting or frightening. However, many children experience trauma frequently as a result of ongoing domestic violence, abuse, neglect, homelessness or violence in their community (Jaycox et al., 2009).

Exposure to chronic trauma can result in “impacts to learning, behavior, and social, emotional, and psychological functioning” (Kuban & Steele, 2011, p.41). Since we were divided into grade level teams, 6th grade team and 9th grade team, we created a teacher buddy system. Each teacher partnered up with another team teacher who was close to their classroom. All of our classrooms had a “bounce station” set up in the back corner of our room. Students who act out due to trauma need a supportive and safe classroom space, as well as a consistent and collaborative approach to school discipline (Pathways to Restorative Communities, 2021). Our classroom bounce stations consisted of either a desk/chair or a beanbag and had a box of items that might help a student calm down or aid in reflection. These stations allowed students to practice calming techniques, express their feelings, heal broken connections, and be supported by an adult they trusted. My box had a water bubble tube, silly putty, stress balls, a rubix cube, and fidget toys. If a student was having a challenging day or had disrupted the classroom learning environment with behavior issues, the teacher would give them a clipboard with their assignment attached and bounce them to their teacher buddy’s classroom. We had very strict procedures for the student entering another classroom, they knew that after getting the bounce clipboard that they were to quietly grab their stuff and exit the classroom. They were to then walk down the hallway and quietly enter the teacher buddy’s classroom without causing any disturbance and find their way to the bounce station. Once that teacher had a break in their lesson, they would check-in with the student to see if they could help them reflect on their decisions or offer them advice with handling their emotions/actions. The student could use any of the items in the box to aid in this reflection while they worked on their assignment. The student was to remain in that classroom until that period had ended and then would return to their normal schedule.

Conflict and behavior challenges are inevitable in the classroom, however, choosing a restorative approach to discipline rather than a punitive one can be the difference between continuing or breaking the trauma cycle (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). All behavioral issues were first tackled using the bounce system, and if the behavior persisted or became a bigger issue, Mr. Miller was called in and usually the child's caretaker.

If you've been a part of the education system you've probably heard the advice "don't smile until Christmas" in order to remain in control of your classroom. It's easier to start off strict and then ease up mid-year, than it is to regain control. Though I'm not a full believer in the advice, more to come on that later, we as a staff spent most of the first few weeks implementing and repeating procedures so that students knew what was expected of them. We also tried to keep the procedures the same throughout the entire school. Examples included our class dismissal policy, how to move between classes, and what to do once in a class. These strict procedures that we had ingrained in them allowed them to move throughout their day without disrupting other classes and students and kept expectations at the forefront of their minds. We also had a reward policy that helped remind them of expectations. During one of our planning days, we decided as a staff that we wanted to focus on good behavior, not bad behavior. Mr. Miller had brought up instances in his teaching career where an unraveled student had completely derailed the learning environment for the other students. Focusing on negative behaviors instead of positive ones can leave students feeling dispirited and confused about how they should handle situations (Anderson, 2019). In an effort to use preventative tactics and encourage good behavior, we created a marble system. Each morning every teacher and staff would put three marbles in their pocket. As they went about their day, if they saw a student engaging in a kind behavior (holding a door

open, picking up a piece of trash in the hallway, helping another student in time of need), they'd quietly hand them a marble and smile. When we state expectations in a positive manner, we are assuming that students have the best of intentions, which creates a culture of respect and a classroom climate of trust. We can't assume that all students know how to behave in a school setting the way that we want them to; by rewarding students when a specific behavior was enacted we set them up for success with expectations. Setting unrealistic expectations or not being clear and specific with our language leaves classrooms feeling chaotic, and teachers spending too much time extinguishing fires and reacting to behavior mistakes (Anderson, 2019).

During homeroom on Fridays, students would turn in their marbles for prizes (pencils, candy, bookmarks, toys, etc.) but prior to that, the homeroom teacher would count up how many marbles their students had earned that week and put them into a spreadsheet. During the last Friday of the month, we had a school-wide marble assembly where all homerooms lined the school's hallway and Mr. Miller would call up a student from each homeroom to put their accumulated marbles (and proudly announce their count) into the jar. The homeroom with the most marbles each month was the proud winner of an ice-cream party. Supporting schoolwide positive behavior is multi-faceted, there are several components to promote a positive school culture and prevent challenging behavior. These include: teaching the behaviors at the start of the school year, consistent reminders, a reward system to acknowledge appropriate behavior, corrective consequences for inappropriate behavior, uniform and constant implementation, and targeted support for students who exhibit challenging behavior (Taylor-Greene et al., 1997). Even though the strict procedures, bounce stations, and marbles adequately helped us maintain a school and classroom culture

of learning, we did have our fair share of behavioral challenges. We also learned that we needed to be reflective as a staff and shift policies and procedures to accommodate issues as they arose.

Creating a Compassionate Classroom

Collin, a male student who lived at the orphanage, became the topic of conversation amongst the staff after school one day. To be honest, I was shocked that his name came up and what the other teachers were saying about him. During all of his classes that day he had been disrespectful to his teachers and refused to do any work. I mentioned that I had never seen that behavior in my class and that he had been as pleasant as always, completed all of his work, and even offered to help with cleaning my Whiteboard that day. Everyone was shocked because he had been bounced out of all of their classrooms. To make the situation even more ironic, I had Collin during third period, so that meant that he had been bounced during the first half of his day, fine during my class, and then been bounced at the end of the day. I mentioned that maybe he had a rough night at the orphanage or maybe something was going on personally with his fostering process and if his behavior continued, I'd be glad to talk to him and see if I could dig around a bit to see what might be contributing to the behavior. The school counselor also agreed that she'd be glad to talk to Collin as well and help him regulate his emotions. Even though I didn't have the context of ACEs at this point, I did have experience with children who had been removed from their parents. I was aware that children entered the orphanage either due to neglect or maltreatment *or* they were voluntarily sent by family due to behavior challenges. I wasn't sure *how* Collin had ended up in the orphanage's care, but I was aware of the trauma that came from removing a child from their family and a disruption in routine. The process of being removed from your home and

placed into foster care, even when there are good intentions, can have negative effects that last a lifetime (Bruskas, 2008). Children are impacted by a variety of factors, including "the psychological and neurobiological effects associated with disrupted attachment to biological parents, the specific traumatic experiences (e.g., neglect and/or abuse) that necessitated placement, the emotional disruption of placement, and the need to adjust to the foster care environment" (Racusin et al., 2005, p. 200). Removal from their home and shifts in placement can lead to feelings of instability, loss of status, and loss of control (Schneider & Phares, 2005). Youth may also worry that they will be treated differently in school if their peers or teachers find out that they are in foster care (Bruskas, 2008). Collin was in a new school setting and in an environment where he was surrounded by male students for the majority of the day. He was only one of the three White males we had in 6th grade, and I began to notice that he didn't make friends easily, he seemed to be alone most of the time.

The next day I was on my way to the copier during my planning period when I saw Collin sitting outside his classroom, concerned and still in awe from yesterday's staff conversation, I stopped and said "*Hey buddy, are you okay*?" He looked up and told me he'd been bounced but then was disruptive in that class so that teacher told him to come out into the hall until Mr. Miller could talk to him. I asked him if he'd like to come sit in my classroom until Mr. Miller was available; it was my planning period and I didn't want him getting in more trouble for being out in the hall. He continued to look down at the floor, softly nodded his head yes and stood up. I peeked my head into his teacher's room, whispered I had Collin in my classroom in case of a fire-drill or emergency and we walked down the hallway. Once in my room, he walked right to his assigned seat and pulled out his work and started working. I let him work for a few minutes and watched him out of the

corner of my eye, waiting for an outburst or a glimpse of bad behavior that had secluded him out into the hallway, but *nothing*. Once his pencil became dull he even raised his hand into the air and lifted his index finger to symbolize "one" (the procedure I had in my classroom that correlated with a specific task—one finger to ask if he could get up to sharpen his pencil). I nodded my head *yes* and sat in disbelief that this kid, who would still use his hand signals to ask to get out of his seat in an empty classroom, would disrupt someone else's classroom. When the bell rang, I told him to gather his stuff and I'd walk him to his next class. I dropped him off with his cohort at the end of the hallway and said, "*I hope you have a good rest of your day, I'll see you tomorrow in science.*"

I was halfway through my demonstration on how land breezes and sea breezes impact weather when someone knocked on my classroom door, my "door monitor" quickly rose from her seat and opened the door and there stood Collin. I told the class to continue drawing out their diagrams in their science notebooks and labeling the breezes and I'd be right back. Shutting the door behind me I said, "*Hey bud, what's up*?" He handed me a yellow sticky note that said "*Can Collin sit with you this period? He's already been bounced and been disruptive."* Disheartened, I asked him what was going on in all of his other classes and told him I'd never seen this kind of disruptive behavior that other teachers were seeing. He continued to look down at the floor and he shrugged his shoulders. I asked him if he needed a space to cool down or if he'd like to talk about it, and he said he just wanted to cool down. I gave him a few minutes to cool down and while my students were working on their group activity, I went to the back of the room and asked him again if he wanted to talk about it. He said "*I get so angry sometimes, it's like my insides fill with rage and I can't help it, it just comes out Ms. Greene*." I told him that we all get angry, and that's normal; we all have our

own triggers and what sets us off but that doesn't mean we can hurt other people with our words or be disrespectful. I asked him if he was disrespectful to his other teachers and he said he was, we talked through ways that he could control his anger when he was mad (counting backwards from ten in his head, deep breaths, tracing the lines on his palm). We also talked about respect and how he could regulate his emotions in a way that wasn't disruptive or disrespectful to his peers or teacher. I went over to my desk and grabbed a brand-new notebook and placed it in front of him. I told him that sometimes when I'm upset or dealing with a lot of emotions in my head and in my heart, it helps me to write about it in my journal. I told him that he could have the notebook and if he'd like, he could write about what's bothering him. He asked me if he could keep the notebook in my room and I told him I'd keep it in my top desk drawer, he could grab it anytime he needed it.

Students who have experienced trauma or been exposed to violence often feel isolated, they might feel like they can't control their own lives, and they might have difficulty managing their emotions. In a classroom setting, this can lead to behavior challenges that become problematic. Using a restorative approach to discipline assumes that behavior is a form of communication, students are only doing the best they can in that moment - emotionally, physically and developmentally (Pathways to Restorative Communities, 2021). However, punitive school discipline holds the students accountable for their actions through reprimanding until they learn to behave "better." In this traditional style of discipline, teachers are authoritative figures and their decisions are applied *to* the student, usually in some form of segregation or isolation from their peers (e.g., lunch detention or in-school suspension). After school that day, I told the other teachers what had happened and asked for more details on what Collin was doing in their classroom, trying to figure out what

triggered these responses I had heard about but never seen. I also mentioned that we didn't know what type of situation Collin went home to everyday at the orphanage *or* what life events happened prior to him being sent to the orphanage. I think at this point, most of the teachers were comparing Collin to our other students who also resided at the orphanage. Since none of those students were acting out or being disruptive, they had a hard time linking Collin's behavior to his childhood adversity. They also couldn't believe that Collin had been so complacent and respectful to me and in my class, they asked me how I handled his outbursts but honestly, I couldn't answer because he had never had one with me. We decided that instead of having a strict bounce buddy system, that some students had built stronger relationships with other teachers so we altered our system to where that student could go to that teacher's bounce station if needed. This was important because even though misbehavior was occurring, it became an opportunity for growth and reflection *in* a space where the student had already built a trusting relationship with that teacher.

For an entire week, Collin found his way to my room almost daily but I could not figure out why he treated me differently than all of his other teachers. I wasn't sure at what point Collin and I had entered into this trusting relationship that he apparently didn't share with other staff members, but I felt like I was the only one in his corner. If I felt that way as an adult, how did he feel as a student in our school? We spent so much time as a staff creating a school culture that was grounded in relationships, respect and safety. It appeared to me though that the moment our disciplinary system didn't work for him he was labeled as a "problem" because of his behavior. Since this behavior was occurring in all of his classes except mine, everyone perceived *Collin* as the problem, and not our disciplinary system or teaching strategies or (knowing now) his trauma exposure. One day, during my planning

period I decided to pop into the class he was in to observe and see if I could pick up on what was triggering his anger. As I walked in, I said in a loud enough voice that the students could hear "*I'm sorry to bother you Ms. Burchette, they're working on the air condition outside of my room and it's really loud. Do you mind if I work in here and use your computer during my planning period*?" I didn't want Collin or any of the other students to know why I was *really* there, so I turned my back to the students and pretended to work while listening intently. Ms. Burchette was a wonderful teacher and extremely knowledgeable about math, she spent countless hours after school each day coming up with real-word scenarios and situations to help her students apply their knowledge. As I was listening though, I picked up on what might have been triggering Collin. Students were called on in "popcorn" style to come to the board and solve a problem in front of the class, which might be fine if you were a student who excelled in math and were confident in your maneuvers. For a student who wasn't math-minded or who lacked confidence in that particular lesson, this might create feelings of anxiousness or low self-worth. I also noticed that if a student wasn't on task, they were called out by their name and given direction. For instance, "*Timmy, please stop tapping your pencil on the desk and get back to work*."

To reiterate, these teaching tactics and classroom management might not be unfavorable to all students, but to a student who was dealing with challenges (perhaps from their home life), this might trigger them. I went back to my classroom and tried to compare how I taught. I wasn't trying to place my teaching capabilities above anyone else's, but there had to be something different about my classroom that wasn't triggering Collin as opposed to his others.

From the moment I decided to become an educator, classroom management was one area that I strongly focused on. I wanted a classroom culture that inspired my students to learn from each other (not just me) and where wrong answers were okay because that meant we were trying. I wanted my students to support each other and lift each other up, so I made it a point to create that kind of environment from day one. I also normalized mistakes. On the third day of school, I was writing out key terms and definitions for our plants unit while the students copied them down on their flashcards and I accidentally spelled *transportation* instead of *transpiration.* I heard a few giggles coming from behind me as I continued to write, and I turned around to see what was going on. A student said, "*Ms. Greene, I don't mean to be rude but I don't think cars and buses sweat out water into the atmosphere*. *And I don't think they have stems.*" Realizing my mistake, I sat down on top of my desk with my head in my hands, shook my head, and giggled. I said, "*Listen girls, just because I'm a teacher and I stand up here each day telling you what you need to learn -- does not mean I'm perfect and I don't want you to think of me as such. I'm human, I make mistakes. I don't know everything, this is my first time teaching 6th grade. We'll learn together and it's okay to make errors. Thank you for catching that silly mistake!*" I also wanted my students to have a voice in their learning, to feel free to question me or to share their opposing viewpoints.

Most teacher-student relationships, both inside and outside the school building, are fundamentally built on narrative characteristics. The relationship entails the narrator (the teacher) giving the contents of knowledge to the listeners (the students), and the narrator builds this reality that is motionless and predictable. Education becomes an act of depositing, where students are an open bucket riding on a conveyor belt and the teacher deposits the knowledge into their bucket as they pass through. The students become knowledge "banks"

where they receive knowledge, memorize it, and repeat it (Freire, 2000). This banking model of education does not fit with my values as a teacher who prefers to facilitate a productive and collective learning environment. Contrary to popular belief, science is not black and White, there are lots of gray areas. I encouraged them to use the scientific reasoning skills I was teaching them and apply them to concepts from their viewpoints. As educators we must introduce the world to our students in a way so that they can develop their own unique opinions but think critically, creatively and respectfully. Although I was unaware that I was doing it at the time, I was dismantling the banking concept (Freire, 2000) in my classroom and along with it the attitudes and practices that maintain power. According to Freire (2000), banking education resists dialogue, inhibits creativity and domesticates. I had begun to break down the student-teacher contradiction within my classroom walls; I worked hard to share power with my students. I encouraged them to speak up and share but I also created a safe space to do so, where they weren't judged or ridiculed if their beliefs were different from their peers. My students were not limited to the thoughts of the curriculum; they had the freedom to share their experiences and their opinions about what *we* were learning as long as they were respectful and didn't speak over each other or devalue someone else's thoughts.

I made it a point to spend no more than ten minutes each period standing in front of the class. I would quickly go over important terminology for the day or do a mini-lecture on the topic, but the majority of the class was centered around dialogue and experimentation. Students were involved in their learning and each other's learning. We would often sit in a circle and discuss complex scientific issues (using the vocabulary from the curriculum) or we would spend the period conducting an experiment and every table would utilize a different scientific variable and then share out their results, together we would form a conclusion of

what happened and why. It was a safe space to make mistakes, and students (and myself) learned from each other. When a student was off task or partaking in a behavior that strayed from our classroom policies, I would quietly slip a small laminated stop sign onto their desk. It was a silly piece of clip art that had an owl holding up a stop sign and on the back it said "please stop what you are doing and make a better choice." I believe this is why Collin didn't act out in my classroom. I did not call students out for poor behavior or to push them back on task, I didn't make a scene. I also didn't utilize the popcorn method or call on students specifically. I would call on a table number instead. I would say something like, "*Does someone at table 4 want to share with us the impacts on natural disasters to wildlife? Take a few seconds and discuss it amongst your tablemates and then share it with the class."* This tactic allowed students who were shy about speaking up or who possibly didn't know the answer to bounce ideas off their tablemates and compose an answer together, then share that answer with the class. I'd follow up with "*Great job! You listed three impacts, table 5 do you have anything you can add to our list?*" Most of the time, children in crisis do not feel heard or valued. By doing this, students were able to participate and learn safely without fear of rejection or being wrong. I was able to anticipate and circumvent the threats that might hinder their self-esteem or self-worth, which ultimately increased their learning and willingness to try (even if they answered incorrectly), because they volunteered to answer instead of being called out. It preserved their feeling of control. It was important to avoid any practice that might have the potential to cause, trigger, or reactivate trauma. This tactic also helped to manage the peer networks and social hierarchies of the classroom, students were grouped by tables randomly and their tables operated like a small community (Jennings, 2019).

A few days before Christmas break, I was deep in the trenches of a s'mores lab with my students showcasing tectonic plate movement when a student busted opened my door and said "*Ms. Greene, come quick, Ms. Smith needs you NOW*!" I told my students to remain in their seats and to keep working until I came back and rushed down the hallway. When I got to the door I saw Collin outside the doorway and Ms. Smith and a couple of her students holding the door shut, Collin was banging and punching the door. She saw me and shouted that they were outside for recess when Collin got into an argument with another student, picked up a chair and threw it, and then proceeded to swing and punch at the other student. I squeezed my way through the crowd and told them to let go of the door so that I could slip through to the outside, she yelled "*No, he'll hit you! I just didn't know who else to call. You're the only one who he'll listen to*." I motioned again for them to let go of the door, cautiously said "*I don't think he'll hit me*" and squeezed through the door frame. Once on the other side, I motioned for Ms. Smith and the students to go back to their classrooms and I locked the door so that Collin couldn't get back inside. Collin instantly fell to his knees and began to scream and cry. Collin had very light, pale skin and blonde hair. As I sat on the stairs below him, I remember thinking that I had never seen someone's skin turn that shade of red before. I calmly sat there for five minutes, never speaking a word, and let him slam his fists on the ground and let out his screams. I remember thinking that I just wanted to wrap my arms around him and let him know he's okay, he's safe, he's loved. I didn't believe for a minute that he would ever do anything to harm me, but I wasn't about to give him the opportunity. I kept hearing footsteps down the hall, as more and more people came to check in I'd give them a thumbs up and motion them on.

My memory reverted back to my foster sister Lilly, and how she would scream at the top of her lungs and pull her hair out when she was angry. I saw some of the same self-harm characteristics in Collin that day, though he favorited punching cement and slapping his face. He had begun to hyperventilate. As I look back at it now through a trauma-informed lens, I can clearly see that this was a trauma response. I asked if I could come closer. He nodded yes, and I began to slowly take deep breaths in and out and count back from ten. Once he regained his breath, I asked him to share with me what happened. He told me that several of the boys in his cohort had been picking on him all week and at recess someone said "*your own mom doesn't even love you, that's why you're at the orphanage*" and so he picked up the chair and threw it at him. At that moment, before I could think, I reached in and put my arms around him. He began to cry again and I said "*Collin, what that boy said was not true. Your mom loves you, your house mom loves you, I love you, and all of your teachers love you. You ARE loved. I know that what that boy said hurt your feelings and you became very angry, but you could have really hurt someone with that chair or your fist. We can't let our anger control us, we have to learn to control our actions.*" At the time, I wasn't aware of ACEs and how to appropriately aid a student showing signs of traumatic experiences, and I wasn't informed on how to regulate emotions. Knowing what I know now about coping with emotions and what language to use as well as recognizing signs of trauma, I have self-critiqued my words and actions that day. If the same situation were to happen today, I would have responded differently. I would have said "*I see that you are upset. It's okay to feel sad and angry, there is nothing wrong with you for feeling this way. I feel sad and angry sometimes, too. These feelings are natural and normal. It's okay to be mad, but it's not okay to throw a chair. You ARE loved no matter what and I am here, we can work through these*

feelings together. Was there a cool down technique that we've learned that might help you feel less angry? Would you like to work on it together?"

We continued to do the breathing exercises and I asked him if he was calm enough to go inside the building now, knowing that the bell was about to ring and all of the other students would be passing through the door to change classes. I wanted to avoid the possibility of more bullying. He stood up and we walked to my room. I wasn't sure what the repercussions were for throwing a punch on school grounds, but I thought it would be best if Collin and I called his house mom together in my room instead of handing the task over to Mr. Miller. I was honest with him and told him that I didn't know what the consequence was going to be, but that I would be there to walk through it with him. When I called his house mom I told her that there had been an incident at school and asked her if she could park and come to my room at pickup.

When she arrived, Collin, myself and Mr. Miller sat in my room and I asked Collin to recount what happened earlier that day. When he was done, he looked at me and said "*Ms. Greene, did I leave anything out?*" I shook my head no, and told him that I was proud of him for being honest. His house mom said that he would have consequences at home and that he would be punished appropriately, she also understood if the school needed to suspend him or take action. I asked Collin if he'd go gather his items from his previous classroom and meet us out in the hallway in just a bit. Once he left the room, I told his house mom how worried I was about him and wanted to make sure he had the appropriate therapeutic treatment. His house mom explained that Collin was "explosive" and that this wasn't his first incident. He had been in trouble at his previous schools and sent to the orphanage because his family couldn't handle his behavior and it scared them. That statement absolutely broke my heart. I

had never felt scared around Collin, just a few hours prior I had walked through a door frame as he was throwing punches knowing he wouldn't harm me.

I thought back to my time with our foster siblings and how their behaviors changed once they had a reliable environment that supported their growth. I wondered what Collin's homelife looked like prior to the orphanage. How did his teachers view him at his previous schools? I wondered if he had someone he could trust at the orphanage, someone that helped him walk through his emotions and guide him when they overtook him. I wondered if he had an outlet for help. Who was in Collin's corner? I'm sure that his house mom and dad did the best they could to provide a normal routine and expectations for Collin, but I'm assuming that he wasn't the only child in their home with concerns. I left that meeting feeling like Collin had already been written off, labeled as "explosive" and as if his inability to process his anger was overshadowing his strengths. I knew very little about the impacts of childhood adversity at this moment in my career, but I knew that there was something that Collin had been through that was triggering the outbursts and impacted his ability to regulate his emotions. I shared with my colleagues what the house mom had told us about Collin's explosiveness and how he ended up at the orphanage, but everyone seemed scared of Collin after that incident. One staff member commented that they felt as if they were walking on eggshells around him, afraid that anything they said would set him off. There were even a couple comments like "*This isn't the best environment for him, he needs more help than we can provide here at school.*" Though I agreed, Collin did in fact need therapeutic support and guidance with processing his emotions and regulating them, I did not agree that he couldn't thrive in our school environment. He was thriving in my classroom. As a staff we spoke about and built our school culture on supporting our students in all capacities, yet everyone

was so quick to jump on the "this isn't the right environment" train and push this student out of our classrooms operating under the assumption that we were "helping him." I perceived this as if Collin was a noxious weed that the school was pulling from their pristine garden, as if rooting out the child with the "explosive" behavior kept our other flowers blooming nicely and growing.

It seemed counter-productive to supporting students and to everything we had built as a staff on those days before school. Davies (2008) says that overreliance on this (mis)behavior narrative and framing behavior in this way doesn't allow for understanding of behavior as a communication tactic or as a protest. Our communication systems embody lived experiences, meaning that past traumatic experiences live *in* our nervous system. Our past experiences can impact how we live and communicate in the present moment. Trauma isn't primarily an emotional response, it happens *in* the brain and body, and what our body cares most about is survival and safety. This protective mechanism is enacted by the body to stop an event that it perceives as potentially dangerous (Menakem, 2017). Students may have difficulty communicating because their body is in defense mode (fight-or-flight) and they feel like danger is lurking around every corner, causing them to react to triggers in unproductive or aggressive ways. Students often use hyperarousal and dissociation in response to the perceived threat and the fight, flight or freeze response is an activation of this response system in the brain, but it is often mistaken for a range of behavioral problems in the classroom (Shrontz et al., 2018). When a student exhibits a hyperarousal response (fight-or-flight) their behavior could look like aggression, agitation, defiance or hyperactivity. When a student exhibits a dissociation response (freeze), their behavior could look like they

have shut down, are unresponsive, or daydreaming. It's important as educators that we ask ourselves, what does this behavior mean and what is the student trying to communicate?

The day we left for Christmas break, Collin stopped by my room to tell me that he wouldn't be returning in January. He said he was going to be moving several hours away to live with a distant family member. He wrapped his arms around me as I fought back tears. He told me thank you for believing in him and that he'd miss me. I asked his house mom where he was going and if I could write, but she wasn't allowed to release any information. That was the last time I saw Collin but I've thought about him frequently over the years hoping that he was able to heal from whatever was burdening him, and hoping that he was loved and valued. Was behavior how Collin was communicating to us? Was it his cry for help? Janzen and Schwartz (2018) use the term (mis)behavior "in an attempt to signal the binaries and subjective nature of children's behaviors, and importantly, the socially constructed nature of these kids" (p.120). I've thought about the language that we used to talk about Collin in our staff meetings and conversations, how we respond to situations risks positioning students and their (mis)behaviors in ways that blame them for their adversity and vilify them. It is far too often that a student's behavior is labeled as misbehavior to the extent that *they* are labeled as defiant or inconvenient to the school (Gore & Parkes, 2008). The language we choose to use reflects particular ideologies that we disseminate through policies and procedures, and it constructs a student's identity and as a result, how the staff respond to who they are and how they behave (Colorado & Janzen, 2021).

Before the Bell Rang

Several of our students relied on bus transportation to school, a small handful were dropped off by their parents or older siblings, and the rest lived within walking distance.

Earlier in my narrative I mentioned how I was approached by an officer and encouraged to call for assistance when walking to my car after hours. This encounter was in the back of my mind when I learned that there were a handful of our students who walked to school each day. If it wasn't safe for an adult to walk across the street to the gravel parking lot, how could it be safe for a tween to walk to and from school? I started paying closer attention to the students who left on foot each day when the last bell rang. I caught myself going the long way home and circling the block slowly to make sure they made it safely. I would see their group get smaller and smaller as each child one-by-one veered off the sidewalk and began walking up to their door. I never once saw them being greeted by a parent or grandparent. They'd pull out their key and unlock their door and go in.

A few weeks into the school year, I noticed some of the same kids that I secretly followed home start to slowly arrive early to school. Teachers were required to arrive at school thirty minutes prior to the first bell, so the doors were unlocked by Mr. Miller at that time. Most students arrived 5-10 minutes early in order to grab their breakfast and finish up their homework before homeroom began. Each day, they'd come in a few minutes earlier than the day before but I never saw them hanging out in the hallway. Most teachers had their doors locked until the required start time allowing them to prep the day's lesson, so I knew that they weren't in their respective classrooms. One morning at 7:30 AM, the faculty bathroom was out of paper towels and I knew our custodian wouldn't arrive until that evening, so I went to the girls' restroom and to my surprise, there were several girls in there. I simply said "*Morning girls! Hope you're doing well today*" and curiously let my eyes wander the room. A couple girls were standing in the corner doing each other's hair, one was standing at the sink brushing her teeth, and the other was washing her face. The same group

continued to arrive early every morning, and Mr. Miller must have picked up on it as well. I noticed that he began arriving at school and unlocking the main door even earlier than his usual 7:30 time. Like Mr. Miller, I too was an early riser and had a fondness for the few moments of quietness prior to the hustle and bustle of the day starting. We had a system down, I started the coffee and warmed up the copier and he unlocked the doors and turned on all of the lights.

One morning, I arrived at the school and started to open the door when I saw one of the students, Dante, who typically came with the small group, pop up from the sidewalk. He greeted me with a smile and said "*Mr. Miller isn't here yet, do you mind if I come in with you?*" I unlocked the door for him and told him I'd be right back. I needed to carry supplies from my car for that day's experiment with rocks and minerals. He said, "*Oh, I'll help*!" Once we had all the supplies in, he asked if he could help clean my Whiteboard and set up the experiment. I agreed and was thankful for the extra set of hands. Once the small group arrived, he said "*Oh, I gotta go get ready*." Before I could stop him to hand him a marble for helping me clean and set up, he was out the door and gone. I walked down the hallway and knocked on the boys' bathroom door. I heard the soft giggling turn to silence, and I said "*Hey guys, it's just Ms. Greene. Can you send Dante out real quick*?" When the door opened, I saw a similar scene that I had seen in the girls' bathroom prior. There were a couple boys standing over the sink brushing their teeth, and the others were combing their hair and passing around a bottle of Axe body spray. Now if you've ever been around a group of middle school boys, you know that they don't believe in the "less is more philosophy" and that Axe is extremely potent. They stopped mid-spray when they saw me standing in the

hallway, and I giggled and said "*Let's go easy on the cologne boys, a little goes a long way*." They laughed and I handed Dante his marble.

Dante began arriving at school earlier than the group every morning and hanging around late in the afternoon. At first, he would meet me and say "*Morning Ms. Greene, I came early to see if you needed any help again?*" Or, he'd come by my room in the afternoon after dismissal and say "*Do you have any copies I can help you make for tomorrow?*" Often, I had more items on my to-do list than I could possibly knock out alone so I would give him a few tasks to help with. He would pass out worksheets for the day, return graded work to the student's folders, vacuum, clean beakers, set up labs, organize classroom materials, and practically anything that I asked him to do. He did every task with a smile on his face. He even made the comment once that he didn't expect a marble every time he helped me out, and he wanted me to save my marbles for the other kids. One afternoon, everyone else had left the building and as we sat and chatted while stapling rubrics together, I said "*It's getting close to dinner time, I appreciate you helping me, but don't you think your grandma needs you home?*" He slowly looked up and said, "*Nobody is at my house and we don't have lights or heat right now. Do you mind if I stay with you until you're done*?" Taken back by his response but not wanting to make a big deal of it, I said "*Of course*" and we kept stapling. Dante lived with his grandmother who had a few medical issues of her own. I'm not sure why his parents were out of the picture but I do know that his grandmother had custody. When I reported the conversation to the school counselor, we found out that his grandmother had to choose between paying for her medicine and putting food on the table *or* electricity. She was connected to community resources and I believe there was a church program that helped her pay her power bill for the month. I knew though that times were hard for his family and that

his grandma was doing the best she could to provide for him and his sister. I never saw her in a face-to-face format the entire school year, but Dante got into trouble once in my classroom and she picked up the phone on the second ring. It's also important to note, Dante was an excellent kid who I never had to get onto except for one time. He was very polite and always followed directions, if the opportunity arose for him to help out a classmate he'd jump right in. He loved to make people laugh and took on the role of the class clown; which got him into trouble in other classrooms and at recess quite often. He had "jokingly" pulled a chair out from beneath another student and I walked into the classroom as he was mid-pull. Most of his behavior issues were centered around trying to make his classmates laugh. I think Dante's home life was stressful for him. I know his grandma absolutely loved him and provided the best she could, but not knowing if there would be heat or food for dinner had to be a difficult experience. I think he tried to make up for his living situation by making others around him laugh, seeing joy on their faces helped ease his pain. When I explained to his grandma on the phone what he had done, she told me that she couldn't get to the school due to her mobility but that she'd be sure to "*give him a good whooping when he gets home.*" When I got off the phone with her, Dante said "*She gonna whoop me, ain't she? Don't let her fool you Ms. Greene, she may be in a wheelchair but she knows how to use her resources for whoopings*." Even in that moment, he laughed and his face lit up with a smile.

That night at the open house, it was very easy for me to automatically assume that Dante's caregiver didn't care about his education and it was evident by them not showing up or reaching out in any form. If we examine the way teachers and staff use language, not only in the classroom, but also about their students' families outside of the classroom, it is evident that there are power structures at play. Foucault (1980) says that "In fact, power produces; it

produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (p. 194). Those in power, in my case as Dante's teacher, use language to generate ideas and beliefs that are taken as fact, which Foucault conceptualized as t*he truth*. These truths continue to turn the wheels of power and feed the hegemonic society, ultimately reinforcing and sustaining the power dynamics that created it. In the classroom, a teacher's language and choice of vocabulary guide power and assimilation expectations. I personally labeled Dante's grandmother as "uninvolved" and "remiss" because she didn't show up to the open house, creating a deficit-based truth as I spoke with other staff members because she didn't show up for events at school. If teachers view students and their families through a deficit lens, they may also view them as less than their middle-class counterparts (Szech, 2021). McCarty (2015) states that "gap discourse ineluctably reproduces the very social, linguistic, and education disparities that it calls into question" (p. 72). This discourse establishes a powerful truth in the way that educators and staff perceive and interact with students and their families, placing them at a disadvantage because they are labeled as "uninvolved." This is why it is vital that we as educators take the time to learn about our students and their families outside of the classroom walls, why we should build trusting relationships with them and value their experiences. I learned that Dante's grandmother was as involved as she could be with her mobility and medical challenges. She made sure that when he got home he had any extra work he hadn't completed in class done and she made sure that he was up and ready for school each morning. She provided for him and his sister in every way that she was capable given her circumstances. Even though they had hardships, I don't doubt for a bit that he was loved and cared for. Dante's lack of resources did not stop him from being the best student he could be at school.

Fall was quickly turning to winter and I noticed that as the weather got colder outside, Dante would stick around and stay with whoever was the last to leave the building. I perceived that his clothes weren't heavy enough for the winter weather, so one day I brought in a box of my husband's items he had outgrown. I was putting the box in the back closet, still contemplating in my mind how I would offer them to Dante without making him feel uncomfortable, when his smiling face popped into my room that morning. Curious as to what was in the big box I was desperately trying to cram into a tiny space, he came over and caught a glimpse of a jacket and said "*That's a nice jacket you got there Ms. Greene, but I don't think that's your style*." We laughed because the jacket had a football team logo on it. I explained that Drew had been eating too many Krispy Kreme donuts and had outgrown all of his clothes. I mentioned that I wasn't sure what to do with them but our apartment was too small to store them, so I had brought them to school with me until I could find them a new home. He said, "*Ahh man, those donuts will get you every time! If you are going to get rid of them, can me and some of the other boys use them?*" I happily said yes (hoping that this would be the result of this conversation) and told him to help himself. A few minutes later, Dante headed out of the classroom with an arm full of clothes and down the hall to the bathroom. The rest of the day, as boys entered my room, I caught glimpses of Drew's clothing on many of them.

I wondered, would I have even noticed the struggles my students were going through if I hadn't arrived early each morning to see them huddled in the bathroom helping each other prepare for the day? If Dante wouldn't have arrived early each morning and spent his time helping me prepare for the day's experiment, would we have had those difficult conversations about his circumstances? Would he have felt comfortable sharing those details

with me in a regular school-setting? Would I have continued to label his grandma as "uninvolved" if he hadn't acted out in my room that day and she explained her medical issues? How much was going on in my students' lives that I was completely unaware of, and if I'm being honest, how much would I have glossed over while I was busy checking off my day's to-do list? Arriving at school early and staying late, allowed me to see how resilient they were and it gave me a better understanding of their lives. It is only through open eyes, on-going dialogue, and trusting relationships with students that educators working in oppressed communities can develop a sense of understanding and compassion, as well as the knowledge required to view students from a strength-based lens.

For When You're in a Pickle

My husband, Drew, and most of my family, give me a hard time because I carry around a large purse that I like to call my *Mary Poppins Bag*. Ask any of them and they'd tell you that I bring "everything but the kitchen sink" with me wherever I go. I take pride in knowing that I'm prepared for any situation. At one point, a smaller bag inside my purse became known as my *pickle bag*... you know, for when you're in a *pickle. Did you pop a button on your pants? No worries, I have a sewing kit. You've got a splitting headache that came out of nowhere? No worries, I have aspirin. Uh oh, we're stranded in a forest and have to drink creek water? Don't worry, I have a straw that filters out waterborne diseases (this one is the source of many running jokes).* They laugh at me and give me a hard time about it, but humility keeps us all grounded. I was in the middle of drawing a diagram of the Earth's rotation around the sun on my Whiteboard when humility struck again. As I lifted my arm to make a circle, my nose caught a scent that wasn't pleasant. My mind raced back to 5:00 AM, wait did I *put* deodorant on? I quickly moved my nose to my armpit to decipher without

being overly suspicious. Yep, my hypothesis had been confirmed, I *was* deodorant-less. Now the appropriate thing to do would have been to wait until the class dismissed, but my mind spiraled so quickly that my mouth slipped out an "*OH NO!*" This sudden moment of panic caught my students' attention, and they gasped and said "*Ms. Greene, what's wrong? Is it a spider?!*" They were all well aware of my fear of spiders and always came to my aid to stomp one when I panicked. I laughed, and so "*No, it's worse! I forgot to put deodorant on this morning. Give me one moment while I grab my pickle bag.*" Not knowing the context, Kaya said "*Ms. Greene, no offense but if you ain't got no deodorant on, I don't think pickle juice is going to help.*" The entire class of girls, including myself, busted out in laughter. I grabbed my purse from my desk and pulled out the glittered pink bag and explained. I told you earlier in this narrative that I normalized mistakes in my classroom, so I had no shame in pulling out my deodorant and slathering it on in front of them. Afterwards, I waved it around in front of them and said, "*Does anybody else need some pickle juice?*" We all laughed as they shook their heads.

Word must have gotten around quickly about the incident because two periods later a student stayed behind after class and asked me what all was in my pickle bag. The middle-school gossip grapevine travels faster than the speed of light and thinking it was a joke I said, "*Oh gosh, anything you could ever need A'niah.*" When she looked down at the ground though and didn't laugh, trying to interpret her body language I asked her if there was something she *needed*. After a short silence, she whispered and asked me if I had any pads. Realizing what she had just asked me, I quickly shut my classroom door, and was prepared to have the *period conversation*. I sat her down and was mid-sentence explaining what was happening to her when she stopped me. She told me she hadn't *just started* her period for the

first time, she had been having periods for over a year but all of this time she was using toilet paper and paper towels to absorb the blood. I went to my pickle bag and dug out every pad and tampon I had and told her to put them in her pocket. I told her to come see me at lunch tomorrow and I'd bring her an entire box. On my way home from school that day I stopped at the store and bought two of the largest boxes of feminine hygiene products I could find. A'niah stopped by my room the next day and we put the boxes into her backpack. She hugged me and proceeded to tell me that her dad already had a hard time providing her and her siblings with food and keeping the rent paid, she didn't want to ask for him to purchase anything extra at the store for her. Neighborhoods plagued by poverty are disproportionately home to families of Color, and although human capital exists in all neighborhoods in the United States, it is developed only within the context that opportunities exist (Bruner, 2017). The magnet school's demographics were 64% Black, 14% White, 15% Hispanic, 6% identifying as two or more races. Sixty-six percent of our students qualified for free and reduced lunch assistance, which is higher than the state average of 48%. Barriers that create income inequality generate challenges for affording essential items such as hygiene products and food. These barriers aren't only impacting households though, poverty has consequences that trickle through the community level as well.

The focus on ACEs, particularly the correlation between adversity and health, led to a push for trauma-informed care. Though highly valued, it only scratched the surface in responding to health disparities as a consequence of ACEs and the influences of family, community, and neighborhood on healthy child development. Although ACEs impact youth and adults across racial and socioeconomic divides, adversity patterns are distributed differently among race and income, leaving some communities to face a disproportionate

burden of trauma when compared to others (Nurius et al., 2012). Earlier in this dissertation I talked about the original ACE model and how it has been expanded to "*Pair of ACEs*" which considers the ways in which race, racism, and poverty are ACEs in and of themselves. The ACE framework has expanded beyond the household-level and has begun to encompass community-level traumas such as neighborhood violence, discrimination, economic hardship, social capital, poor housing conditions, and community disruption (Bethell et al., 2017). The child who is planted into this system of inadequate soil composted in systemic inequities and oppression, is deprived of the vital nutrients they need to grow and thrive. Racial disparities are ACEs and they are omnipresent in our society. Brenard et al. (2020) discusses another adaptation of the original ACE discourse with his *C-ACE* (culturally-informed adverse childhood experiences) approach, which recognizes and understands that intergenerational impacts of racial trauma on children *is* a risk factor. Even when a child has a safe and secure environment within their home, they are still susceptible to adversity outside the home. This includes school violence, bullying, and denigration -- resulting in prejudice to those who are perceived as "different" constituting hazards to healthy development and shaping the trajectories of their growth (Bruner, 2017). To my knowledge, my students were not victims of abuse or neglect in their current living situations. I am unaware of what landed many of them in living situations with single-parents or grandparents, but I feel confident that whoever they lived with at that time was loving and provided for them the best they could given their particular circumstances. I do think that the neighborhoods in which my students lived were insufficient in physical, economic, social, and educational capital and did not provide children a place for healthy growth and development. As the school year went on, I

slowly became more aware of how racism and poverty harmed my students and their families.

Slowly, more students approached me in between classes and after school to ask if I had an item in my pickle bag that they could use. I'm not sure if the boys and A'niah had shared their stories with other students and then encouraged them to ask me, or if the students felt comfortable enough to approach me after I told the class what all was in my pickle bag and word got out. Either way, it became apparent that my students were in need of a few items and I was happy to share what I had. As I would give them dental hygiene products or extra socks, they'd share their stories with me one by one and I started to build a relationship with each of them that reached outside our classroom walls. They would tell me about their home life and how they were being raised by a grandparent, or how their mom had been killed in a drive-by shooting, or how they only got to see their dad during visitation hours at the prison. Many of them would also spend their afternoons helping take care of their siblings.

These conditions that my students faced (structural barriers to obtaining resources to grow, thrive and succeed) are the reality of an unlevel playing field perpetuated by the myth of meritocracy. The assumption that all families have an equal opportunity for mobility is a pervasive myth and it only solidifies hegemonic structures and paints low-income neighborhoods as culturally, morally, and intellectually deficient. The implications of "othering" people who are experiencing economic hardships can be seen in educational policies such as the achievement gap "problem" which points fingers at the deficiencies in the parenting and home lives of low-income students (Weiner, 2003). These kinds of policies and deficit ideologies constructs "them" and "their" cultures as the problem, *instead* of the

systems of power that colonize and keep people in poverty. The "culture of poverty" paradigm asserts that people in poverty play a significant role in maintaining their impoverished condition and that generations are socialized to believe they have nothing to strive for, sustaining the cycle (Lewis, 1998). This paradigm continues to be used to socialize people (especially teachers) into deficit-driven misconceptions about poverty and students from low-income families and communities. How can we begin to see what we have been socialized not to see?

The notion of educational reform as a tool to "level the playing field" and promote equity in students' education does not take into account racial disparities and lack of resources (Dutil, 2020). If we frame equity in terms of competition and social mobility, it pits our students against one another and frames their mindset to believe that they alone are the sole determining factor in their success. Yet, no one "wins" this competition because the way we frame it makes it even more difficult to solve the *real* problem. Deficit ideologies suggest that we "fix these inequalities by fixing the disenfranchised communities rather than that which disenfranchises them" (Gorski, 2020, p. 156). As a society, we look away from the mechanisms that continue to turn the wheel of injustices and who benefits from these wheels of power, and instead we have been trained to focus our attention on the citizens and communities with the least amount of power to push a narrative (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). The achievement gap discourse that has dominated educational policy for decades takes our attention away from systemic conditions that create the gap and focuses our attention on *"at-risk*" youth from "broken" homes whose poverty-stricken culture hinders them from succeeding (Brandon, 2003). If we don't reframe how we think and talk about educational equity, we can never achieve it.

Once my eyes were opened to the dominant discourses that labeled my students as "broken" and how this deficit model created an environment that was susceptible to "othering," I started to view my students and their families through a *different* lens. My students blew me away at how resilient they were and how they were able to navigate such hardships and still show up to school each day. The pickle bag eventually turned into a share-closet that my students could come and access before and after school. I stocked the closet with deodorant, toothpaste, toothbrushes, floss, shampoo, soap, socks, hair ties and bows, shaving cream and razors, feminine products, jackets and clothes, and school supplies. I added to the closet as needed, or when a student requested an item I didn't yet have. I tried to watch for sales at the store, used coupons, and bought in bulk when reasonable. My students lacked resources not because *they* were broken, they lacked resources because the *system is broken.* This same system protects the elite class interests by moving attention away from systemic injustice and wants us to focus our gaze on locating the sources of social problems *within* economically disadvantaged communities, maintaining the power hierarchy. This power justifies and maintains existing social, political, and economic conditions, such as the gross inequities in access to adequate healthcare, educational opportunity, and the dwindling support programs for communities. Failing to understand and address the larger sociopolitical context of class inequity is the surest sign of deficit ideology; suggesting that we "fix" the people in these communities rather than fixing inequities and barriers is grounded in colonialism (Lipman, 2008; Weiner, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

Race is pertinent to the rise of colonialism, creating hierarchies of human groups to establish dominance over subjected peoples to justify the imperial enterprise (Ashcroft et al., 2013). Families from low-socioeconomic communities are depicted as "unworthy,"

"unmotivated," and "less than" through social constructions and norms. This deficit framework is a byproduct of imperialism, a tool used to socialize citizens to accept a variety of oppressions and to maintain dominance and control (Shields et al., 2005). Racial inequality is not fueled by a single, powerful socioeconomic factor, it is fueled from cumulative disadvantages that accrue over time to undermine the success of impoverished racial minorities (Nichol, 2018). In order to uproot this deficit ideology, we must learn to recognize it, which can be a challenging task when it surrounds us and has infested every aspect of our society. I started to become more aware of this deficit ideology being employed in conversations about poverty in education, particularly as it related to my students of Color. Often, it implicitly appeared as we spoke about our students using common educational language: "*at-risk*," "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," "behind," and "behavioral." We have normalized these labels and expressions and it is unnerving how easily they slide off the tongues of those who identify as equity advocates, exhibiting the hegemonic power of mass socialization. As I began to recognize signs of this dominant narrative and challenges to my own class socialization, it is important to note that I was still unintentionally carrying out the stereotypes of low-income families in my educational practice.

Walls of Solace

Prior to our S'mores Plate Tectonic lab, I asked each student table to bring in a box of graham crackers, two chocolate bars, a tub of White icing, and a bag of marshmallows. I let each table decide who would be willing to bring what item and told them that if they needed help getting their supplies to let me know. I had several calls from parents letting me know that they had bought an extra bag of marshmallows or icing in case someone else wasn't able to bring in anything. Several parents dropped in on the morning of the experiment and

apologized, they told me that they would have brought something if they could have afforded it but they just couldn't at that time and hoped that their child wouldn't be penalized. I assured them that we would have plenty and that we would work it out either way, they were relieved to hear that a few students had brought in extra. I could tell that they were embarrassed to tell me they couldn't afford the lab items, but that they were willing to face embarrassment if it meant that their child wouldn't be penalized for their lack of funds. In hindsight I would handle this situation differently. When I sent home the list for the experiment supplies, it didn't occur to me that I would have parents who wouldn't be able to afford at least one item. I also didn't think about the short notice that I gave them to (1) travel to purchase the item and (2) budget to pay for the item. This was my first teaching experience and my first experience teaching in a low-socioeconomic area. If you remember from my opening story of this dissertation, I completed my student teaching experience in a school that was majority upper and middle-class families. At that school, teachers sent home a list of items that were needed for a classroom activity or even supplies in general, and the next few days students would bring in supplies by the bags full. Fast forward to the magnet school, I was operating under the same notion, presuming every student could bring in one item. Not fully knowing my students' living situations or the community that I was a part of, I didn't consider the hardship that I was placing on my students' families. I certainly had a lot to learn (and *unlearn*) and I am very thankful that I was placed in a school and a community where I could grow professionally and personally with my students.

There is a deficit discourse that dominates conversations about class and poverty, that low-income families do not value education. Making matters even more complicated, schools are only a microcosm of the larger society (Gorski, 2011). The stereotype that low-income

parents don't value the educational environment is a symptom of broader social conditioning and is cultivated by policy and law-makers who want to label the "problem" of class inequities *outside* of the systems of power in which they control (Berliner, 2006). These larger sociopolitical conditions continue to fuel the fire of their power framing the least powerful communities as deficient and labeling them as undeserving of equal opportunity. From my experience at the magnet school, I saw how dedicated these parents were and even in a time when they could contribute nothing to our class experiment, they showed up and explained why. They wanted to make sure that their child would not be scrutinized or penalized for their inability to pay for lab materials. As an educator, we can't properly engage low-income families equitably if we do not understand that these students and their families are coming to us restrained by the sociopolitical context (Gorski, 2011).

After all the bags of edible lab materials made it into the classroom, we ended up having enough extra for every student to be able to build their own tectonic plate set instead of one set as a table. At the end of the last class, the supply table still had four boxes of graham crackers that hadn't been opened. A student, Ryan, saw the unopened boxes and asked me what I was going to do with them. I told him I wasn't sure, that I didn't have another lab that called for graham crackers. He asked me if he could have them and said that he and his little sister usually didn't have too much to eat for dinner at home, which is why he always brings home any extra items from his friends' lunches. I sent him home with everything that was left over from that day's lab and started to stock non-perishable food items in the share-closet.

Over 22% of North Carolina's children are food insecure, with 61 of the 100 counties having rates over 15% (NC Justice, 2022). Hunger, like poverty, is racially layered.

Challenges of poverty are multiplied and compounded, where families regularly have to make choices between food *or* rent, food *or* medicine, food *or* electricity, and food *or* transportation. Hunger is a trauma and an ACE; food insecurity is linked to negative health outcomes, poor development and behavioral health problems (Center for Hunger Free Communities, 2019). A child's brain development is dependent on them being well-fed; malnutrition jeopardizes their health, development, and academic potential. The executive director of NC's Second Harvest Food Bank, Clyde Fitzgerald, says "*When kids aren't hungry, they learn better, they can focus better, their demeanor is better, their behavior is better."* Fitzgerald goes on to say that some traumas are unavoidable, but "hunger is a tragedy that doesn't have to happen." Food insecurity and hunger are economic issues due to long-standing racial injustices. These disparities are associated with historical marginalization and create barriers for employment, housing, health care, education and more. Just as word had traveled quickly about my pickle bag incident, word got around about the food box in my closet. Students started bringing me extra items that they didn't eat for breakfast or lunch, and before I knew it we were fully stocked with applesauce, poptarts, and granola bars. They even started a fresh fruit basket as well. I was so humbled by their generosity and kindness to each other. They were never ashamed to use the closet and often would speak up for one another when they saw that someone needed something. They also took great pride in being able to share and support their classmates' needs.

As many of North Carolina's counties report breathtaking percentages of child poverty and food insecurity, it is not surprising that many teachers flee from high-poverty schools when the opportunity arises. The lack of resources and support can be troubling and taxing. Teaching is a calling, but teaching in high-poverty areas is a calling within a calling.

The politicians who regularly label these communities and schools as "broken" and "failing" rarely come around to see the intense and cumulative challenges of real poverty. It is a lot to navigate, but I think many teachers do their best to stand in the gap to make sure their students have what they need to succeed mentally, emotionally and physically. That doesn't mean that teachers should have to, though. North Carolina ranks 38th nationally in teacher pay, with the average salary of a teacher in the 2020-2021 school year making $53,458. The starting teacher salary in North Carolina is $37,127 (National Education Association, 2022). I was fortunate during my teaching career to be able to provide my own classroom supplies and a few extras here and there for my students, but not every teacher has this opportunity. My class sizes were relatively small; I would not have been able to do so if I had larger class sizes or if I had a family of my own to provide for. The classroom has changed from a place of learning to a place to "fill the gap" manifested and maintained by social inequities and hegemonic structures. Education as a whole is broken. Persistent under-investment in public education continues, yet teachers and schools are required to do more to provide opportunity, tools, and access to all their students. Despite these challenges, it was so important to me to build community together inside my classroom walls. No matter what adversity my students brought to the door, I wanted them to feel safe and loved during those few hours I had with them. The same student that went home to an empty cupboard was willing to share his granola bar with a friend who had forgotten his lunch. When someone came to class and didn't have a pencil, someone at their table would grab one from their desk and say "*Here you go, you can use mine today.*" When I asked a question and someone answered correctly, the entire class would erupt into applause and say "*Way to go, Samuel*!" As I was returning graded unit tests one morning, a student who had struggled through our entire space unit

received a perfect score. Her tablemates saw the 100 and smiley face sticker and told her that she needed to take it home and hang it on the fridge. She replied, "*I don't have a fridge. I'll just show it to my dad but he'll probably throw it away*." That same group of girls from that table came up to me after class and asked if they could turn the bulletin board into a fridge. A little confused as to what they meant, I asked for clarification. They wanted to decorate the board to resemble a fridge and use it to hang up "fridge-worthy" grades from their classmates. From that point on, anytime someone made a perfect score they would hold a ceremony for that student to proudly walk up to the bulletin board and pin it on our paper fridge. Those four walls were our solace, a safe space where they could learn and grow together, a place where they could share details about their struggles and not be judged, and they supported each other every step of the way. It was *outside* those four walls though, that I worried about them.

Playing in an Unfair Game

One morning I arrived at school noticing there was yellow crime tape covering a house two doors down and a large police presence. When Dante came into my classroom, I asked if he knew what had happened at the house down the road. The elderly lady who had lived there had been killed in a robbery during the early morning hours. I must have stood there for a while in shock, because he shook my arm and asked if I was okay. I told him that I didn't think it was safe for him and the other students to walk home alone anymore, myself and the other teachers would make sure that they were escorted home each day. He brushed it off and said "*Ms. Greene, it happens all the time in my neighborhood. I'm used to it. I'll be fine.*" Used to it? How could a 11-year old be used to murder and criminal activity so close to his house, I pondered. It was at this moment that I had realized, there was a lot that went on

in my students' lives that I had no experience with and quite frankly it worried me that this was their *normal*. There was another incident where gang activity was involved and the police had shown up to our school to question a few of our students. That day, I learned that three of the boys in my third period class were in a gang. How does a 6th grader end up in a gang? I remember another staff member asking me if I was scared to have them in our classrooms, but the root of my fear wasn't grounded in if they were in a gang or what they might be capable of. My fear was that something horrific was going to happen to them in the crossfire, that they were making decisions now that an 11-year old should never be burdened with. When I expressed my worry for them, one of the students, Ryder, told me he had no choice. His dad had been a member of the gang, and was incarcerated, so his older brother was required to take his spot. His brother was shot and killed the year prior, and he was required to step up and fill that spot. My heart broke as he told me about the consequences that might occur to his grandma if he didn't "do what he was supposed to do." The challenges of poverty are a lot to navigate, and there are hurdles that the general public (including myself up until this point in my career) have no experience with. The responsibilities of my students at such a young age were shocking to me.

Ryder's dad had been incarcerated for most of his life and he had been raised by his mom and older brother. Parental or household member incarceration is considered an adverse childhood experience; incarceration strains on households include financial and health disparities, lack of connectedness, shame, and so many other effects that most of us cannot fathom. Exposure to parental incarceration has been linked to juvenile delinquency, maladaptive behavior, and social skill deficits (Geller et al., 2009). Exposure to household violence during childhood has been found to contribute to later behavioral challenges and

delinquency (Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). Ryder's mom worked multiple jobs to provide for him and his siblings, leaving his older brother to provide for his daily needs. Gang members have an increased risk of being victims of violence and it is estimated that they die by homicide at a rate 100 times higher than the national average (Pyrooz et al., 2012). When Ryder's brother passed away, he had to step in to fill his role in the gang. Gangs often act as pseudo parents to adolescents, due to the mass incarceration of Black men and to single-parent households working multiple jobs to make ends meet. The original ACE study doesn't include exposure to community violence as a category but it does fit into the World Health Organization's classification for an ACE category (World Health Organization, 2022).

Violence permeates some sections of society, creating fear and avoidance of those communities. Yet, every single day, youth in certain communities and neighborhoods witness or participate in violent actions including: murder, robbery, rapes, homicides, and assaults. Gangs most often surface in troubled neighborhoods; areas that are socially disorganized, have inadequate opportunities and support, and whose residents are economically disadvantaged. These areas may also have higher rates of homelessness, school dropout, drug sales, public health challenges, and other violent and illegal activity. The relationship between gangs and communities is complex (Venkatesh, 2000). Community members may disapprove of gang activities, particularly violent and illegal acts, and they may discourage youth from getting involved in the gangs. At the same time, gangs might also serve as a source of community protection, safeguarding elderly and children from other violent acts, but at the same time ruling with violence and fear. Gangs are disproportionately involved in perpetrating violent crime, including the sale and dispersion of illegal drugs (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Selling illegal substances and partaking in illegal activity is used as a source

of income in some impoverished neighborhoods; due to the inability to earn decent wages due to racism and the barriers present in high-poverty schools. Exposure to community violence only adds to the cumulative effects of trauma and adversity caused by oppression. Broader social and economic forces secure and maintain oppression in these communities, reinforcing and reproducing inequalities through the daily life and functions of society and societal institutions. These social and economic forces kept Ryder's family in a state of oppression, forcing him to partake in actions he was much too young for to protect and provide for his family, and exposing him to violent acts that only added to his cumulative trauma. Ryder's family is an example of how racism, poverty, and trauma are intergenerational.

Systemic racism is a form of violence that labels and keeps people of Color in poverty through the societal and structural withholding of opportunities and resources, and in the unjust and mass incarcerations imposed on racialized individuals and neighborhoods (Banaji et al, 2021). Racial discrimination continues to intervene on a person's emotional, physical, economic, and social wellbeing by limiting access to safe housing, adequate healthcare, education, and employment. Racism and its intersections with other forms of oppression create and maintain conditions of economic insecurity, resulting in compounding cycles of health issues and exposure to violence stemming from systemic trauma (Hudson et al., 2020). Trauma has generational effects and can reproduce poverty cycles, especially when that trauma is fostered by systematic oppression in the first place.

As do most teachers, I keep a file under my desk with my student rosters from each year and their contact information. It's in a folder that I also like to keep hand-written notes and newspaper clippings of my students. Every so often, I will Google search one of them to

see the impacts they're leaving on this world and print off their accomplishments. When I was writing the story above about Ryder, I thought about the last day I saw him as we left school for the summer. This goodbye was different because it wasn't a "*Have a wonderful summer, I'll see you next year in 7th grade science*" goodbye. This was a final goodbye. I had accepted another teaching position in my hometown hours away and I knew that our paths would probably not cross again. When I leaned in for a hug, arms wide open, he stepped back and said "*Ms. Greene, you know I'm too cool for that*." I laughed and told him how proud of him I was and that I was looking forward to hearing about all the great things he does in his life. As I had done with all of my students, I gave him my home address and told him I expected to receive a high school graduation invite six years from now. He shrugged and said, "*I'll be lucky if I make it out of middle school.*" I hadn't really thought about that conversation and what he meant until this very moment. As I was writing about his experiences, I decided to do a quick search and see what he was up to. Several of my students I still communicate with via social media and I'll check in from time to time, but I hadn't heard from Ryder since that last day of school. When I hit "enter" on his name in the search bar, the very first result was an obituary and my heart shattered. Ryder had passed away. As I read his obituary, there was a heaviness that came with this stark reality. Ryder's mom had now lost two sons, and was left to process this unimaginable loss without her husband by her side. I can't imagine pouring my soul into raising two boys, working multiple jobs to make ends meet and provide for them, to then have it all taken away from you before they even had a chance to live their own lives. There are no guidelines on how to cope with the grief of losing a student, but as I read the comments on his tribute wall, it was evident that the community felt the immense loss that this tragedy brought about as well.

As deeply painful as it is to learn of his death, it brought a strange bittersweetness to learn from his obituary that he had graduated from high school and had started a career. He *made it* past middle school. I sat with what that phrase might have meant for hours. Was it something as simple as he hated school and showing up every day for another six years was unbearable and that he was joking with me (he did in fact hate school, he made sure to tell me every single day of sixth grade)? Or, did he already know his fate? The systemic oppression that drove his dad into incarceration, his mom to work multiple jobs, his brother to raise him, his brother's death, his participation in a gang to fulfill his family's spot and to protect his loved ones -- did all of those cumulative factors decide the trajectory of his life and his final days? What if Ryder, his family, and his community wasn't considered disposable, throw-away members of our society? What if there were structures in place to protect our youth, families, and communities from these tragic outcomes and prevent adversity from occurring in the first place?

How I Make Sense of What They Taught Me

The students and families that I encountered while teaching at Granville Magnet School and the relationships that I built with them will forever change how I teach and interact with my students. Though I didn't know about trauma and its impacts on the learning environment at this point in my career, the experiences I had as a foster sibling helped me to have a better understanding of my students' challenges. These students and their experiences taught me that a child needs someone that they can predictably rely on, a safe space where their voices and thoughts are valued, and someone who sees their strengths so that they too can view themselves as strong. These students had walked through adversity their entire lives and still showed up at school each day and tried their best. They woke up early and utilized

resources around them to make sure that they were ready to learn before the bell rang. They advocated for one another and they cheered each other on as milestones were accomplished. My students endured many rocky situations outside those classroom walls. Yet, they persevered, and they taught me that in order to understand someone else's experiences, we must initiate true dialogue. We must be vulnerable enough to listen and allow their words to turn ours upside down. We must allow the realities of others to unravel our complacency. We must understand our own power (even if this power only comes from being in the dominant culture) and give their words our complete attention and to actually listen (not just hear) what they have to say and share about their experiences. In the next section, *Dismantling Me,* I discuss the next part of my journey as an educator and examine my experiences in the doctoral program at Appalachian State University that radically dismantled my knowing.

Dismantling Me

After spending two years in the classroom, one year as a middle school science teacher and another year as a high school science teacher, I transitioned to an informal role in the field of education. My decision to leave the classroom was grounded in the amount of time I was forced to spend focused on the designated curriculum and how every decision was made around test results, decisions that were not centered in the well-being or best educational outcomes of students. I not only experienced frustration with mandated tests and policies, but I felt like I was powerless in my own classroom. I transitioned into a role for North Carolina State University where I served as a 4-H agent for the following five years. In this new role, I created a school enrichment program that focused on environmental education and the natural sciences. I always explained my new role as a "happy medium" where I was able to be in the classroom every day and light a passion in students for the natural world around them, but had no obligations around testing. Testing is punitive for students and for teachers, and the test-based accountability approaches to educational reform have failed to improve education (Hagopian, 2014; Au & Apple, 2010).

In my new role, I was able to visit each of my 30+ classrooms once a month and bring engaging science experiments that correlated with their curriculum, but allowed students to interact and be creative with no formal assessment attached. During this timeframe, I was asked by many of the classroom teachers if I'd be willing to help them build out their science resources and bring more hands-on content into their classrooms. I heard many times that they only taught science "*once a week because we just don't have the time and they aren't tested on it until eighth grade*." As a science educator, that broke my heart. Students in North Carolina are annually assessed in reading and math in grades 3-8, and as a

result most of the learning is focused on these subjects with science and history being sprinkled in wherever possible. I began to work with these teachers during summer break to help build out their resources and help them plan their science lessons that strayed from the typical worksheet and textbook readings. Just as those students in the after-school program sparked my interest in education and sent me down a new career path, these teachers allowed me to explore opportunities in education outside traditional teaching. I realized that I enjoyed educating teachers just as much as I did their students, and a new road emerged on my career map.

Fall of 2018, I began my Education Specialist (EdS) program with a concentration in adult and developmental education and in 2020 I was able to begin my doctoral program in Educational Leadership with a focus in higher education. What I had intentionally started as an entry point into the adult learning arena, became an inquiry into my past and everything I had ever been taught. In this section I share my experiences in the Educational Leadership (Ed.D) program at Appalachian State University and how my knowledge about power, privilege, oppression, and the sociopolitical conditions in society and in education turned my understanding of the world on its head.

My Learning at the Intersection of Socialization and Imposter Syndrome

The American Dream and pursuit of happiness idea arose from unfettered buy-in to traditional ideologies and beliefs steeped in capitalism. At its core, the American Dream promises success and financial prosperity in exchange for hard work. The idea that every American has the same opportunity for social mobility is false. Capitalism, the motive to make a profit, has been successful at boosting wealth in America but has failed at redistributing it. One's prestige and social status is directly related to their productivity,

determining their value in society based on how much they earn and own (Nesbit, 2010). Neoliberalism was politically developed by capitalism, seeking to maximize the freedom of trade and wealth by removing all barriers to the private accumulation of wealth and power. These systems encourage its victims to blame themselves for their inability to be successful and earn capital, meanwhile the dominant group is able to maintain their status quo and hierarchies of power and privilege. Rooted in Darwinian principles and competition suggesting that you must "win" to succeed, capitalism and neoliberalism orbit around individualism, classism, and power (Madsen, 2014). These ideologies impact every corner of American society including parenting styles and community attitudes that nourish and maintain increasing demands for performance among youth. Placing a materialistic value on education and its perceived prominence within the community defeats the purpose of learning and only signifies the value of maintaining social position (Kashdan & Breen, 2007).

Earlier in this dissertation I spoke a bit about my upbringing, and though privileged, anything less than perfect was unacceptable. Ingrained in my childhood was the notion that academic achievement was equated to my success within society and my worth as a person. It didn't matter that I took extremely detailed notes and spent hours studying for a test; if I didn't make an A, that was considered failure. I was constantly compared to my peers, and the learning environment was centered around competition. My upbringing caused me to develop a strong (and unhealthy) attachment to the social construct of success. When asked about the state of mind of affluent children striving for success, William Deresciewicsz (2014) stated, "The prospect of not being successful terrifies them, disorients them, defeats them. They have been haunted their whole lives by a fear of failure - often, in the first

instance, by their parents' fear of failure. The cost of falling short, or even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential" (p. 21-22). This fear dominated my entire adolescent and early adult life. And when I had *finally* reached the top of my academic mountain, instead of sitting back and applauding my accomplishments, I questioned my ability to be there and whether I had enough knowledge to adequately sit with the people at my table. Most of my cohort had been in education for 15-20+ years, and I was only rounding out year five so my experiences weren't nearly as developed as theirs. Despite having these lived experiences as a foster sibling, educator and student, I was still patterned by this socialized construct of *success* and began to doubt my capabilities when I saw how advanced my cohort peers were.

Imposter syndrome, identified by Pailine Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978, is the idea that you've only succeeded because of luck and not because of your accomplishments or qualifications (Clance & Imes, 1978). Environments play an important role in eliciting imposter feelings. Social structure and context feed norms fueling these feelings of disparity and otherness. These internalized, negative perceptions of oneself are conceived out of environments and social interactions and expectations. As I compared myself to my peers, I felt "less than" and that my knowledge wasn't adequate enough to allow me in this space. Here I sat at one of the highest accredited institutions for education, starting off a terminal degree at the age of 30 and I felt like I hadn't earned it, like I didn't belong, as if at some point someone was going to figure out that they'd mistakenly let me in and rip it from me.

Throughout my career and as I learned about my students, small shifts in my knowledge and teaching practices had occurred, but not in large capacities. These ideologies

that I had been socialized into created an internal struggle. I felt like an imposter, comparing my knowledge to my peers, viewing myself through a deficit-based perspective. As I reflect on these imposter syndrome feelings at the start of my doctoral career, I am now aware that it wasn't me that was deficient, it was the socialization process that formed my knowledge that was deficient. The constructs of academic success and its direct link to social success and mobility saturated my childhood and adult life, leading me to buy into these particular ideologies. It wasn't until I went through the doctoral program that I was able to unlearn and relearn by using my experiential knowledge to apply concepts, opening up the door for me to begin to undo this socialization process. My world and everything that I had learned was completely turned upside down, allowing me to shift my perspectives, and continue to dismantle the beliefs and ideologies that my foster siblings and students had helped me to begin to dismantle years earlier.

Shifts in Perceptions: A New Understanding of History

Throughout my coursework, we read about and discussed many concepts that specifically labeled and pushed back on societal norms, expectations and practices, such as discourse, culture of power, Whiteness and colonialism. I remember the first time "colonialism" came about in one of our classes. I'll be the first to admit that history was never my passion in school, and so my immediate thought was: what do colonial beliefs have to do with the current status of education? We were challenged to create a powerful analysis of the education system, starting with the historical context of how it evolved. This particular assignment opened my eyes to how deeply settler colonialism is ingrained into societal structures. It's important to note the difference between colonialism and settler colonialism. Colonialism is when a political entity tries to gain control over people and land, it occurs as

an event and not an ongoing process (Veracini, 2010). Settler colonialism is the act of displacing the Indigenous people who live in the area. Settler colonialism is a consistent social and political structure where colonizers settle onto a land, declaring it as their own, erasing the Indigenous population. It is an ongoing process, ingrained in the past, present and future (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005).

Education was only a dream, not a requirement, in the 17th century and for those children who were able to attend school, the main purpose was to teach them to read the Bible and align their lives by Puritan morals. As settler colonies grew, each was required to have at least one school that taught academics, focusing only on wealthier populations. After the American Revolution, early leaders proposed the creation of publicly funded schools that were more unified. Federal ordinances gave acreage of federal land to support the creation of schools and build stable communities throughout the country (Gutek, 1991). Horace Mann, a Massachusetts legislator, began to advocate and push for universal public schools that would be free and funded by the state. He claimed that this public investment in education would benefit the entire nation by transforming youth into literate, moral and productive citizens. Mann believed that education was the answer to closing social gaps, overcoming poverty and creating a more equitable society (Gutek, 1991). Education had been dominated by religion and only accessible to elite families and White men. The fight was grounded in bringing education under the control of the government and a handle on how schools shape American society. School became a social institution and education became a social process. The goal, still operating under religious implications, was to socially integrate people through the inoculation of certain beliefs, specifically focusing on “uplifting” characteristics. Mann laid

the groundwork for greater governmental control by advocating that the states control the character and mission of public schools.

During the mid-19th century, pushed by Protestant ideology, education was used as a tool to "assimilate" Indian tribes into the mainstream American society and way of life. Reformers "civilized" Indian children by making them accept White men's beliefs and value systems with the end goal of eradicating Indian culture. Youth were also forced to convert to Christianity and forced to work jobs based on their sex. Girls did the laundry for the entire institution and learned to sew, cook and clean. Boys learned industrial skills and performed manual labor on the farm. This labor is a form of settler colonialism, viewing Indigenous people as property (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Residential schools silenced Indigenous identity, stripped youth of cultural knowledge, and weakened family and life connections. It was essentially, education for extinction (Adams, 1995).

This was the first time in my academic history that I had learned a more complete history of education and it laid the groundwork for me to understand how White supremacy and dominance are socially constructed. I began to question what knowledge was true, who produces it, and who is in control of it. Throughout my own education, and that of others in the United States, history has been taught from the viewpoint of the victor. This White perspective on history and the events that took place is a reflection of America's extensive White colonial past. Not only is this narrative an extremely restricted perspective of the world but it fails to tell the stories and knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and people of Color communities. This White colonial perspective admires historical figures such as Christopher Columbus and Abraham Lincoln while vilifying and dismissing Indigenous peoples, implying that they and their cultures are "less than" and inferior to White people. As a result

of this limited and one-sided historical narrative, students have gone through the American education system without any understanding of topics like imperialism and colonialism. Settler histories are reinforced by the colonial education system by using practices that orbit around Western concepts and ideals, placing emphasis on data, assessments, and competency. American history is a history of settler colonialism and it doesn't only exist in the past, but it's an ongoing process happening every single day with cumulative effects. It can be seen alive and well in the exclusion, erasure, coercion, and dominance of communities of Color, like the communities I taught in; it trickles through the veins of society through politics and social relations (Nieto-Phillips, 2004). The atrocities that occurred throughout the course of American history, particularly among groups who have been subjected to mass trauma as the result of historical colonization, marginalization, and genocide have been linked to health disparities throughout generations (Brockie et al., 2015). Historical trauma is a sequence of characteristics associated with mass trauma events across generations experienced by a cultural group that has historically been systematically oppressed (Brave Heart, 1999). Cultural groups with significant histories of trauma continue to experience marginalization and microaggressions as everyday experiences of discrimination and racism (Evans-Campbell, 2008). The historical legacy of racism continues to operate within society through institutional and structural practices, continuing inequities throughout layers of sociocultural realms (Williams et al., 2019). The students who filled my classroom had to fight the systems of oppression and consequences of discrimination, just as their parents and grandparents continue to have to do on a daily basis.

One of our assignments was to bring in an artifact that showcased "ways that colonial ideologies persist in educational institutions today." When one of my peers held up a school

calendar, I assumed he was going to talk about how learning was seen as an act that happened 180 days out of the year, instead of the more hands-on Indigenous model where learning is an everyday interaction between humans and their environment. When he circled the holidays, I was *shook*. How could I have been so complacent? The majority of the school calendar is centered around Christian holidays such as Easter and Christmas. It never occurred to me that the school calendar was built around Christianity, because I was a part of that religion and I didn't have to adjust my schedule to accommodate my beliefs. What does this say about our education system and how it considers and treats other cultures? Is this another form of assimilation? This leads me back to the question of the purpose of schooling. Prior to this program I would have stated that the purpose of schooling was to gain knowledge, opportunity, college preparation, to build a workforce, curiosity, and to become an active citizen.

The Power of Learning About Power

Paulo Freire (1968) asserted that education should be for liberation. However, I began to realize throughout my courses that it has become the system that reifies oppression. Education has failed because its creators designed it from their personal and experiential knowledge and to fulfill their own agendas. It's the hands of the few (those with power), that dominate the many (those who are powerless). Power relations are the foundation for culture and society… and consequently, education. Marx (1976) claimed that power is a resource and it is always in limited supply; power wants to stay concentrated. Power manifests through economic processes and is distributed through the accumulation of capital and it translates into the control over ideas. These ideas are implemented into every part of society as ideologies and they seduce the working class into a false consciousness, securing their

subordination. Marxism views power as repressive and states that it obscures the "truth." Foucault (1983) told us that power is a relation, it is never "held or owned" but it is strategically exercised through the social body. Freire (1968) stated that we must expand the consciousness of the oppressed in order to overthrow the power. Any system that isn't working to consciously interrupt oppression isn't revolutionary. The oppressed are not "marginals" who live "outside" the boundaries of society. The solution does not lie in integrating them into the societal structures that oppress them; the solution is to transform the structures that are oppressing them.

Positive results from an education program fail to exist when the program fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Those with power are not going to hand over the education needed to overthrow that power (or them). These challenges presented by Freire and Foucault offer new perspectives to address the authority and discourse of colonialism practices that "either directly constructs or is implicated in social relations that keep privilege and oppression alive as active constituting forces of daily life within the centers and margins of power" (Olsen & Dobrin, p. 200).

These readings and course assignments opened my eyes to how Whitewashed my world was, everything that I had ever learned up until this point was solely taught from a White perspective. I started to think critically and question what we are taught. What knowledge and information had been left out? Who had been left out of the history books? I began to seek out counternarratives to the dominant, Eurocentric, Western perspective so that I could shift my own perspective and make space for new (and more truthful) knowledge. Relearning and shifting how I perceive the world around me is vital to decentering the dominant White colonial lens that dominated my prior perspective and led to my

complacency and participation in social structures that viewed my students, their families, and their communities as broken and throwaways.

Becoming *Unsettled*

One of the most powerful and uncomfortable courses I took during my Ed.D program was *Decolonizing Educational Research*. The course confronted and challenged the White settler colonial practices of education, with a focus on the politics of knowledge and relational ethics of power. We examined the theoretical concepts of answerability, re-positionality, recognizability, and how each provides a methodological approach to shift away from damage- and deficit- centered educational practices and research. This was an elective course and I had no idea that at the time I chose it that it would spark a fire within me and fuel my research design, eventually becoming the foundation for this dissertation.

The course readings and curriculum were centered around Indigenous and anti-colonial scholars, and a great deal of the reading dealt with complex, unfamiliar, and uncomfortable ideas. I remember Dr. Jackson specifically stated on the first night of class, "*Intellectual comfort is not the goal of this course.*" She encouraged us to wrestle with new ideas (not often a pleasant experience), but explained that it was our responsibility as scholars to examine our attachments and beliefs to see how they limit us and protect us from engaging with *what and who* is different from us. I've thought a lot about my internal push-and-pulls as we went through this course and the inner circles of confusion, guilt, awareness, and questioning that ensued. How deeply ingrained in historical power structures our society operates within became very apparent early on in our readings, and everything became displaced for me.

A week into the course I met with Dr. Jackson after class and told her how taken back I was by the readings and how I was struggling emotionally with where the readings were leaving me; I wanted to show up authentically but this *moment* was making a movement in my life. This movement was questioning my experiences and really pulling me in, albeit *uncomfortably*. Later, I had a similar conversation about the direction of my dissertation and how our assignments and course readings had impacted how I wanted to speak about my experiences with my students, but that I was still struggling with finding a theory and philosophical approach for my work. She replied, "I think the theory has already chosen *you*." We don't choose a theory for our work, the theory chooses you. It's waiting in the background, informing your thinking as you encounter texts and engage with them. This is what happened when I read Tuck and Yang's works. Foucault's theory of power and discourse, and Tuck and Yang's theory of decolonization, fueled a change and shift for and within me. After engaging with and processing these theories and concepts, I saw their evidence *everywhere* in my daily life. It blew apart how I thought about and perceived the world around me, shattering the foundation beneath my feet. In *Thinking with Theory,* Jackson and Mazzei (2011) stated that if we rely only on our own experiences then we will reproduce what we already know, reproducing sameness. For me, thinking with theory was difficult because it was unsettling everything that I believed. It was as if there was an earthquake within me, shaking and rattling me loose from the threads of complacency, sameness, and familiarity. It produced a change - a different way of thinking, a different way of being, and a different way of speaking.

The weight of historical reality can be uncomfortable. The truth is, settlers indirectly and directly benefited from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous communities and that

can be a harsh reality to accept. The weight of guilt can make us quickly jump toward any reprieve. Tuck and Yang (2012) refer to "settler moves to innocence" as strategies that attempt to alleviate the settler of responsibility and guilt without giving up their power, their privilege, or their land. Tuck and Yang (2012) encourage and ask educators to become *unsettled*. As I read and processed, I became very conscious of my own positionality as a settler, benefiting from and advancing the settler colonial enterprise. Tuck and Yang urge scholars to be aware of this positionality as they pursue their work. I quickly had settler guilt and realized that as an educator I often take on the role and take pride in fixing issues. Not necessarily for outward praise, it makes me feel better personally when I'm efficient at my job and make a difference in the lives of my students. I often feel guilty that I grew up privileged in a two-parent household with food on the table, electricity, and support and love. I try to make up for my White privilege by overextending myself to my students and making sure their needs are met while they're within my classroom walls. Although unintentional, classist and racist ideologies can easily surface in education operating under "good intentions" of White, middle- upper class teachers. White savior complex is an ideology where a White person "guides people of Color from the margins to the mainstream with his or her own initiative and benevolence" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 243). The White person who is acting from a place of superiority attempts to help rescue a person of Color or community, either consciously or unconsciously, having the underlying belief that they know what is best for them. In my case as an educator, trying to provide aid and support for my students' needs didn't mean any harm but White saviorism perpetuates White supremacy within our society. It only acts as a band-aid to the problem, and once the band-aid falls off, those deeper barriers of oppression remain intact. It doesn't allow us to perceive the situation accurately

because we are focused on an individual and their specific needs, rather than focusing on the larger systemic structural issues that cause these needs. This new knowledge allowed me to view my students' disparities from a societal perspective, instead of on an individual level, changing the way I spoke to them and about them. It also helped me to become more aware of my own biases and allowed me to work toward deconstructing my White savior mindset and assumptions.

Reading *Moves to Innocence V: A(s)t(e)risk Peoples* (Tuck & Yang, 2012) created turmoil and concern within me as an educator in the ways in which we label, code, and identify students who have experienced trauma including: abuse, neglect, mistreatment, malnourishment, etc. As a result of these traumas the youth have been coded with learning disabilities, learning challenges, and troubling behaviors. This illustration of oppression and coding systematics not only increases their traumatic experiences as outliers but puts the settler colonial back at the forefront of power. It is *us* who label these students for our own benefit, so that we can quickly identify their weaknesses and accommodate them in our classrooms. Who is this helping? The use of codes and labels are grounded in deficit-based thinking and only further oppresses these students and puts a target on their back for further discrimination. The youth become absorbed by these labels and even begin to believe that they are less valuable, less intelligent, and less worthy than their peers. The use of these deficit-based frameworks continues the act of "us vs. them" and communicates to these youth that they are a failure or helpless if we don't step in to rescue them. It also makes them dependent on "us" and outside resources. By focusing on their weaknesses and implementing deficit-based frameworks in our schools, we perpetuate the pain narrative about these youth. This needs to be unsettled in our teaching practices; it is vital as educators

and administrators that we stop pushing and participating in the use of these labels and codes for our youth. Anti-colonial means that we must resist these practices in a unified manner, not by addressing the symptoms that result from these oppressions, but by challenging and dismantling the tenets of the systems that produce oppression. It circles back to the question I've encountered several times throughout this process, *what is the purpose of education and who is it for?*

The Purpose of Education: Promise or Power?

At multiple points throughout my program, we revisited the purpose of education. Prior to learning about colonialism and Whiteness, I had a limited and narrow viewpoint on why education existed and how it evolved. I had experiences with how I viewed learning, how my students viewed education, and how their life circumstances created barriers to their education; but it wasn't until this program that I realized how those barriers were created and maintained to keep them in a state of oppression. As I grappled with the historical events that created and shaped our educational institutions, I began to wonder: *why* are we trying to sustain an education system that is completely broken? The dysfunction lies in blaming children and families for their problems rather than the policies and institutional interests which drive dehumanization and dispossession. Dismantling the broken system would mean dismantling the power that enables it. Power controls the narrative and the knowledge that is taught. If that power is given to or shared with the people and communities who have been silenced and erased from history, then that means a different story would have to be told.

Formal schooling is much more about coloniality than it is about teaching, learning and coexistence. Throughout history, the American education system has tried to balance meritocracy and democracy, reproducing a deep obsession for sorting and ranking people.

Assessments have been the primary instrument in locating this so-called *balance*, creating a rivalry between the "perfectibility of man" and equality of opportunity (Hoff, 1999). Test scores have been used to significantly alter the educational landscape and spotlight the gaps in achievement. Knowledge is power and is treated as property; by limiting knowledge, it can be pursued and protected by those who are the most powerful in the stratified society (Harris, 1993). Rogers and Mosley (2006) stated that "White people are the beneficiaries of inequality in society" (p. 465). The act of *erasing to replace* is still evident today in how we focus on the lower strata and how to provide them with the same opportunities and experiences of students in middle- and higher classes. The desire to mimic the upper strata of society is more of a myth than an obtainable reality because it offers a superficial understanding of historical racism and how it permeates education in the U.S. (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). This deep investment in White supremacy sorts, codes, and segments students from differing social classes validating racist premises of social difference (Wilder, 2013). Coding systematics further damage students' sense of worth and increase their traumatic experiences as outliers in society, while maintaining power for the settler-colonial. It is *us*, educators and policymakers, who label students for personal benefit, helping us to quickly target their deficits to make it easier for us to accommodate them in our schools (hooks, 1994). We are partaking in oppressive tactics that puts a continuous target on their back for discrimination. Deficit based ideologies and policies only further perpetuate the "us vs. them" mentality and communicate that these students are damaged and in need of our support to help "fix" these damages. We offer them a life-preserver, to keep them from failing and keep them afloat; by rescuing them from themselves it makes them dependent on "us" and the resources we "provide" to them.

I saw these deficit driven conversations play out in my time as a foster sibling. Lilly was tested and compared to "normal" children her age and was earmarked as having weaker cognitive abilities and predicted to have poor academic achievement, none of which took into account her childhood adversity and neglect. The foster care system stepped in to "rescue" Lilly and provide care for her, but quickly spoke of how "damaged" she was to her potential adopters, who would then need to "fix" those damages through years of intentional support and care. As a teacher at the magnet school, I was implicated in this deficit-based ideology before the school even opened. The magnet school was implemented to fill the gap students were exhibiting in their reading level scores. They were coming to "*us*" (the rookie teachers), under the assumption that we could "*fix*" "*them*" and get them back on track by the time they graduated high school. Even though every student who received entry into the magnet program met this "low-standard" and there was little discrimination amongst our students, our school body as a whole was discriminated against by other students in the county because they attended the magnet school program. They were labeled for their deficiencies, deepening the wounds of oppression and inequity, and segregating them even more from their community peers. Knowing that a student couldn't go from a 2nd grade reading level to a 6th grade reading level in one school year, the program was set up to gradually increase their reading comprehension year after year, making "*them*" dependent on "*us*" and our resources for the entirety of their middle and high school career. This is another example of White saviorism, attempting to rescue students of Color and students from *their* oppressed communities, to help them to be as successful as their White, middle- and upper-class counterparts.

In keeping with its absurd yet purposeful rupture between land and humans, coloniality has perforated learning from a transformational experience into transactional metrics. It has boiled learning down into test-score production and social attainment. However, as long as coloniality has been in existence, so has the act of learning and it is important to remember that it will survive coloniality (Patel, 2016). Learning is an act of futurity and we must become answerable to it, we must create space for disrupting settler logics. Educational equity is not about test scores and graduation rates, it's not about wealth and the future our students wish to have; in fact, it's not about the *future* at all. It's about *now.* It's about the environment that we create for our students and the experiences they've had and continue to have. It's about recognizing their adversity *and* their resilience. It's achieved by ensuring that each student has a school and classroom where they feel safe, where adults care about them and value their experiences and who view them as human beings. It's a culture where they are seen for their strengths and not labeled for their weaknesses, an environment where they can create and explore, and have the opportunity to practice skills like collaboration and communication. It's about breaking down the systems that continue to oppress and code them. It is not about every child being able to compete in an unequal system. It is about nurturing a child's development so that they have the knowledge, skills and beliefs that they need in order to interact with and reflect on their world, to make choices and decisions that are aligned with their core values, and work with others to make our world more equitable for everyone. The playing field does not need to be leveled so that our students can compete equally -- we need to change the game that we are asking our students to play in.

As I wrap up this section, I reflect back on the orientation session for the Ed.D program and how I felt like I didn't belong in this space. The woman who sat in that chair, ashamed of her limited experiences in the world, does not exist anymore. I barely recognize her and feel disconnected from the thoughts and beliefs that once contaminated her mind. This journey has been challenging yet transformative. At the beginning, I struggled to find my place within this program, feeling as though everyone else's knowledge was more advanced than mine. I've grappled with the purpose of the education system, its values, and my place within it. I've struggled with my privilege and my own complacency in the historical reproduction of injustice and inequity. Through my struggle, I have learned that *no* knowledge is absolute, and that the knowledge we do hold is defined by our social class, cultural identities, and lived experiences.

My experiential knowledge has played a significant role in *dismantling me.* Watching my foster siblings walk through and overcome challenges that saturated their childhood and seeing them labeled for their deficiencies (due to neglect) and viewed as damaged, opened my eyes to a different reality than the one I lived as a child from a two-income, loving household. It was because of my time with my foster siblings that I developed an understanding for behavior challenges as a form of communication, and having that foundation allowed me to build trusting relationships with students at the magnet school. The lived experiences that my students at the magnet school shared with me allowed me to see how systemic racism and structural inequities kept their families in poverty, maintaining cycles of oppression and historical trauma. If I had not had either of these lived experiences, would I have been dismantled so easily?

I am aware that simply *seeing* how my siblings and students were so easily labeled and viewed as throwaways in society doesn't do justice to the day-to-day discrimination and oppression that they live through. But, their experiences and how I perceived them allowed me to have a narrow understanding of their reality. Without this understanding, I wouldn't have been able to shake loose from my complacency. I would have struggled with naming my own privilege and viewing myself as a White savior, remaining blind to the injustices happening all around me. It was seeing my siblings and students' challenges created by systemic inequities that allowed me to see their barriers through my lens, and that lens allowed me to shift my perspective, unlearn and relearn, and become unsettled. Tuck and Yang (2012) state that unsettled isn't a destination or an "exemplary" category on a professional development evaluation, it isn't a place you reach, mark off, and move on. Becoming unsettled and dismantled is an *ongoing process*, it takes continual reflection and refusal. We have to constantly pause to learn, unlearn, and then relearn - we never reach proficiency. We must continue to ask if the futures we imagine, if the spaces we want to create for learning, if the way we view and speak to one another, awakens or demolishes settler logic. Power will always be sought after, but by understanding one's *own* power, even if that power only stems from being in the majority, we can initiate true dialogue.

Chapter 5: Teaching as an Act of Resistance

"Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation." (Freire, 1970, p. 61)

Returning to My Research Questions

My first two research questions explored the dominant discourses about students with adverse childhood experiences and the role of power in producing and reproducing these deficit-based narratives. To summarize the findings, the dominant discourse surrounding youth who have experienced ACEs is that they are broken, defective, and unworthy. These deficit-based narratives have labeled them as "*at-risk"* and are built on a foundation of power and control, creating an image of what is "normal" and "appropriate" development and behavior. Once these labels are applied, youth are viewed from the lens of their deficiency, not as an individual with strengths and assets who also survived traumatic experiences. Within this discourse, a child's identity and value is constructed and the label is used to categorize and contain them within societal and cultural systems. This deficit-based labeling system results in the youth being excluded from society, yet contained in an oppressive state, due to a complex and interlocking system that inherently dehumanizes them. These norms and discourses continue to reproduce because they operate on the sole assumption that inequalities are a result of moral, cultural and behavioral deficiency, instead of the reality of unequal social systems and systemic racism.

This study is significant because it is solely centered around creating a greater understanding of the issues of systemic racism and inequity that are built into the foundations of our nation's education system. Critically deconstructing discourses that shape the way we teach, speak to, and view youth with high ACEs (generally labeled as *"at-risk*"), and the

direct and indirect power relations that this label holds over their lives, is an integral component of rethinking pedagogical practices to transform existing systems.

This study was both a form of critical inquiry and resistance as activism. As I wrote and shared my experiences from within my own home and classroom, I was able to "plug in" concepts and view how these policies and procedures continued to label my siblings and students as a deficit to society, hindering their opportunities and their self-worth. In this section, I explore my last two research questions: How can educators resist these discourses within their classrooms and hallways? How might this resistance create opportunities, and reform for teaching and trauma-informed education?

Pedagogy of Pausing

In 2009, Eve Tuck authored *Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities* pleading with communities, researchers, and educators to reconsider the long-term implications of damage-centered pedagogy and research. She called for a moratorium on research that intends to document people and community's pain and brokenness, and a call to action to hold those in power accountable for systemic oppression.

In the letter, she writes:

> In damaged-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the

> danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. (Tuck, 2009, p. 413)

As I read and examined Tuck's letter as a scholar and educator, it initiated a rippling effect inspiring my dissertation research and framework. Tuck states that the act of *pausing* involves "intentionally engaging in suspension of one's own premises and projects, but always with a sense of futurity" (Patel, 2016, p. xiii). She goes on to say that pausing is an insertion of *space* in time, where productive interruptions provide opportunities to sit in silence and allow knowledge to emerge. We must pause to reach beyond. Patel (2016) urges us to not only pause, but to completely stop many of the worst habits in the field of education. These bad habits that Patel refers to include the ways in which educational institutions and researchers have avoided naming and condemning racism and White supremacy through the distribution of racial proxies. Patel describes the educational institution as a dysfunctional place, operating outside the boundaries of its commonly stated intentions. Most of this dysfunction is rooted in blaming issues on students and families, instead of the policies and corporate structures that propel dispossession.

Eve Tuck's letter (*Suspending Damage*) and Patel's book (*Decolonizing Educational Research*), bring us to an important crossroads for the future of education and research: either continue to utilize the practices that rely on and refuel coloniality, *or* consistently work toward undoing it. It is a call to action to remember the true purpose of knowledge, calling for regeneration, "the direct application of acting against our ingrained and oppressive fears" (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 151). We must acknowledge the historic pain while simultaneously taking action against the pain in order to reframe history. It is the work of

Tuck and Patel that brought me to a pivotal moment in my scholarly journey, allowing me to take on the work of recalibration, and it is my hope that this dissertation encourages future and veteran educators and anyone working with youth to take a *pause*. I conclude this dissertation with a set of letters, aiming to inspire such pauses to create a rupture and change in being and learning, counteracting the habits and structures of coloniality.

Dear 2013 Me: A Letter to a Future Educator

You've wrapped up your coursework and your student teaching experience, and you've been offered your first teaching position. You're about to embark on a challenging yet rewarding journey. I want to tell you that there will be those people you meet in the coming weeks who will tell you how insignificant your role and your job will be. You'll get the question, what's next for you? And with your response of *education*, you'll get a small nod, perhaps a forced smile, and you'll commonly get a response like "you'll pour your entire life into teaching those kids and at the end of the day you won't have two pennies to rub together." Those same people will ask someone else who will respond with engineering or business administration and their face will light up with how exciting and fulfilling those career fields will be. You will begin to feel like every other career field is more prestigious than teaching, and if you're not careful, you'll begin to believe that about yourself. Don't succumb to the way society views you or your profession, the work you do day-in-and-day-out will be meaningful and valuable. You belong in this space.

Those around you who aren't on the frontlines of education, will dehumanize you and the field of education. They are out of touch with the realities of what actually happens within your classroom. We are in an educational war, fighting between what is best for our students and what makes the most money for corporations. Elected officials and those in

power use their platforms and positions to further their careers and deepen their pockets, often at the expense of those whom education is supposed to help. You will begin to question yourself and this path you've chosen, thinking that the politics of education aren't worth the frustration you bring home with you every day. Use these frustrations to fuel your purpose.

For many of the children who will fill your classroom desks, school is *unfair.* One student may go home to an afternoon snack and an organized, well-lit study space while receiving progress check-ins from their parents who are making dinner. For another student, they come home to an empty house and make their own meals while they babysit their younger siblings. Home might be too loud, filled with noisy streets or close proximity to neighbors, home might not have a bed or electricity, home might be unsafe, and for some home might not even exist. They may not be able to get their work done because of these barriers, and when they show up to school the next day and aren't "prepared," it's important that you don't write them off and compare their work ethic to other students. For them, school may be the only place that they feel safe, it may be the only place that is quiet enough to sleep, the only place where they can wash their face or brush their teeth, or the only place where food is guaranteed. Not every student who enters those school doors, will show up with the same opportunities to navigate the educational system. School is not a level playing field. But, you won't realize this at first. You'll be too consumed with making your own classroom a color-coded happy place, filled with new school supplies and poster quotes to *truly* see the challenges your students face on a daily basis. You'll have high expectations for them and their parents, comparing these students to the students you taught in your student teaching experience. Your privilege will blur your sight. You'll be frustrated that their parents didn't show up for the open house or drop in to meet you. When students don't return

their paperwork on the first day of school, you'll think that their parents don't value education or care enough to fill out the important paperwork. You'll quickly label them as apathetic because you've been socialized to view uninvolved parents this way. You've cleaned, painted, and rearranged your room to accommodate your new students but you'll need to do some internal rearranging. You have a very narrow perspective of the powers at play in education. You don't know (yet) how rooted in colonial ideologies the education system is because you're a majority, the system has always benefited you. You've been complacent in maintaining social norms and constructs because you've never seen it from the eyes of the oppressed.

This school year, sixty students will open your eyes. I urge you to pay close attention. When you arrive at school early and are busy preparing for the day's lesson, pay attention to what's happening around you. Listen closely to the conversations that occur when no one is around. If you don't listen to the dialogue happening before you, you'll continue to be part of the discourse that views and labels your students as *broken*. You've had experience with adverse childhood experiences before (though you don't realize the impact trauma has on child development yet), lean into your past experiences with your foster siblings. You'll use this knowledge about trauma and its links to behavior to see your students in a different light. This will allow you to be an advocate for several of your students, when other teachers and staff label them for their (mis)behavior, engage in critical dialogue to disrupt this label. We must problematize the label in an effort to understand and change how we speak about youth and make sense of the circumstances they encounter on a daily basis. Be vocal. Stand up and speak out when you disagree with the policies and procedures that view your students through a damage-based lens. Just because you're a first-year teacher does not mean that

your voice is less powerful. Don't keep your experiences with foster care quiet, share them with your colleagues. Seeing the world through someone else's perspective is the only way that we can begin to shift the conversation. Ask questions. When you build and foster a trusting relationship with a student, don't be afraid to ask, "what happened to you?" It's important that you know what's going on in your students' lives outside those four walls.

When a student finds his way to your classroom every day for being "explosive" don't let his behavior define who he is. Share with your colleagues what trauma-informed care is and how behavior *is* communication. What are your students trying to communicate to you? When their anger gets the best of them, don't be fearful and don't let fear control how your colleagues perceive them. Recognize that anger is a trauma response, and sit with them through their emotions, mentor them as they learn to self-regulate. Acknowledge that their feelings and emotions are real and justified, and that it's okay to be mad, angry or sad. They are not "*less than*" their peers, they are "more than" their trauma, do not let their adversity label them. Don't be afraid to share with your colleagues what's working well in your classroom, and how you avoid using the "pop-corn method" and reframe from shaming them in front of their peers. Communicate with your colleagues about the resilience of your students, and how much effort they devote each morning into being prepared prior to the bell ringing.

Make it a point to learn about the community you're serving. Reach out to your students' families and introduce yourself, and use multiple platforms to do so. Don't wait until a student misbehaves or gets in trouble to phone home. Building relationships with your students and their families will allow you to see the struggles that they encounter, these struggles have been portrayed to you your entire life as laziness and lack of value for

education. You've been conditioned to believe that education is a way out of poverty, and that social mobility is attainable for all. This isn't true. You'll later learn through your scholarly journey that these barriers are the consequence of an inequitable society. These systems of power and oppression construct communities and families as both the *cause of* and the *solution* to complex social issues, affirming and upholding the colonized mentality and subjugation. Power systems identify low-socioeconomic communities as the "problem," but does not focus on how power structures and society create these problems. It is impossible to be both the *problem* and the *answer,* we must stop blaming low-socioeconomic communities for inequities and expecting them to overcome while maintaining and reinforcing the systems that keep an oppressive state intact. These convoluted stereotypes will seep into your classroom and the school's policies. It is important that you pause, and think critically about the power systems at play, and why they are used as a form of social control.

You will experience pressure to meet the needs of those who hold the power (policy makers and administrators). You will have to balance political and institutional expectations, while understanding the lived histories and trauma of the students you serve and support. This will be challenging; you must fight and be willing to take risks. You will have to establish your own knowledge and sense of political maturity, with a solid understanding of the parallel between truth and power in generating and maintaining social inequities. You will have to constantly battle with your biases, acknowledging your privilege on a daily basis, embarking in self-reflexivity to make certain you aren't contributing to the hegemonic structures you're trying to dismantle. You have control over your choices and who you'll become as an educator, rely on your past experiences to help guide you. Learn from your

mistakes and use those life lessons to transform into the person and educator you want to become. Do not be afraid to admit when you're wrong, always adapt and evolve as needed.

You're a complex composition of your lived experiences -- good and bad. Without each of these experiences, you would not be the person you are in 2022. Each experience was necessary for you to learn and grow. Do the hard work to better define your own philosophy and beliefs about education and *live it.*

Dear Staff: A Letter to the Magnet School

I don't know where this letter finds you in your professional journey, but it is my hope that you're still a player in the game of education. For some of you, this school year might wrap up a decade of being on the front lines in the classroom, others may have worked their way up the administrative ladder and are running their own school now. Either way -- I hope you're still advocating for and educating other people's children. It's hard to believe that it's almost been ten years since we were recruited to teach and serve the first class of the Magnet School. For many of us, the 2013 school year brought a population of students with whom we were completely unfamiliar with. With little knowledge about their community, lived histories, experiences, and challenges -- we built a school with a notion to catch them up to speed, but in retrospect the policies and procedures that we created *maintained* their reality. I'm not sure how each of you found your way into education or what path you took to get to the Magnet School, but I predict that our education was similar. I feel this way because we were unconsciously partaking in a system that we were seeking to destroy. If any of us had known that the institutions we attended were filling us with one-sided "knowledge," and that the main goal of our profession (from policy-makers viewpoint) was to maintain the

power for the dominant culture, keeping those with no power in the margins; I feel as if we would have taken a different approach to our school policies and procedures.

Our sixth-grade class taught me more about life and the injustices that percolate through our societal systems than I ever taught them about science and the natural world. It is because of my time with those students that I have been able to challenge my beliefs and knowledge and grow as a scholar and professional. Professionalism is an on-going effort, a process of *becoming*. The journey of every educator evolves and shifts throughout their career. This evolution requires us to take part in continual and intentional reflections about policies and practices, our strengths and challenges, and our responsibilities. Over the last few years, I have relived the scenarios and experiences I had with our Magnet School students and tried to lean into the journey of self-reflection by dismantling my own biases and teaching practices. When I started this work, I was certain that we needed to cease the use of labels such as "*at-risk*" and rethink how we view and speak to and about our students who have experienced adversity. Now, more than ever, I am convinced that we must embark in critical dialogue with our colleagues, community members, policy-makers, and anyone who works with children to rethink the educational needs of youth and to resist the hegemonic structures that label our students as defective and maintain oppressive systems.

There is a toxic fog that suffocates our school classrooms and hallways, it forms when the cold air of bias and ignorance collides with the warm vitality of children who have experienced adversity. The fog lingers when these children interact with school administrators, teachers, counselors, and doctors who look at them and see them through damaged and deficient lenses, "othering" them for their vulnerabilities. However, we can't blame the schools and health care systems alone; we live in a society that constructs, feeds,

and maintains assumptions and stereotypes. We judge the actions and intellects of families and communities that fail to meet our standards of success, labeling them as insufficient and inadequate. Teachers who do not identify with communities in which they teach may partake in damaging stereotypes, and I was guilty of this during my time at the Magnet School. It doesn't mean that these teachers are bad people or that they are deliberately damaging their students or marginalizing them, they are usually trying to help them. But, this act of "help" can be just as damaging as the use of labels, because it problematizes the children and families in these communities; viewing them as deficient and in need of fixing instead of the systems that keep them subjugated and oppressed. We are unable to perceive the challenges of those who are different from ourselves because we look through a culturally clouded lens.

We aimed to "help" our sixth graders who were testing low in reading, but didn't dig into and investigate the system that created these deficiencies. We simply met the students where they were, and pledged to work with them each year to increase their reading comprehension, making our students and their families dependent on us for years to come. Meanwhile, students throughout the county continued to fall behind in reading and the cycle started over, ensuring that we always had a supply of students who would need us for "help." So what should we have done? I realize that we were all rookie educators and if my fellow White teachers were anything like me, you had a narrow view of the realities of communities of Color, and because of that I didn't have the adequate knowledge to view these challenges from a social perspective instead of an individual one. But, as I have chronicled my journey into understanding others' worlds, a journey that involved learning, unlearning and relearning, to see through the fog of my own cultural lens, I have come to understand that power drives our societal and educational systems.

Perhaps you've been traveling down your own path to unlearning over the years, and maybe you've been on your own journey of resistance. If I've learned anything throughout this process, it's that none of us can break down these systems alone. I don't believe that the answers lie in reform programs and policies, I think we should start with a basic understanding of who we are individually (including our biases, privilege, and subjectivities) and how we are connected and disconnected from those around us. We can continue to buffer our students from damaging perspectives, but in order to make true change we must eradicate the systems of power that produce damaged narratives to maintain oppression. I urge you to join me in this quest, to examine the structures within which you have worked and are working, to engage authentically within those communities, to eradicate the deficit lens, and to move towards a humanizing form of pedagogy that puts the person at the center of the discourse. We must resist the normative discourses that shape the narratives about our students who have experienced adversity. We must create opportunities and teach across the boundaries of societal differences, class and race, recognizing and overcoming the power structures, stereotypes, and barriers that hinder us from truly seeing one another. These efforts must move the needle in how we educate, our instructional practices, how our curriculum is developed, and every piece of the educational infrastructure. Until we can clean our lenses from the cultural fog, unblur our vision in order to see the world as others see it, and confront power structures, all of the educational reform in the world will be useless. I leave you with two of my favorite quotes.

> "As educators, as scholars — really, as readers — contested engagement is an important part of our work. We must engage with each other, in part, where we each

are, and push each other to reach beyond and differently, to unlearn so that we might learn differently." - Leigh Patel (2021)

"One of the paradoxes of education was that precisely at the point when you begin to develop conscience, you must find yourself at war with your society." - James Baldwin (1963)

May we continue to push ourselves and each other to resist and speak against the dominant narratives, to find ourselves in a battle with society, and may we never stop *becoming*.

This is Only the Beginning

This research study has been a challenging, transformative, and eye-opening process for me. I have found myself sitting at a crossroads many times over the last few years, struggling with my own learning and relearning. I have begun to question the educational system, its foundation and values, and my place within it. I struggled to tell the stories of my foster siblings and students, from my vantage point, while acknowledging my own privilege and positionality. It was challenging to unlearn so much of what I had been taught and understand the role of the educational institution in the historical reproduction of social injustice. Through these struggles, I have taken on a humanizing approach to this work, engaging with my own experiences and self-capacity to listen to and support the experiences of the youth with whom I've had the privilege to work with over the years. This journey has taught me that no knowledge is absolute, and that we all hold partial knowledge which is defined and influenced by our cultural, social class, and lived experiences. It is through this

work that I have learned and relearned that other's narratives and experiences (not just the privileged) are invaluable to dismantling the systems of power and oppression.

I entered this program thinking it was my final ascent to my mountain top, my last rung on the ladder of academic achievement. My opportunity to have a louder voice to transform education within my own classroom walls. But, this program -- transformed me. It dismantled me. This isn't my final ascent… *this is only the beginning.*

A Pledge to My Future Self

I am a teacher… a scholar, an advocate, a friend.

I believe that the educational system should be a democratic process.

I believe in a space where every student has the opportunity to grow, play, develop and explore.

I believe that education should be a platform for dismantling hegemonic structures and ideologies. I believe education is a transformative process and a path for critical consciousness.

If children are to grow in a space where they are valued, respected, safe, and loved.. it starts with me.

But I am not alone, I need others by my side.

These children are our future, and their success and their failures impact us all.

We must serve *all* kids, not *some* kids.

We must break the current cycle of education…

…of the same education

…of deciding who gets to learn and who doesn't

… who's story is told in the history books

….what counts as knowledge

I am a teacher, and I don't pick and choose the kids who I teach.

My students don't get to pick their zip code, their race, their adversity, or their home life.

I believe in the power of love and fostering relationships.

I pledge to be committed to the students in my classroom, but also to the students I've taught previously and to the students who I will teach in the future.

I pledge to nurture the whole child and to acknowledge that adversity looks different in every situation.

I pledge to support my students' emotional and educational needs and acknowledge that behavior is a form of communication.

I pledge to speak about and to my students through an asset-based lens, and to always view them for their strengths instead of labeling them for their deficiencies.

I pledge to openly find ways to discuss structural injustice and to continue to dismantle power structures, to rethink and rebuild an educational system that supports the needs of students from racialized and impoverished communities.

I pledge to never stop learning and shifting, to never stop being *unsettled.*

I believe in education, and creating an authentic learning space that is inherent in a pedagogy of love.

I am a teacher.

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Vita

Whitney D. Greene was born in Boone, North Carolina. She attended North Carolina State University with a B.S. in Poultry Science and Environmental Science. After graduation she attended Appalachian State University to earn a teaching licensure in middle grades science. She began her career teaching 6th grade science in Oxford, North Carolina.

She attended North Carolina State where she received her Master's in Environmental Assessment while returning to her home county to teach 9th grade earth and environmental science. In 2015 she accepted a position with North Carolina State University, serving as the 4-H agent for Wilkes County. She earned her Education Specialist degree in Adult and Developmental Education from in 2020 and a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership in 2022, both from Appalachian State University.

Whitney continues to believe deeply in the value of education as an avenue for challenging hegemonic ideologies. She continues to embark in a pedagogy of love, finding ways to openly discuss structural inequities that exist in our educational institutions, recreating and rethinking the system so that we can truly support the needs of all students.