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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Unveiling Whiteness in Progressive Education:
Learning from the Critical Narratives of Black Progressive Educators and Activists

by

Chris Thinnes

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

Loyola Marymount University,

in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education

2022

Unveiling Whiteness in Progressive Education:
Learning from the Critical Narratives of Black Progressive Educators and Activists

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by

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Los Angeles, CA 90045**


This dissertation written by Christopher D. Thinnes, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

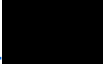
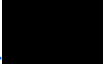
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ABSTRACT

Unveiling Whiteness in Progressive Education:

Learning from the Critical Narratives of Black Progressive Educators and Activists

by

Chris Thinnes

Progressive education has the socially transformative potential to mitigate the racialized violence of neoliberal education reform, but is dominated by white norms and has failed for more than a century to articulate a coherent or purposeful political agenda explicitly committed to racial equity and justice. Informed by Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Critical Biculturalism, this qualitative study engaged Black progressive educators and activists in an effort not only to understand the contours and impacts of white hegemonic norms in progressive education spaces, but also to produce a framework of principles, policies, and/or practices that could disrupt them. Using Critical Narrative Inquiry as a research method, four Black progressive educators and activists participated in semi-structured interviews in two parts: first, to elicit stories that speak to emotions, environments, and past experiences of whiteness in progressive education spaces, and second, to invite participants to identify principles, policies, or practices that could move progressive education from a “white space” (Anderson, 2015) to “cultural democracy” (Darder, 2012). Analysis of participants’ stories yielded five predominant themes unveiling the complex dynamics of whiteness in progressive education spaces. Findings supplement the limited field of research on the racialized dynamics of progressive education by offering recommendations to Black and white progressive educators and activists, progressive school and organizational leaders, and progressive advocacy organizations and universities to

disrupt the hegemony of white norms and advance racial equity and justice in progressive education.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Surely in this union of two of the great faiths of the American people, the faith in progress and the faith in education, we have reason to hope for light and guidance. Here is a movement which would seem to be completely devoted to the promotion of social welfare through education. . . . The times are literally crying for a new vision of American destiny. The teaching profession, or at least its progressive elements, should eagerly grasp the opportunity which the fates have placed in their hands.

—George Counts, 1932, pp. 258-260

In 1935, maverick Black educator, historian, researcher, and university leader Horace Mann Bond addressed the membership of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), the first formal organization of educators to embrace the child-centered, experiential, constructivist, and civic-minded pedagogy championed most famously by John Dewey. The association also advocated for the propagation of Dewey's pedagogy in American schools, in opposition to the teacher-centered, mechanical, and scientific pedagogy of the "social efficiency" model. "Let us confess," Bond implored his audience, in a speech subsequently published as "The Curriculum and the Negro Child," "that the schools have never built a new social order, but have always in all times and in all lands been the instruments through which social forces are perpetuated" (1935, p. 168). Referring to contemporary initiatives to reframe the curricula of segregated Negro schools in the southern states, Bond reminded the PEA that "the chain of social causation in the creation of attitudes, through the curriculum . . . is linked to the highly complex forces and past institutions whose dead spirits are revived in the unconscious prejudices, and conscious 'patriotism,' of our contemporaries" (p. 160). To illustrate the case, Bond reminded his audience:

Poverty and recreant human nature are only partial explanations of the iniquitous discriminations against Negro children in the provision of public education. Few school-

board members who are also cotton planters may be expected to show great zeal in equipping their tenants with high arithmetical abilities. (p. 160)

While Bond (1935) did not explicitly reference the racial identities of school board members—or, for that matter, the racial identities of the Progressive Education Association membership sitting before him—his references to cotton plantations and the curriculum of segregated Negro schools couldn't have made his position any clearer to a predominantly white audience of progressive education advocates.¹ Similarly, Bond thinly veiled his critical references to the quasi-biological and cultural determinism to which many in his audience were drawn, to account for visible inequities in the provision of adequate schooling to Black students in public schools.

If nothing else, what is apparent is that Bond (1935) was offering a call to action for white progressive education advocates, asking them to examine the racialized biases embedded systemically throughout the education system, an institutional condition that progressive education advocates—as I maintain throughout this study—have failed to heed to this day. The capacity of American schools and their constituents to confront the legacy and impacts of American Slavery, Jim Crow, educational segregation, quasi-biological determinism, and countless other systemic expressions and enactments of white supremacy will determine whether

¹ In accord with the Associated Press's current usage rules regarding ethnoracial identifiers (Bauder, 2020), all references to "Black" in my writing are capitalized but references to "white" are not. The same is true of related terms and phrases (e.g., "whiteness" or "white supremacy"). The purpose of this distinction is not to enact a bias but to acknowledge that "white people in general have much less shared history and culture, and don't have the experience of being discriminated against because of skin color" (Bauder, 2020, para. 2). Furthermore, as the Associated Press's vice president for standards explained, "Capitalizing the term white, as is done by white supremacists, risks subtly conveying legitimacy to such beliefs" (Bauder, 2020, para. 4). Alternative conventions employed by other authors are preserved in direct quotations.

or not American public schools can deliver on their promise to “fit the children enrolled more suitably for life as American citizens” (p. 162).

Bond (1935) articulated a dynamic racializing tension that has persisted throughout the history of American education policy reform, between the declared intentions of ostensibly well-meaning advocates for schooling that might transform society and the impact of the policies they design—policies which, absent of critical interrogation and resistance to the historical and personal inequities from which these advocates materially benefit, tend to enact, perpetuate, and entrench social and material inequalities in schools and society.

Neoliberalism, Racialized Inequality, and the Failure of Progressive Education:

Statement of the Problem

Nowhere in the history of American educational policy reform is the disparity between professed intentions and material impacts more conspicuously demonstrated than in the contemporary Age of Neoliberal Education Reform—where for more than three decades, the “expectations defined by the interests of the economically and politically powerful [are] carried out by the country’s most inconspicuous moral leaders—namely, teachers” (Darder, 2002, p. 5). Cowing to the allegation in *A Nation at Risk* (1983) that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5), allegedly failing schools, struggling students, and incompetent teachers were explicitly positioned as a risk to the security of the United States: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (p. 5). In short order, a now unseemly alliance of federal legislators, state

governors, educational systems leaders, and policy wonks on both sides of the political spectrum enacted a raft of initiatives to assess students' and schools' achievement through high-stakes measures, increase competition between schools under the banner of parental "choice" in a "free market," marginalize the role and influence of educators and their unions and advocacy organizations, and incentivize "innovation" towards these and related aims with meritocratic privileges and financial rewards.

Framed by an uncritical acceptance in public discourse and popular media "that the globalization of the economy is a necessity from which we cannot escape" (Freire, 1998, p.11), American schooling came to be defined as training for students to be economically competitive in the global marketplace. Teaching came to be defined as providing that training to students, "without discussing the conditions, the cultures, or the forms of production of the countries that are being swept along" (Freire, 1998, p. 113). Most notable among those countries was our own: by catalyzing political and business leaders' interventions in education policy, by conflating educational achievement with economic mobility, and by defining American schools as the training ground for global economic competitiveness and domination, neoliberal education reform helped to ensure that "democracy is no longer a political concept but an economic metaphor" (Darder, 2002, p. 12). So, too, schooling was no longer treated as an institution with the potential to uplift and transform a society, but as a classifying mechanism to ensure the sustainability and growth of the economy and the accumulation of material wealth along racialized and other stratified lines.

After more than three decades of neoliberal reform, much of its broader transformation—not only on the structures, systems, and practices in American schools but on

our conceptualization of the purpose of schooling in the American social imaginary—is familiar to us. What has, however, received inadequate treatment are the explicitly racialized inequities that neoliberal reformers cited, with which neoliberal policy initiatives were associated, and that neoliberal reform initiatives explicitly claimed to address—racialized inequalities that those same policies incontrovertibly deepened over time. This has been so, despite *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB; 2001) being defined as “an act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility and choice, so that no child is left behind” (*No Child Left Behind* [NCLB], 2001). As to the historical underperformance of racial/ethnic subgroups as compared with white students in particular, NCLB 2001 and a slate of high-stakes testing for students and schools were alleged as a corrective: by “measuring” inequities, attention would be focused on those inequities and appropriately competitive policy levers and educational measures would presumably mitigate them. These racialized disparities in educational achievement and attainment, therefore, were explained as the consequence of specifically educational failures: NCLB 2001 as a totemic neoliberal reform policy “acknowledges the symptoms, but not the causes, of the achievement problem . . . but does not make visible the structural obstacles that children of color and their families face” (Leonardo, 2009, p.136). These policies foreground abstract appeals to the rhetoric of racial equity and justice, while enacting systems and structures that ensure the perpetuation of racial inequity and oppression in our schools.

Simply stated, as a result of neoliberal education reform policies, the measured disparities between racial/ethnic subgroups in educational achievement and attainment diminished less in the ten years *following* NCLB (2001) than in the ten years preceding it (Guisbond et al., 2012). And yet to this day, as David Gillborn (2005) asserted, “An examination of outcomes clearly

shows that central reform strategies . . . are known to work *against* race equity but are nevertheless promoted as ‘best practice’ for all” (p. 496, italics mine). The persistence and entrenchment of these racial inequities are not flaws in the design of the neoliberal system, but hegemonic features of the system, despite the harmful instrumentalizing impact of teaching as content transmission, high stakes testing, and other prominent initiatives of the neoliberal reform era on all students. White students have remained at a competitive advantage in rates of access, achievement, and attainment compared to racially minoritized student populations across the country. Yet neoliberal reformers package these disparities as “unfortunate outcomes of group competition, uneven social development, or cultural explanations of the inferiority of people of color” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 127).

Racial Inequities and Neoliberal Education Reform

Despite the raft of neoliberal reforms in the late 20th and early 21st century alleging to address racialized inequities in opportunity and outcomes for students of color in general, and Black students in particular, we find starker disparities now more than ever in a variety of contexts—including but not limited to the racial segregation of our schools, punitive disciplinary policies, limited access to and achievement in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and grossly disproportionate representation from a variety of lenses. As distinct from the explicitly racialized systems and structure of the past, these impacts follow from mechanisms of policy and practice devoid, on the surface, of racially prejudicial or pejorative intent. But as Kiel (2015) asserted, “While these mechanisms are not racial, they continue to create groups of students that are racially identifiable, an effect similar to the explicitly racial classifications of the past” (Kiel, 2015, p. 620).

Although these racially inequitable dynamics and outcomes apply to a variety of racial and ethnic subgroups in American schools, a comprehensive survey across those subgroups was beyond the scope and purpose of this study. This study focused more narrowly on the prevalence and power of these dynamics as they affect Black constituents of American schools, though surely further research will be needed to examine the relative value of this approach to an analysis of related issues as they pertain to other subgroups.

The most conspicuous of these sweeping inequities is the systemic resegregation of Black students and white students in our schools. As Orfield et al. found in their review of 2016 data:

The year 1988 was the high point of desegregation for Black students in terms of the share of students in majority white schools. By 1991, an increasingly conservative Supreme Court authorized the termination of desegregation plans . . . During the quarter century since the high point in 1988, the share of intensely segregated nonwhite schools (which we defined as those schools with only 0-10% white students) more than tripled, rising from 5.7% to 18.6% of all public schools. (Orfield et al., 2016, p. 3)

This disproportionate representation is even more extreme in charter schools, which are not regulated by the same civil rights protections and in which the percentage of Black students in 90-100% minority schools was twice as high as in public schools (Orfield et al., 2016, p. 8). Further, as of 2019, 40.1% of Black students in the United States attended public schools in which students of color constituted 90-100% of the student body; in regions such as the northeastern states, this figure swelled to 51.5% and in New York state it was 64% (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020, p. 29). Figures were even starker in the central cities of metropolitan areas: on

average, Black students attended schools that have 16% white students (Orfield & Jarvie, 2020, p. 33).

Ethnoracial diversity is all the more problematic in the private school sector. Although students of color constituted the demographic majority of public school students, fully 68.6% of private school students were white (Ee et al., 2018, para. 8). According to the most recent data available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2021), Black students represented only 9.4% of students in religiously affiliated private schools, and 9.8% of students in nonsectarian independent schools (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). Additionally, while the enrollment rates of white students in private schools have remained consistent over time, the enrollment rates of all students of color in private schools have declined in recent years (Ee et al., 2018, para. 9). Private school disparities in ethnoracial diversity and their continuing decline raise obvious and essential questions concerning the impact of independent and private schools on the diversity of the public school population, suggest problematic conclusions as to the commitment of independent and private schools to racial and ethnic diversity, and beg correlative questions about the obligations of independent and private schools to mitigate such impacts.

Among the starkest inequities in the American neoliberal educational system is the impact of “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies—enacted often but not always through in-school and out-of-school suspensions—on Black students. For example, although 15.1% of the public school population identified as Black (NCES, 2018), Black students comprised 38.8% of all students who were expelled with educational services, and 33.3% of all students who were expelled without educational services (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil

Rights [USDOE OCR], 2021b, p. 12). Similarly, Black students comprised 31.4% of all students who received one or more in-school suspensions, and 38.2% of all students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions (USDOE OCR, 2021b, p. 16). Furthermore, Black boys were suspended (with or without educational services) at rates more than three times their share of total student enrollment (USDOE OCR, 2021b, p. 17). Finally, Black students—again, representing approximately 15% of the public school student population—comprised 28.7% of all students referred to law enforcement, and 31.6% of students arrested at school (USDOE OCR, 2021b, p. 21). And although 2017-18 Civil Rights Data Collection data (cited in USDOE OCR, 2021a, slides 2-3) showed that Black preschoolers represented 18.2% of total enrolled preschool students, they comprised 43.3% of all students who were suspended one or more times, and 38.2% of all students who were expelled (USDOE OCR, 2021a, slides 2-3).

It is hard to imagine a systemic lens on the experience of American school children that is not shaped by racialized inequities. Consider, for example, Black students' access to and achievement in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Black students represented approximately 15% of public high school enrollment, but only 9% of students enrolled in at least one AP course (The Education Trust, 2020, para. 5). Among all Black students who did take at least one AP test, 28.1% earned a passing score; among all white students who took at least one AP test, 64.9% passed (Center for American Progress, 2021). Similarly, although Black students represented approximately 16% of public elementary school enrollment, they comprised only 9% of enrollment in gifted and talented programs (The Education Trust, 2020, para. 3). As stark as these disparities may be, however, they pale in comparison to the question of whether Black students see themselves reflected in the population of educators and school leaders who guide

their learning in schools. In our country's nearly 14,000 public school districts, only 6.7% of teachers identified as Black; in private schools the number of Black teachers was a mere 3.2% (NCES, 2020). Similarly, only 10.5% of public school principals, and a scant 5.4% of equivalent administrators in private schools, identified as Black (NCES, 2020). Insofar as district superintendents are concerned, Modan (2020) reviewed data prior to publication of The American Association of School Administrators' 2020 decennial survey (Tienken, 2021) and found that an overwhelming 91.4% are white (Modan, 2020, para. 3).

Colorblindness

This disparity between the ostensible intention of neoliberal reform policies to diminish racial inequities in the American education system, and the actual tendency of these policies to deepen them, is characteristic of a broader dynamic in the neoliberal reform movement: "The routine assumptions that structure the system encode a deep privileging of white students and, in particular, the legitimization, defense, and extension of Black inequity" (Gillborn, 2005, p. 496). Reform through legislation and policy has been consistently expressed with colorblind rhetoric and promoted with ostensibly color-blind intentions. As Kathleen Nolan (2015) noted sharply, "In the post-Civil Rights era, race-based discrimination is illegal: thus, the logic goes, if we choose not to 'see race' then racism will be eliminated" (p. 897).

Paradoxically, neoliberal reform advocates tend to extol the virtues of a civil society in which race, racialization, and racism are no longer salient factors in a "post-racial" era capable—to emphasize their most common appeal—of electing a Black man to the Presidency. While a raft of ostensibly color-blind reforms known to have disproportionate impact on Black students continues to be advanced, neoliberal reformers simultaneously appeal to a purportedly more

equitable vision of a pluralistic democracy that continues to frame racial bigotry and systemic bias as exceptional and aberrant. This conceptual paradox—or, rather, this lie—is buoyed by the prevailing hegemony of colorblind ideology in the American populace, not only in the education space but throughout our society.

Colorblindness, an ideological construct that will be explored at considerable length in Chapter 2, is governed by adherence to a relatively consistent set of beliefs: (a) that race and racism are declining in historical significance as factors in American society; (b) that racism is largely isolated and exceptional; (c) that racism is individual, irrational, and pathological; (d) that success and failure are intrinsically individualistic phenomena; (e) that the limitations and behaviors of people of color are to be blamed for apparent inequities in access, achievement, or outcomes; (f) that attitudes, rather than learned and/or unexamined behaviors, account for instances of purportedly racist acts; (g) that institutional and systemic racism are abstractions to be downplayed rather than interrogated; (h) that our country’s racial progress is inadequately understood and appreciated; (i) that class stratification accounts for the problematic dynamics misunderstood to derive from racial identity; and (j) that American slavery and genocide are long-ago and far-away factors that bear little impact on contemporary society or citizenship (Leonardo, 2009).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2013) has championed efforts to aggregate, analyze, and interpret the racialized perceptions of white respondents. In his work, he offered a useful framework to categorize these prevailing beliefs and capture the primary levers of white respondents’ color-blind ideology, which he characterized in the following manner:

- *Abstract Liberalism*: the application of generalized appeals to liberal values or beliefs as justification for racially inequitable dynamics (e.g., “Race should not be a factor when judging people.” [2001, p. 42]);
- *Biologization of Culture*: the use of quasi-biological rationales to attribute inequitable Black status to intrinsic limitations (e.g., “Blacks are lazy” [2001, p. 42]);
- *Naturalization of Racial Matters*: explanations of racialized inequities as “normal” dispositions (e.g., segregation or limited interracial marriage as the produce of “natural” dispositions to stay with one’s own); and
- *Minimization of Racism*: appeals to racial “progress” over time; denials of structural racism; characterization of racism as individualistic, deliberate, and aberrant

This framework is useful not only to explore and reflect on the prevailing ideology of neoliberal education reform, but also to better interrogate the color-blind racism of progressive education advocacy for well more than a century.

“The White Space”

The hegemony of colorblind racial ideology in the contemporary political and pedagogical moment traces back in part to the entrenchment and normalization of the broader neoliberal project in the American social imaginary. Nolan (2015) explored the contours of this normalization:

Despite the devastating effects of neoliberal policies for an ever-growing number of individuals and communities worldwide, discourses that celebrate “liberating the market” and individual “freedom” have become so entrenched in everyday life that, collectively, we have fallen deep into what Freire (2000) would call a limit situation—unable to see

beyond social structure, unable to imagine another reality. In fact, an essential part of the neoliberal project is the manufacturing of discourse that works to normalize current social arrangements and help to construct them simply as “the way things are.” (p. 896)

The domination of these norms across our society and schools is explicitly racialized, to the extent this ideology reifies the systemic imposition of structural reforms that have disproportionately affected the lives of students of color, persistently attributes their difficulties to inherent personal or cultural defects among those same students, fails to hold space to recognize (let alone to critically interrogate) systematic racialized inequities and biases, and refuses to recognize the subjectivity, agency, and humanity of students from racialized communities.

The result is a systematic framing of contemporary schools, educational policy, pedagogical strategies, and advocacy and activist spaces as *white spaces*—a term drawn by Elijah Anderson (2015) from Black colloquial discourse—that Anderson characterized as follows:

A normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present. In turn, blacks often refer to such settings colloquially as “the white space”—a perceptual category—and they typically approach that space with care. . . . For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society. . . . While white people usually avoid black space, black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence. (p. 10)

These spaces privilege the positionality of white people and the lens of white racial identity formation, both passively and actively conferring intellectual and moral authority to whiteness:

When present there, the black person typically has limited standing relative to his white counterparts and is made aware of this situation by the way others treat him. With a wealth of moral authority, one [white person] can experience acceptance, as well as an aura of protection against ritual offense, including random acts of disrespect; without such authority, the black person is uniquely vulnerable. . . . But for the black person, moral authority is actualized only when [she or] he is well integrated into the white space, and most often [she or] he is not. (Anderson, 2015, p.15)

The governing dynamics of the white space are enforced through the *white gaze*, an unspoken but pervasive system of surveillance and control, through which white racial norms are protected and defended, including but not limited to problematizing the presence, positionality, agency, and authority of Black folks (Anderson, 2015).

Progressive Education as a White Space

The contemporary dilemmas engaged by this study have their root in historicized dynamics: from the emergence of an increasingly coherent progressive educational philosophy in the early 20th century, progressive education advocates and activists have called for the progressive education movement to define an explicit commitment to racial and social justice with some semblance of the urgency, clarity, and purpose with which it has distanced itself from other policies and provisions of late-20th century and early 21st century neoliberal policy and pedagogy. For instance, the progressive education movement has adequately demonstrated its active resistance to high-stakes testing, teaching-as-transmission, the privatization of public

schooling, and devotion to universal content standards. As George Counts indicated in 1932, however, the song remains the same:

The Progressive Education Movement, in spite of its complexity, does stand for certain rather definite things. . . . It has focused attention squarely upon the child; it has recognized the fundamental importance of the interest of the learner; it has defended the thesis that activity lies at the root of all true education; it has conceived learning in terms of life situations and growth of character; it has championed the rights of the child as a free personality. All of this is excellent; but in my judgment it is not enough. It constitutes too narrow a conception of the meaning of education; it brings into the picture but one half of the landscape. (p. 258)

Whether the progressive education movement has demonstrated its commitment to equity and justice is another question entirely: as Counts (1932) noted nearly a century ago,

The great weakness of Progressive Education lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare. . . . These people have shown themselves entirely incapable of dealing with any of the great crises of our time. (p. 259)

Thus, as Counts identified in 1932 but remains true to the present day, “Neutrality with respect to the great issues that agitate society, while perhaps theoretically possible, is practically tantamount to giving support to the most powerful forces engaged in the context” (p. 260).

Thus, though the pages of the progressive canon are replete with abstract calls to action to declare and to enact such a socially transformative agenda, the progressive education movement itself remains a white space no less subject to the tendrils and tenets of white supremacy than the neoliberal educational ideology against which it might otherwise be pitted as a plausible

pedagogical and political alternative. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, the conceptual progenitors of the progressive education movement not only inherited but also promoted racialized theories of human development that were intrinsically oppressive to bicultural students. Its pioneers enacted experiments in its early decades that championed the segregation of bicultural students in vocational schools. Its prominent activists to this day rail against dehumanizing school practices that impact “all” students but rarely speak to the identities, experiences, or historically marginalized positionality of bicultural students in the contemporary educational landscape. Indeed, the progressive education movement will remain no less a white space—subject to the white gaze, adhering to the contours of color-blind racism, and perpetuating the sinews of white supremacy—than neoliberal education reform, until and unless whiteness is unveiled and an explicit and coherent antiracist stance is enacted.

In the face of neoliberal education policies and practices that normalize dehumanizing educational practices across the American social imaginary and serve “the implicit purpose of conserving the social and economic status quo through the perpetuation of institutional values and relationships that safeguard dominant power structures” (Darder, 2012, p. 5), progressive education holds a transformative potential to enact a more humanizing pedagogy for all students but, most critically, to embrace a culturally sustaining pedagogy for students, families, colleagues, families, and communities of color. While “the promise of progressive practices . . . resides in their inherently political and activist potential” (Algava, 2016, p. 47), the progressive education movement has abjectly failed to articulate a coherent or purposeful political agenda explicitly in the service of racial equity and justice.

Consequently, the progressive education movement—despite its abstract protestations to the contrary—has had no meaningfully transformative impact at a systemic level, either in mitigating the damages of neoliberal educational ideology in general, or in acknowledging the centrality of racial identity development, cultural competency, and explicitly anti-bias pedagogy to the student-centered development of the “whole child” in particular. “The routine assumptions that structure the system,” as David Gillborn (2005) noted, “encode a deep privileging of white students and, in particular, the legitimization, defense, and extension of Black inequity” (p. 496). Moreover, the progressive education movement has identified a surprising resonance with advocates of neoliberal education reform:

[They] have consistently identified the cause and the problem within the student. Either the bicultural student is considered to be genetically inferior or environmentally inferior; nonetheless, in both cases the cause and problem are located inherently in the student. It is particularly revealing that neither view has ever seriously challenged the traditional educational values and practices that structure relationships in schools or placed on them directly the responsibility for the underachievement of bicultural students. (Darder, 2012, p. 4)

As a result of its colorblind and culturally neutral orientation to “child-centered” practices, the progressive education movement remains no less a white space, overseen and controlled by the “white gaze,” than the neoliberal education goliath against which it positions itself. Accordingly, white privilege, white supremacy, and colorblind racial ideology in the progressive education movement occlude the promise of progressive education to mitigate

racialized systemic inequities in the American education system and to promote the culturally responsive and sustaining imperatives of American education in the 21st century.

Purpose of the Study:

Restoring the Transformative Promise of Progressive Education

This study engaged with and amplified the voices of Black educators and activists in the progressive education movement. The study critically identified and interrogated these issues as a constructive contribution to the realization of the progressive education movement's transformative potential. Interrogating the racism and racialization of progressive educational history, pedagogy, and activism—in order to ascertain and advance the socially transformative potential of progressive education with respect to racial equity and justice—requires us to recognize that “the most dangerous form of ‘white supremacy’ is not the obvious and extreme fascistic posturing of small neo-nazi groups, but rather the taken-for-granted routine privileging of white interests that goes unremarked in the political mainstream” (Gillborn, 2005, p. 485). In addition, as a white researcher conceding from the outset that the progressive educational field is a primarily and traditionally white space, I had to tread carefully to resist the entrenchment of those dynamics in this study, mindfully resisting the centering of “whiteness” in the discourse on racial equity, and, instead, actively foregrounding the voices of progressive Black educators in an effort to ascertain how white supremacy is expressed, enacted, experienced, and perpetuated in progressive education spaces—and exploring, with those most affected by this phenomenon, what can be done to transform structures and practices of racism within the progressive education movement.

Hence, the primary purpose of this study was to learn from the lived experience of prominent Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces and to amplify their voices in order to make “whiteness” visible and to move from a politics of colorblindness to cultural democracy (Darder, 2012) within progressive education. This signaled the need to critically interrogate potential strategies to transform normalized beliefs, practices, structures, and relationships tied to pedagogy, curriculum, research, activism, policy formation, and organizational leadership devoted to the advancement of a renewed and revitalized vision of progressive education. With this in mind, this study also sought to contribute to an ideological critique that identifies which elements are necessary to building a culturally inclusive and sustaining progressive education movement, to build solidarity across cultural differences within the progressive education movement, and thereby to redeem progressive pedagogy’s socially transformative potential with specific regard to racial equity and justice. Closely related to this pursuit was my effort to examine how white progressive educators, beginning with myself, might position ourselves more effectively in solidarity with progressive educators of color to advance a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and to mitigate racialized inequities in our schools and in our field.

Given the purpose of this study and considering both the volatility of the issues at hand and the demonstrated precarity of some people’s feelings about it, it is important to state emphatically what the purpose of this study was *not*. First, a deconstruction of “white supremacy” enacted or perpetuated in the progressive education movement is not tantamount to an attack on white people, either in general or within the progressive education movement, either by alleging that there are extremists in the movement driven by racial animus or by implying that

educators employing a “child-centered” pedagogy intentionally marginalize, oppress, or otherwise dehumanize people of color. On this point Ansley (1997) made a distinction resonant with Gillborn’s (2005):

I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (p. 491, cited in Gillborn, 2005, p. 592)

Similarly, the purpose of this study was not to disparage progressive pedagogy, progressive schools, or the progressive education movement *per se*, so much as to redeem, to reclaim, and to redefine its transformative potential.

Research Questions

The ultimate goal of this study was not only to understand the contours and impacts of white hegemonic norms in progressive education spaces, but also and more importantly to produce a framework of principles, policies, and/or practices that could disrupt them. Without transforming the historical and contemporary dominance of white norms in progressive education, it cannot conceivably mitigate the accrued, racialized violence of neoliberal education policy in contemporary American schooling. Two central research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do the lived experiences of Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces reveal specific ways that the politics of whiteness (e.g., color-

blindness, white privilege, and/or white supremacy) have perpetuated structures of racism in progressive schools and organizations?

2. What reformulations of progressive educational philosophy, practice, and/or policy would be required to realize the socially transformative potential of progressive education, and to move progressive education from colorblindness to cultural democracy?

Sawyer and Norris (2013) acknowledged that research questions are “often initially uncertain, relationally contingent, and deeply embedded in experience,” thus “research questions emerge within and illuminate the inquiry” (p. 31). Deep listening, purposeful questioning, and reciprocal dialogue with participants led to a variety of lenses, inflections, and extensions on these research questions that were expressed as questions in the interviews with participants.

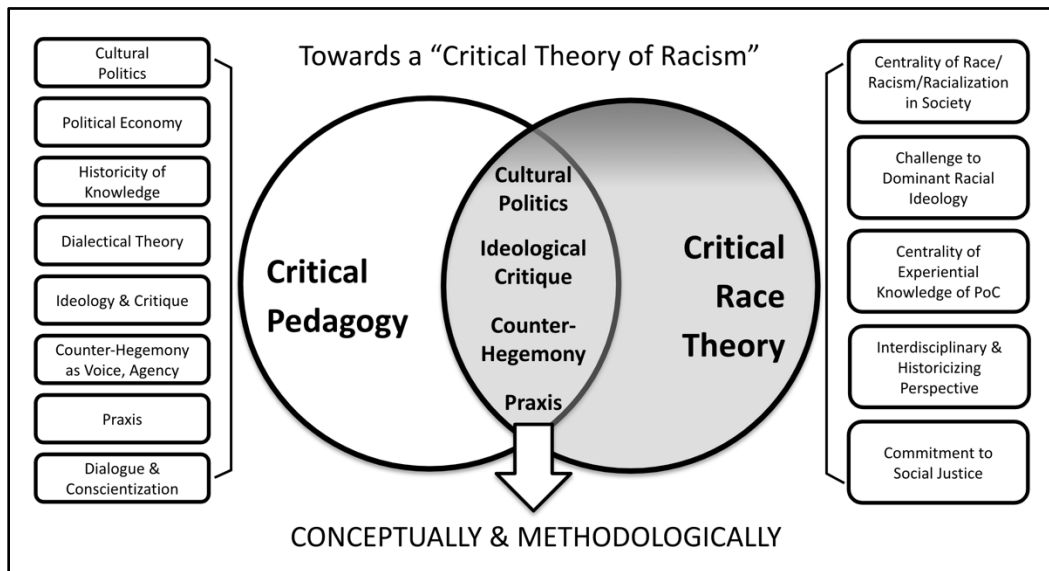
Conceptual Framework: Toward a Critical Theory of Racism

“Critical inquiry,” as Antonia Darder (2012) confirmed, “does not seek to describe or simply interpret the world, but rather encompasses an underlying commitment to social transformation” (p. 2). The conceptual framework of this study recognized and relied upon both critical pedagogy and critical race theory (CRT) as the predominant critical theories that have influenced progressive educators and activists in recent decades. Moreover, this study recognized the mutual and reciprocal indispensability of critical pedagogy and CRT for framing a critical interrogation of racialized educational ideology, both by providing critical lenses to identify the hegemonic beliefs and practices that are perpetuated in K-12 education, and by offering the radical hope of mitigating racialized education inequities.

However, as illustrated in Figure 1, below, this study also considered limitations of each theoretical framework and the tension that's been navigated in recent years between the two. Thus, the conceptual framework of this study contributed towards a “critical theory of racism” (Darder & Torres, 2004), seeking to sustain essential principles of critical pedagogy and CRT as complementary theoretical frameworks in a generative dialectical tension, while at the same time recognizing the individual limitations and contradistinctions of critical pedagogy and CRT. Lastly, Darder’s (2012) theory of critical biculturalism was utilized in this study as a key culturally democratic tool of analysis for interpretation of participant stories with respect to their negotiation and navigation of the dominant/subordinate power relations within the progressive education movement.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Note. Adapted from *Culture and Power in the Classroom: Educational Foundations for the Schooling of Bicultural Students*, by A. Darder, 2012, copyright 2012 by Paradigm Publishers; and “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” by G. Ladson-Billings and W. F. Tate, 1995, in *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), pp. 47-68, copyright 1995 by Teachers College, Columbia University.

Critical Pedagogy

Seeded in the seminal writing of Karl Marx, gestated in the seminal writings of the critical theory movement, and birthed in “a watershed in the evolution and coalescing of the field now loosely known as the critical pedagogy movement” (Darder, 2012, p. 81) with Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) in 1970, critical interpretive research has been extended, refined, and reinvigorated by such progressive educators as Jonathan Kozol and Maxine Greene, and critical pedagogical theorists such as Antonia Darder, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren. As Darder (2012) acknowledged, “There is no recipe for the universal implementation and application of any form of critical pedagogy” and “it is precisely this distinguishing characteristic that constitutes its genuinely critical nature and therefore its emancipatory and democratic function” (p. 81).

However, there are a number of “critical principles that inform a critical epistemology of research, which at the heart counter classical positivist approaches to the study of human phenomena” (Darder, 2012, p. 1) and with which critical interpretive research tends to be anchored and guided. Among these are the contentions that *cultural politics* inform the determination of cultural norms and legitimate knowledge, and that research is inextricably embedded in the *political economy*: therefore, research navigates contested spaces of dominance and oppression in the contexts of culture and class. Critical pedagogy also acknowledges the *historicity of knowledge*—both in terms of the reification of ideas in historically specific contexts and in terms of the positionality of researchers in particular historical moments—and embraces a *dialectical view of knowledge*, negating conventional binary constructions and the notion of universal or absolute truths (Darder, 2012).

Critical pedagogy also posits that a prevailing *ideology* informs the researcher's assumptions about a "common sense" or "natural" order of things, which is no less the inheritance of historically constructed and contested ideas than the subject of a researcher's study—but that the power of these ideas to define "common sense" constitutes a dominant *hegemony* that subjugates alternative forms of knowledge in defense of the status quo: granted that knowledge construction is no less a contested space than politics, critical pedagogy posits the potential of research to act in *counter-hegemony* not only to critique and to resist, but also to reframe and to reform ideas in resistance to hegemonic ideologies. In addition, critical pedagogy is meant to link research to liberatory transformation, requiring its enactment not only in words but also in the world in a dynamic interaction of theory and practice informed by the reflection, dialogue, and action of *praxis*. Similarly, critical pedagogy recognizes the reciprocal relationship of research with the people engaged in or by it; its outcomes are therefore driven by a commitment to the *conscientization* of the researcher and the subject (Darder, 2012).

Critical Race Theory

Recognizing that "Marxist and Neo-Marxist formulations about class continue to merit consideration as theoretical models for understanding social inequity" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 49), but asserting that "the metaproposition that race, unlike gender and class, remains untheorized" (p. 49) within educational research, critical race theory (CRT) addresses perceived inadequacies of critical approaches through race-centered theorizing of educational inequity, inspired by the voices of early 20th-century theorists such as Carter Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois, who "presented cogent arguments for considering race as *the* central construct for understanding inequality" (p. 50).

CRT in education leveraged seminal principles developed in CRT in legal studies to address “a need for a vocabulary that could name the race-related structures of oppression in the law and society that had not been adequately addressed in existing scholarship” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 9). CRT in legal studies, according to Matsuda et al. (1993), was informed by six essential themes:

- an assertion that “racism is endemic to American life,”
- a resistance to “dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy,”
- a belief that “racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage,”
- an insistence on the “recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society,”
- a recognition that “critical race theory is interdisciplinary,” and
- a pursuit of “eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.” (Matsuda et al., 1993, pp. 9-10)

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate generated a first salvo “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” in 1995, a foundational framework that continues to guide the evolution of critical race theory in education some two decades later on the premise, as in law, that persistent inequities “are a logical and predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of racism continue to be muted and marginalized” (p. 47). Features of critical race theory that resonate with critical pedagogy—but clarify its epistemological priorities on race as central unit of analysis—include an assertion that race, racism, and racialization are central to

social dynamics and knowledge construction; an insistence on challenging hegemonic racial ideology; a focus on the interdisciplinary and historically specific construction of racial ideology; a commitment to transformative practice that dismantles white supremacy, informed by theory, reflection, and dialogue; and an intentional centering of the voices, experience, and knowledges of people and communities of color. Of the latter, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) asserted:

Without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities. (p. 58)

Toward a Critical Theory of Racism

While both critical pedagogy and critical race theory are rooted in “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 1998, p. 48) in “a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62)—critical pedagogy primarily with a view to class structures in its analysis of culture, power, and ideology; and critical race theory with a view primarily focused on race and racialization—each theory fails to adequately account for central preoccupations of the other. Critical educational researchers of the Marxist and Neo-Marxist tradition posit that critical race theorists have failed adequately to situate “race” in the context of the political economy, while critical race theorists have asserted that critical interpretive researchers have failed adequately to theorize “race” at any level. The conceptual framework of this study, in contrast, sought to embrace the resonance of critical pedagogy with CRT in their analogous commitments to deconstructing the cultural politics of knowledge construction and ideological formation, while positioning research as a contribution to counter-hegemonic practice. Yet this study also had to sustain, in a generative dialectical

tension, the competing positions of critical pedagogy and CRT with regard to the centrality of race in the formation of knowledge and power.

For all its seeming resonance with critical pedagogy, critical race theory was borne as much as anything from dissonance with it. Critical race theorists maintain that the preoccupations of critical theory with class relations and the political economy ensure that “a critical study of race is not a study of race at all, but an analysis of class antagonism within capitalism, which gives rise to the reality of racial division” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 5). Because critical theorists fail sufficiently to theorize race, racism, or racialization, critical pedagogical research tends to occlude white supremacy as a lever and a lens in political discourse and policy formation. Instead, critical race theorists insisted, “Racism is *itself* a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms” (Mills, 1997, in Leonardo, 2009, p. 3).

Critical education theorists maintain, on the other hand, that “there is no need for a distinct (critical) theory of ‘race;’ instead, what is required is an earnest endeavor to theorize the specious concept with its illusory status out of existence” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 12). Darder and Torres (2004) noted that this concern is also an historical one, in that the very notion of “race” is ensconced within an ideology of racism, perpetuated by Eurocentric and colonizing representations of humanity, in order to justify the genocide, conquest, and enslavement of those signified as “other races” and, therefore, inferior. Furthermore, they asserted that a myopic preoccupation with “race” distracts from the broader liberatory project because “our understanding of racism and those schooling practices that perpetuate racialized inequality can never be separated from the reproduction of class inequality” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 94).

Critical education theorists contend that critical race theory's failure to situate "race" in the context of the political economy both reifies the problematic social construction of "race" and thereby limits the broader emancipatory project.

Thus, as a conceptual lens for this study, a "critical theory of racism" called for a synthesis of critical pedagogy and critical race theory that centers its deconstruction of cultural politics and its ideological critique on "race," but acknowledges intersecting dimensions of identity formation and the intersectional nature of racialized inequity and oppression in our society as in our schools. This preserves a counter-hegemonic mission but directs it primarily to the dismantling of white supremacy not only theoretically, but in praxis—foregrounding, both conceptually and methodologically, the personal narratives of people of color to problematize and interrogate racialized systemic assumptions. In the proper balance, recognizing the coherence and importance of the issues in central dispute, "this school of thought promotes being theoretically critical of race and being race-critical of theory" and does not "center the study of ideology on class relations but appropriate its usefulness for the fundamental study of race" (Leonardo, 2009, p. 7)

This dynamic conceptual framework—maintaining this dialectical tension between critical pedagogy and critical race theory, in the service of a contribution to an emerging "critical theory of racism"—supported the broader purpose of this study through interrogation of racialized dynamics in the progressive education movement. Without addressing these racialized dynamics, I contend, the progressive education movement cannot viably recuperate or reframe its ostensible transformative social potential. Alisa Algava (2016) asserted an analogous, contemporary call to action as follows:

While progressive education implicitly confronts and contests deficit-based pedagogies, standardization, and high-stakes accountability by demanding space and time, prioritizing the developmental needs and interests of children over one-size-fits-all, and valuing a multiplicity of answers, approaches, and experiences, our task is to make a culturally sustaining stance explicit. (p. 55)

A Theory of Cultural Democracy

An emancipatory pedagogy and activist stance resonant with critical pedagogy and critical race theory must contribute to the formation of what Antonia Darder (2012) termed *cultural democracy* in our school spaces: a political, pedagogical, and relational dynamic rooted in radical hope that asserts “the right to cultivate and maintain a bicultural identity—that is, to retain identification with their culture of origin while learning to survive effectively within the institutional values of the dominant society” (p. xix). This radical theory of cultural democracy weaves together a critical understanding of biculturalism and lays out a set of principles for a critical bicultural pedagogy; by so doing, Darder infused critical education theory with a deeper understanding of the role of culture and power in the education of racially minoritized communities.

Critical Biculturalism

In her seminal text, *Culture and Power in the Classroom*, Darder (2012) critically defined the notion of bicultural in the following manner:

Bicultural, in this context, connotes an enculturation process that is distinct from that of affluent monocultural euroamerican students. This distinction is derived from the fact that working-class bicultural students, throughout their development, must contend with (1)

two cultural/class systems whose values are very often in direct conflicts; and (2) a set of sociopolitical and historical forces dissimilar to those of mainstream Euroamerican students and the educational institutions that bicultural students must attend” (p. xix).

Moreover, she argued:

[Critical] *Biculturalism* . . . represents the process by which bicultural human beings mediate between the dominant discourse of educational institutions and the realities that they must face as members of subordinate cultures. More specifically, the *process of biculturation* incorporates the different ways in which bicultural human beings respond to cultural conflicts and the daily struggle with racism and other forms of cultural invasion. (p. 48)

Throughout the history of American schooling, regardless of the political orientation of the pedagogical mainstream, such ubiquitous and problematic tropes as the racialized “achievement gap” have consistently positioned the bicultural student as the source of the “problem”: “Either the bicultural student is considered to be genetically inferior or environmentally inferior; nonetheless, in both cases the cause and problem are located inherently in the student” (Darder, 2012, p. 4). This dynamic may be most conspicuously visible in the wake of neoliberal education reforms, which would seem (if only by virtue of their explicit framing) to have “the implicit purpose of conserving the social and economic status quo through the perpetuation of institutional values and relationships that safeguard dominant power structures” (Darder, 2012, p. 5). Yet, the progressive education movement is no less culpable in this marginalization of the bicultural student:

With its heavy reliance on subjective consciousness, descriptive orientation, and often epistemological relativism . . . the traditional liberal discourse is stripped of the criteria necessary for critically evaluating various interpretations of the existing social, cultural, economic, and political realities. The result is a distorted reading of power within both the classroom and society. (Darder, 2012, p. 9)

Beyond a broader misconception of the school as a politically neutral institution whose purpose is to be responsive to the highly relativistic and individualistic needs of its students, and in addition to a subjectivist pedagogy that relativizes the construction of knowledge and values, the contemporary progressive school often functions—just as much as more typically “conservative” schools—“within a conceptual framework that serves to absolve schools from responsibility for the widespread underachievement of bicultural students” (Darder, 2012, p. 10). These phenomena are inextricably intertwined with a seeming allegiance in the progressive education movement to a blander form of cultural “pluralism” that features “a one-sided subjective notion of political participation and decision making . . . that consequently does little to change the institutional conditions that perpetuate the oppression of subordinate cultures in the United States” (Darder, 2012, p. 9).

Critical Bicultural Pedagogy

Darder (2012) further outlined the following six key principles for a critical bicultural pedagogy:

- built on a theory of cultural democracy;
- supports a dialectical, contextual view of the world, particularly as it relates to the notion of culture within the bicultural experience;

- recognizes those forms of cultural invasion that negatively impact the lives of bicultural students and their families;
- utilizes a dialogical model of communication that can create the conditions for students of color to find their voice through opportunities to reflect, critique, and act on their world to transform it;
- acknowledges the issue of power in society and the political nature of schooling; and
- above all, is committed to the empowerment and liberation of all people and all living sentient beings, including the planet. (pp. 188-190)

From this vantage point, movement towards cultural democracy in the progressive education movement—not only as a reaction to the dehumanizing impacts of neoliberal education reform for bicultural students, teachers, and communities, but also to activate the dormant and abstract potential of progressive pedagogy to transform the experience of learning for bicultural students, thus, more broadly in our schools and our society—requires a fundamental reframing of the political, pedagogical, and relational dynamics of progressive educational and activist spaces:

If the bicultural voice is to be awakened and students of color are to become active social agents in the world, educators must create the conditions for a genuine form of cultural democracy to take root in the classroom—one that not only creates the space for all aspects of their humanity to be expressed but also allows their cultural particularities to be in critical conversation with the universal human dimensions that are also vital to their identities and relationships with each other. (Darder, 2012, p. 55)

As such, Darder's (2012) critical bicultural theory offered an important possibility:

A politics of cultural difference . . . can lead to a profound understanding of how power and identity work and ultimately can assist those [who are] disenfranchised and stigmatized to critique and engage the asymmetrical power relations that shape their lives. (p. 186).

This study rested, then, on the supposition that this would be true among Black progressive educators in progressive educational and activist spaces, just as it has been so among bicultural students in our classroom and our schools. To that end, a critical bicultural pedagogy resting on Darder's (2012) critical theory of cultural democracy served both as a pedagogical imperative in this study's fieldwork and a theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of participants' narratives. By keeping Darder's principles in mind, in conjunction with a critical theory of racism, this study aimed to engage the voices of Black educators in the progressive education movement, in search of "a language of possibility and hope" (p. 44).

Methodology

This qualitative research study employed critical narrative inquiry as its methodology primarily because of its ideological and pedagogical coherence with the critical conceptual framework that informed this study. Recognizing the limitations of my own positionality adequately to imagine, understand, or critically interrogate the experiences of Black progressive educators and activists, and repudiating the feigned objectivity of "traditional" scientific methods, this study lent itself to a "storytelling and questioning inquiry . . . woven around themes . . . as experienced and interpreted through narratives" (Baker, 2005, p.1) from four Black progressive educators and activists, who provided insights into their experience of navigating

whiteness within progressive education spaces, as well as recommendations to disrupt the hegemony of white norms in progressive education spaces in the future. The intentionality of the analysis and interpretation of these narratives constituted “a systematic study of experience made public” (Hooley, 2010, para. 6); the co-evaluation of major themes and the co-construction of recommendations rooted this study in a nascent iteration of the culturally democratic progressive pedagogy for which this study sought to advocate.

Four Black progressive educators, authors, and/or activists were identified by purposive sampling (e.g., from prior encounters, engagements, or collaborations broadly related to the subject of study) and familiarized in a general way with the purpose of this study, as well as its research questions prior to individual, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were structured in two parts: first, to elicit stories that speak to emotions, environments, and past experiences pertaining to the white space of the progressive education movement; second, to invite participants to identify principles, policies, or practices that could move progressive education from a white space towards cultural democracy. Field notes were recorded during the interviews, and all interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. Analysis of these interviews followed, guided by the lenses of the conceptual framework and the “inward, outward, backward, forward” structure of the interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

Following a first round of analysis focused on the identification of major themes revealed in narratives from the first part of each interview, corrected transcripts were shared with participants in order to invite input, refinement, or resistance to emerging interpretations by the research subjects themselves (Creswell, 2009). Subsequently, a group dialogue was hosted in order to discuss those emerging interpretations, as well as emerging findings from the second

part of the interviews, with a focus on recommended strategies and positionalities to advance a more culturally democratic reformulation of progressive education. In addition, this group dialogue provided an opportunity for the researcher and participants to debrief their experience and reflect on issues of racialized power and positionality in the research process itself.

The methodology employed for this study was inextricably intertwined with my own identity as a white progressive educator and activist, intentionally participating in “a research agenda that casts a critical and ‘othering’ gaze on ourselves and seeks to disrupt the privilege of other ourselves and other whites” (Fasching-Varner, 2011, pp. 165-166). The methodology was also intended to enact or express a conceptual framework that fuses critical interpretive research methodologies with critical race theory. As a contribution to a “critical theory of race,” this study was therefore closely associated with the practice of “critical race pedagogy,” which Marvin Lynn (1999) defined as “an analysis of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination in education that relies mostly on the perceptions, experiences, and counterhegemonic practices of educators of color” (p. 625). Furthermore, to the extent that my own positionality figured prominently in this study, this methodology honored the imperative to “forge a third space for neo-abolitionist whites as neither enemy nor ally but concrete subject of struggle,” recognizing that “this new positionality will be guided by non-white discourses” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 186).

Significance of the Study

The primary significance of this study was to unveil, deconstruct, and mitigate some of the historically racialized dynamics in the progressive education movement that have been inextricably intertwined with but occluded by ostensibly culturally “neutral” or “universal” preoccupations, such as “child-centered learning,” “active engagement in the community,” and

“democratic education.” From the outset, this study begged such questions as “Which child?”, “Which communities?”, and “What democracy?” with an emphatically racialized inflection. In addition, recognizing that “the only way for society to gain genuine insight into the problem is to learn firsthand from those closest to the problem” (Freire, 2000, p. 12), this study foregrounded the experience, insight, and generative theoretical contributions of Black progressive educators and education activists, whose voices have most often been ignored, marginalized, or erased.

Foregrounding the voices of Black progressive educators and activists assisted, in some measure, to address the occlusion of such voices in the white space of research on progressive education, and therefore supplements the very limited field of research currently available on the intersections of progressive education and racial justice. By lifting the veil on the racialized dynamics in progressive education spaces and foregrounding the voices of progressive educators of color, this study stands to benefit researchers, educators, activists, and school leaders in the progressive education movement—not only by helping to make visible the racialized dynamics of progressive education history, theory, and activism but also by concretely addressing those dynamics in pursuit of racial equity and justice.

In addition, both as the researcher and especially as a progressive education advocate in my own positionality, this study clarified some of the ways I position myself as an ally, advocate, and activist, and will inevitably enhance the impact of my continued contributions to the struggle for racial justice in the years ahead. On the one hand, this project served as a contribution to an emerging discourse in whiteness studies, with specific reference to white progressive educators in the white space of progressive education:

The critical project that largely informs the new scholarship of “whiteness” rests on a singular assumption. Its primary aim is to unveil the rhetorical, political, cultural, and social mechanisms through which “whiteness” is both invented and used to mask its power and privilege. (Giroux, 1997, p. 102)

At the same time, sustained dialogue with and analysis of the narratives gathered from research participants helped me personally to “recognize the ways [my own] actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that [I] profess to see eradicated” (hooks, 1989, p. 113). Finally, while this study’s intention sought to clarify the imperatives of white progressive educators who wish to struggle in solidarity with colleagues of color for racial justice, it consciously recognized the vulnerability of such approaches to centering the discourse on racial equity and liberation on whiteness.

Delimitations and Limitations

Focusing emphatically and exclusively on the experience of Black progressive educators and activists meant that this study would not account for the experience of all progressive educators of color. Similarly, I did not presume that the experience and insights of Black educators and activists would be identical. By focusing on the experience of Black educators and activists, my intention was to outline the contours of whiteness in the progressive education movement with a careful focus on patterns within the Black progressive educator or activist’s experience, but not to marginalize the experience of people of color who do not identify as Black nor necessarily to suggest that whiteness can only be understood through the lens of the Black subject’s experience. Subsequent studies could explore similar dynamics among progressive

educators and activists from Latinx, Asian-American, Native American, and other racial and ethnic groups.

Similarly, this study was limited to Black educators and activists in the United States, and did not account for variations in these dynamics that might differ in other national contexts. Finally, while this study recognized the intersectional nature of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), it was not intended to adequately account for factors such as class, gender, religion, ability, or other identifiers that inform, complicate, and extend the nature of oppression with reference to white supremacy. Instead, this study was intended to focus emphatically on racialized dynamics specific to the enactment of white supremacy in the progressive education movement.

Known limitations of this study, beyond those delimitations intentionally introduced and framed by its methodology, begin with the generalizability of results from a sample of four Black progressive educators and activists. In addition, purposive sampling of those four subjects may have led to the privileging of my own assumptions and biases in the interpretation of critical narratives, emerging from shared histories and prior experiences with the participants. Further, the predominant experience of progressive schools that participants shared was from their time in independent, non-sectarian progressive schools. This inevitably introduced dynamics salient to private schools' structures, systems, and cultures, and suggests that further research should be conducted with Black educators and activists from public progressive schools in order to extend and/or augment the findings of this study. As concerns each of these limitations of the study, however, Creswell (2009) reminded us that the value of qualitative research does not lie in its generalizability per se, but rather in the specificity of themes unveiled in the context of a specific study.

Additional limitations include the range of subjectivities introduced through the intentional co-evaluation of findings with the research subjects and my own reflections on my identity and positionality. In the first case, Sultana (2007) made a distinction between “writing ‘with’” and “writing ‘about’” that’s salient to the intentions of this study: recognizing the research subjects as “actors in . . . the production of culture, construction of meaning, cultivation of ways of being and identification of paths of future social actions” (p. 375, cited in Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 15) required reliance on their voices as integral interpreters of the study’s findings.

Positionality

Given the nature of the study, my positionality as a white male progressive educator must be acknowledged with respect to its limitations, possible challenges, and possible advantages, given my established relationships with the movement. As a white progressive educator and activist, I had to be mindful of my limited capacity fully to identify with the experience of Black participants, the likelihood that elements of my own complicity in racial injustice would be unveiled, and the potential that my role as a white researcher would introduce power imbalances in dialogue with Black participants.

As for my intentionally persistent efforts to reflect on my own positionality—both in my analysis and interpretation of narratives, and in my co-construction of recommendations for a more culturally democratic reformulation of progressive education—I recognized that this inward-turning gaze might distract from clear-eyed views of more systemic racialized dynamics that require mitigation. In this context I align my position with Sultana (2007):

While some scholars have argued that acknowledgement of positionality, reflexivity, identity, and representation does not necessarily result in politically engaged research and

writing, and may not result in destabilizing existing power relations or bring about dramatic changes, the alternative of not heeding such issues is even more problematic. (p. 383)

Finally, this study—like any politically or ideologically committed research—invited the risk and challenge of confirmation bias. Given that this study emerged from personal experience, I entered into it with some strong ideas. Wherever possible I made an effort critically to interrogate findings that align with those views I had already established. I did not want this to be a study that simply validated beliefs that had already been formed or conclusions I had already drawn from my relationships with Black progressive educators in the past and my history of participation as a white man within this movement.

Organization of Dissertation

This chapter has provided an introduction to the background, focus, scope, and limits of this study. Chapter 2 reviews available literature to contextualize and enrich dynamics outlined in this chapter, with a particular focus on historicized and racialized dynamics in the evolution of progressive education: an overview of the development of progressive educational theory and principles, an analysis of problematic racial ideology inherited and perpetuated by progressive education's early proponents, and an analysis of color-blind racism in the post-Civil Rights era. Chapter 3 discusses the research design and methods employed in this study, and their intentional resonance with the theoretical framework. Chapter 4 presents the stories of four Black progressive educators and identifies five overarching themes. Chapter 5 discusses these themes in an effort to make “whiteness” visible in the progressive education movement, summarizes feedback from participants in group meetings, and then harvests recommended

theoretical and practical strategies to catalyze a culturally democratic, racially just, and socially transformative agenda for progressive education in the 21st century.

Conclusion

As a final note, I would rely on the words of George Counts, from the annals of *Progressive Education* in 1932, to capture the intended spirit of this study with reference to the future of the progressive education movement—focusing emphatically on the unveiling, dismantling, and reframing of white privilege and supremacy in the movement’s predominantly white space:

I am merely registering a genuine concern regarding the future of what seems to be the most promising movement above the educational horizon. This movement holds out so much promise that its friends must insist on high accomplishment. The Progressive Education Association includes among its members more than its share of the boldest and most creative figures in American education. My hope is that it will not dissipate its energies or fail to measure up to its great opportunities. But, if it is to fulfill its promise, it must lose some of its easy optimism and prepare to deal more fundamentally, realistically, and positively with the American social situation than it has done up to the present moment. (Counts, 1932, p. 257)

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In Chapter 1, I suggested that the progressive education movement itself remains a “white space” (Anderson, 2015) no less subject to the tendrils and tenets of color-blind white supremacy than the neoliberal educational ideology against which it has been positioned as a plausible pedagogical and political alternative. In the first section of Chapter 2, I analyze the broader development of progressive educational theory and principles from the early 20th century through to the present day—engaging with some of the historical, social, and pedagogical tensions with which it has been informed and to which it has reacted. In the second section, I trace the problematic racial ideology enshrined in and perpetuated by early models of progressive pedagogy, and explore John Dewey’s failure adequately to engage with race and racism in his otherwise seminal theorization of progressive pedagogy. In the third section, I explore the sinews of contemporary theory and research on color-blind racism in the post-Civil Rights era, with a view to outlining the discursive and structural dynamics of color-blind racism that maintain and perpetuate white supremacy in progressive schools and organizations no more and no less than in other white spaces—despite the essential irony that progressive institutions construe themselves as somehow beyond or having transcended race. In order to explore how progressive education can redeem its continually promised yet regrettably dormant potential to transform democratic society with a view to racial equity and justice, it was crucial for the purposes of this study to “make whiteness visible” in its historical formation and contemporary practice by reviewing erasures and omissions progressive educational theory has never reconciled, problematic inheritances progressive schools and organizations have never

repudiated, and ongoing cultural dynamics than maintain and embolden the hegemony of white racial norms in progressive white spaces.

Progressive Education—or, Rather, “Progressive Education”

The public imagination of progressive education in this country, and in these times, tends towards ludicrous extremes. Proponents hail progressive education as the elusive philosopher’s stone required to catalyze the infinite potential of childhood development and transformative promise of democratic society. Critics imagine the progressive classroom spawning little more than hippie drum circles, nut-free campus dining programs, and feral children wholly unprepared for college or career success. Perhaps the only thing the most vocal advocates and detractors might agree upon, if pressed, is this: they’re not sure what, exactly, progressive education *is*. Progressive education has become a construct that, at one and the same time, is both over-inscribed with assumptions and under-furnished with reliable or consistent examples.

Almost ninety years ago, Reisner (1930) confirmed that this uncertainty has characterized the understanding of progressive education not only in the public imagination, but also among its most devoted practitioners, from progressive education’s birth:

For years the term has been in constant use and presumably its meaning is clearly and comprehensively understood. And yet there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding just what progressive education is. Laymen, hearing the term so freely used by professional educators, are abashed at their ignorance of what is apparently so well known, and only privately, with an apologetic air, do they confess to their deficiency of understanding. . . . Even among educators—educators organized in panels for the discussion of progressive education—there appears to be a deplorable lack of unanimity

regarding the connotations of the word progressive. (1930, p. 192, in Pecore, 2015, pp. 53-54)

Washburne (1952) acknowledged the difficulty of coherently and sufficiently describing progressive education, not because of the limited understanding of its analysts but because of the dynamic nature of its commitments: as Pecore (2015) asserted, “progressive education is continuously progressing; it is alive and growing with no fixed creed, no unchanging body of knowledge, and no specific method to be applied” (p. 55). But this, perhaps, does not help define “progressive education” helpfully for the purposes of this study.

I would argue that the problem is explained squarely by the fact that “progressive education” is not a methodology, but a philosophy; not a fixed strategy, but a dynamic discourse. On the one hand, progressive education undoubtedly has a variety of driving goals, and governing principles, that frame its presence in contemporary education debate as a legitimate philosophy (Little et al., 2015; Pecore, 2015). On the other hand, an understanding of progressive education should be framed by an appreciation of the historical, social, and cultural tensions to which it has tended to respond, rather than to resolve—and which it has frequently sustained, rather than reconciling—in a dialectical tension between its preoccupations with students’ experience of learning, and the impact of schooling on society. In the following sections I present the driving principles of progressive education, as they have been historically framed by the individuals and organizations reputed to represent, protect, or promote them, as well as outline some of the historical, pedagogical, and racial tensions that have governed the growth, impact, and problematics of progressive education—less as a coherent school of thought, and more as a dynamic movement.

What *Was* “Progressive Education” Meant to Be?

Contrary to the oft-accepted premise that progressive education was born purely of the minds of early 20th century educators like John Dewey, or the emergence of early 20th century organizations like the Progressive Education Association, progressive education’s roots in the United States were nurtured in the soil of nineteenth-century cultural and economic ferment in which the theory of a “new education” was formed (Cremin, 1962). People in the United States were coming to terms with the transformative impact of nascent industrialism in, and unprecedented immigration to, the United States, as well as their varied perceptions of the potential and peril that accompanied these changes. These phenomena raised dramatic questions about the nature of the body politic, and the role of schools in service to it. As Lawrence Cremin indicated in his landmark historical study, progressive education began:

as part of a vast humanitarian effort to apply the promise of American life—the ideal of government by, of, and for the people—to the puzzling new urban-industrial civilization that came into being during the latter half of the nineteenth century. . . . In effect, progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals. (Cremin, 1962, p. viii)

Responding, as well, to the early American manifestations of Mann’s concept of the common school—which were afflicted in rural, urban, and suburban settings by conceptual abstract learning, financing inadequacies, limited professionalism, and little relevance between learning and “the real world” of adults (Cremin, 1962)—progressive education “began as a sided protest against a restricted view of the school, but it was always more than this; for essentially it viewed

education as an adjunct to politics in realizing the promise of American life” (Cremin, 1962, p. 88).

By the time John Dewey, still a relatively unknown junior colleague of Albion Small at the University of Chicago, was interviewed by *The School Journal* in 1897, a pedagogic creed for a “new education” had already started to take shape that would inform more conspicuous and explicit articulations of “progressive education” in the 20th century: “Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform” and “the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life” (Dewey & Small, 1897, in Cremin, 1962, p. 100). Only two years later, in the best-selling *The School and Society* (Dewey & Hazenplug, 1899, cited in Cremin, 1962), Dewey responded both to popular dissatisfaction with prevailing models of the common school, and to targeted critiques of his early experimental alternatives, by asserting the irrelevance of then-contemporary school models to the changes in industrialism, and insisting that “if our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete transformation” and that with this transformation “we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious” (Dewey & Hazenplug, 1899, pp. 23-24, cited in Cremin, 1962, pp. 117-118). The progressive school was cast from the outset as “a lever of social change” (Cremin, 1962, p. 118). In Dewey’s formulation, “educational theory . . . becomes political theory, and the educator is inevitably cast into the struggle for social reform” (Cremin, 1962, p. 118). In this dramatic repositioning of the school as a transformative agent of social change, I would argue, not only did progressive education’s rise to prominence begin, but also its eventual fall from political grace.

Strands of Progressive Education(s)

Although most early 20th-century progressive educators identified with these transformative goals for schooling, their work demonstrated significant differences in ideological orientation and proposed practice. Researchers have proposed various categories to identify these tendencies. For example, some scholars described the struggle between pedagogical and administrative progressives (Labaree, 2005; Tyack, 1974). Catalyzing the transformative promise of a new approach to education in the face of sweeping population growth and burgeoning industrialism begged questions not only about what is taught in schools, and how, but also how schools are structured and managed, and by whom. Pedagogical progressives reinvigorated debate about curriculum, and “proffered that schools should recognize and adapt to the individual capacity and interests of students rather than systemic standardization” (Vazquez-Heilig, 2017, p. 2). Administrative progressives focused on standardized structures and systems, governed from the top down in the interests of efficiency and consistency: they argued “that the governance of city schools was immersed in bureaucracy and inefficiency and should be turned over to a legion of educational experts” (Vazquez-Heilig, 2013, p. 2). It should be noted that administrative progressives were often socially, culturally, and politically conservative: some scholars resist including administrative progressives as “true” progressives because of this cognitive dissonance (Vaughan, 2018). Administrative progressives were not interested in the welfare of racialized students or their agency as citizens in a democracy, but in the efficiency with which they could be integrated into the workforce. Consonant with their preoccupation with administrative efficiency was a fixation on standardized curricular content and testing: whereas pedagogical progressives were primarily concerned with *how* to think and *how* to teach,

administrative progressives were preoccupied with *what* to think and *what* to teach (Fallace, 2018). Thus I would argue, ironically, that late 20th and early 21st century neoliberal reform advocates descend directly, and to some degree ironically, from the administrative progressives' school of thought and practice.

Historians and researchers have designated other categorization schemes as well. Church and Sedlak (1976) employed the terms “conservative progressives” and “liberal progressives,” foregrounding ideological rather than practical priorities of the administrative and pedagogical progressives, respectively (cited in Labaree, 2005). Kliebard (1976) referred to three different categories: “social efficiency,” “child development,” and “social reconstruction”: “social efficiency” correlates approximately to the administrative progressives, while “child development” and “social reconstruction” map directly to the primary preoccupations of pedagogical progressives (cited in Labaree, 2005).

More recently, Kelly Vaughan (2018) proposed a categorization scheme that features three branches of progressive education: “moderate (child-centered/experientialist), radical (critical reconstructionist), and conservative (social behaviorist)” (p. 41). Moderate progressives believed that curriculum should be rooted in experience and that teaching should focus on the interests and needs of the child: by supporting children and cultivating their citizenship skills, society would be improved. Conservative progressives believed that curriculum should be shaped according to society's needs, and that social behaviorist reforms would increase the efficiency with which schools prepared children to function as adults in society. Radical progressives (among them George Counts, who confronted the PEA's moderate progressives so powerfully in 1932) “believed that all schooling was a form of indoctrination and that it was the

role of schools to help teach students to reconstruct society” (Vaughan, 2018, p. 42). I lean towards Vaughan’s categorization in the conceptual framework of this study because it emphasizes the ideological orientation of the various strands of progressivism, as well as anticipates the core dilemma in progressive education at this time: a failure adequately to integrate the transformatively democratic political possibilities championed by the radical progressives, with the child-centered and project-based pedagogical commitments of the moderate progressives that endured.

How Did “Progressive Education” Come to be Known?

By 1916, Dewey had well assumed his mantle as the leading proponent and presumptive godfather of “progressive education” in the United States, with the release of his seminal *Democracy and Education*. By that juncture a wide variety of laboratories of progressive education has been well established and warranted the more substantial theoretical treatment Dewey’s book provided; historically, perhaps the greatest achievement of the work is that it “orchestrated the many diverse strands of pedagogical progressivism into a single inclusive theory and gave them unity and direction” (Cremin, 1962, p. 121). However, I would contend that Dewey (1916) gave inadequate attention to the transformative political implications of the radical progressives’ position. Dewey outlined seven fundamental features that were to be the mainstays of this inclusive theory:

- the biological continuity of human impulses and instincts with natural energies;
- the dependence of the growth of the mind upon participation in conjoint activities having a common purpose;

- the influence of the physical environment through the uses made of it in the social medium;
- the necessity of utilization of individual variations in desire and thinking for a progressively developing society;
- the essential unity of method and subject matter;
- the intrinsic continuity of ends and means; and
- the recognition of mind as thinking which perceives and tests the meaning of behavior. (Dewey, 1916, p. 377)

These were the principles of pedagogy through which Dewey's early theory framed the continuing reform of American schools; in that reform "he saw the first and foremost work of an 'intentionally progressive' society" (Cremin, 1962, p. 126).

Continuing Stewardship of Progressive Pedagogical Principles

In subsequent generations, a series of national organizations—the Progressive Education Association, the Network of Progressive Educators, and the Progressive Education Network—assumed their succeeding mantles as torchbearers and guardians of the progressive educational tradition. As such, they were responsible for enshrining core principles of progressive pedagogy into published lists of key principles, to ground the progressive educator's practice and to define "progressive education" for the general public. In addition, they helped guide the evolution of these principles over time.

Just three years after the publication of *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916), the Progressive Education Association (PEA) formed, under the leadership of a first generation of explicitly self-described progressive educators such as Marietta Pierce Johnson, to further

advance the mission of the progressive education movement through such initiatives as its journal, *Progressive Education*. Printed on the inside leaf of its quarterly publication from 1924 onwards were the founding tenets the PEA board adopted in 1919 in Washington, D.C.:

- freedom to develop naturally;
- interest, the motive of all work;
- the teacher a guide, not a taskmaster;
- scientific study of pupil development;
- greater attention to all that affects the child's physical development;
- cooperation between school and home to meet the needs of child life; and
- the progressive school a leader in educational movements. (Progressive Education Association, 1924, p. 2)

For the next thirty years, “these principles and the progressive education movement would fundamentally alter the course of American education” (Little et al., 2015, p. 85). Subsequently, prevailing political conservatism in the post-WWII years led to the progressive pedagogy of the moderates and radicals falling out of favor, particularly with the development of Cold War anxieties about the United States' preeminence in the global order. This led broadly to a resurgence of conservative (/administrative) progressivism as political and education leaders turned their attention back to how schools could be run, and what should be taught, ostensibly to ensure the United States' dominance on the global stage (Fallace, 2018).

What is “Progressive Education” Becoming?

By the mid-1980s, the Network of Progressive Educators (NPE), acknowledged as the next generation's successor to the Progressive Education Association, undertook the initiative to

resurrect and catalyze a national focus of the principles of progressive pedagogy. This was by no coincidence just a few short years after the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the nascent onslaught of prevailing neoliberal education policies that have persisted through to the present day. In its annual conference in Weston, Massachusetts, in 1987, the organization publicized its version of the “Principles of Progressive Education” for the late 20th century:

- curriculum tailored to individual learning styles, developmental needs, and intellectual interests;
- the student as an active partner in learning;
- arts, sciences, and humanities equally valued in an interdisciplinary curriculum;
- learning through direct experience and primary material;
- a focus on multi-cultural and global perspectives;
- the school as a model of democracy;
- the school as a humane environment;
- commitment to the community beyond school; and
- commitment to a healthy body through sports and outdoor play. (Little et al., 2012, p. 87)

Perhaps in strategic recognition of the express political commitments that signaled the movement’s decline in the politically hostile climate of the 1950s, these principles were considerably oblique in their expression of socially transformative commitments. Indeed, the school is positioned by these principles as a “model” of democracy, but this is a far cry from a *lever* of or for democracy.

By the early 1990s, the Network of Progressive Educators was completely defunct—in no small part owing to the broader cultural conservatism of the 1980s, concerns about the dominance of the United States on the global stage, and the prevalence of increasingly bureaucratic and domineering education policy and discourse. During a 2005 conference on progressive education, however, a committee was reformed to revive its activities; in 2009 the Progressive Education Network (PEN) was incorporated. Recognizing that “educators have been challenged in agreeing upon a single definition for progressive education” (Progressive Education Network [PEN], 2009), PEN offered these driving principles for the 21st century:

- Education must prepare students for active participation in a democratic society.
- Education must focus on students' social, emotional, academic, cognitive and physical development.
- Education must nurture and support students' natural curiosity and innate desire to learn.
- Education must foster internal motivation in students.
- Education must be responsive to the developmental needs of students.
- Education must foster respectful relationships between teachers and students.
- Education must encourage the active participation of students in their learning, which arises from previous experience.
- Progressive educators must play an active role in guiding the educational vision of our society. (PEN, 2009)

By this juncture, explicit commitments to socially transformative agency (beyond ensuring students' readiness for “active participation in a democratic society”) had been even further

diluted than before. This reinvigorated concern among the organization’s membership, particularly but not exclusively among advocates for racial equity and justice, which was bravely confronted and interrogated in PEN’s national conference on “Access, Equity, and Activism” in 2015. By that juncture I had been recruited to PEN’s Board of Directors, and we responded to these concerns as well as predominant feedback from the conference with a revised set of principles in 2016:

- engages students as active participants in their learning and in society;
- supports teachers’ voice as experienced practitioners and growth as lifelong learners;
- builds solidarity between progressive educators in the public and private sectors;
- advances critical dialogue on the roles of schools in a democratic society;
- responds to contemporary issues from a progressive educational perspective;
- welcomes families and communities as partners in children’s learning;
- promotes diversity, equity, and justice in our schools and society; and
- encourages progressive educators to play an active role in guiding the educational vision of our society. (PEN, 2016a, n.p.)

Though hardly a radical manifesto of progressive education’s socially reconstructive potential, this revision was notable on two counts: these principles center “critical dialogue on the roles of school in a democratic society” and enshrine the terminology of “diversity, equity, and justice” in the core principles of progressive education for the first time in its history.

In a separate PEN document entitled “Educational Principles,” PEN further stipulated the following conviction:

The purpose of school expands beyond prevailing education policy and practice.

Progressive educators support their students' deep intellectual development and healthy identity formation—as developing individuals, as active learners within a school community, and as engaged citizens in the broader world. (PEN, 2016b, n.p.)

Furthermore, PEN insisted that “Education must” attend to each of the following goals:

- amplify students' voice, agency, conscience, and intellect to create a more equitable, just, and sustainable world;
- encourage the active participation of students in their learning, in their communities, and in the world;
- respond to the developmental needs of students, and focus on their social, emotional, intellectual, cognitive, cultural, and physical development;
- honor and nurture students' natural curiosity and innate desire to learn, fostering internal motivation and the discovery of passion and purpose;
- emerge from the interests, experiences, goals, and needs of diverse constituents, fostering empathy, communication and collaboration across difference; and
- foster respectfully collaborative and critical relationships between students, educators, parents/guardians, and the community. (PEN, 2016b, n.p.)

In recent years, PEN has foregrounded progressive education's commitments not only to the pedagogy of the moderate progressive tradition (as had always been the case with PEA and NPE) but also to the socially transformative possibilities of the radical progressive tradition (as PEN's progenitor organizations never would, or could) throughout its communication and programming.

(R)e-racing Progressive Education History

In a provocative and brilliant interruption to contemporary education discourse, Jal Mehta (2014) confronted contemporary practitioners of “deeper learning”—arguably an early 21st century manifestation of moderate progressive pedagogical principles in the context of “21st century learning” that emerged as a viable alternative and reaction to the restrictive, instrumentalized, and transmissive pedagogy of neoliberal education in the late 20th century (New Tech Network, 2017). Mehta (2014) argued that deeper learning, just as progressive education before it, “has historically been the province of the advantaged—those who could afford to send their children to the best private schools and to live in the most desirable school districts” (Mehta, 2014, para. 3). Further, Mehta asserted that “to the degree that race mirrors class, these inequalities in access . . . are shortchanging Black and Latino students” (2014, para. 3). Mehta noted that this dynamic extends to contemporary spaces in which “deeper learning” is interrogated and advanced, as well:

If you travel in deeper learning circles—go to conferences, teach classes, visit schools—you will notice that many of the faces, among both the teachers and the learners, are white. Sometimes this is directly acknowledged, and sometimes it is only implicit, but the reality is the reality—deeper learning in the U.S. is much more white than the nation as a whole. (Mehta, 2014, para. 2)

And progressive education more broadly speaking over this last century—both in tandem with and distinct from deeper learning in this last decade—is both informed by and suffers from a complicity in racialized bias and privilege it must now seek to acknowledge and repudiate, from which it must seek to heal, and to which it must purposefully respond.

Race and/at the Origins of Progressive Education Theory and Practice

This complicity in racialized bias is visible even in the works of those early progressive education pioneers who are celebrated as founders of the progressive movement. It is difficult, at best, to reconcile the racial biases of progressive pedagogy's forebears with their ostensibly boundless belief in the potential of human children. Yet, as Ronald K. Goodenow noted as early as 1975:

Few historians have analyzed the attitudes of major white progressive educators on race and ethnicity. Very little is known about what they did in the area of race relations and the schooling of minority and ethnic groups or about efforts sponsored by the Progressive Education Association to deal with racial tension and the “place” of blacks and white ethnics in American society. Likewise, the response and contribution of blacks and ethnics to progressive education has received little attention from scholars. (Goodenow, 1975, p. 365)

Thankfully this myopia has begun to be explored by credible scholars in recent years (see Burkholder, 2011; Fallace, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2018; Frank, 2013; Koch & Lawson, 2004; Margonis, 2009; McGee, 1999; Neubert, 2010; Øland, 2011; Pappas, 1996).

Surveying the pantheon of white progressive educational pioneers of the early 20th century—Dewey, Froebel, Montessori, Parker, and more—Thomas D. Fallace (2015) noted that, in 1913, Marie Montessori “argue[d] that the anthropological study of the history of humankind had much to teach the educator about the development of the White child” (Fallace, 2015, p. 37). Invoking excerpts from Montessori's *Pedagogical Anthropology* (1913, pp. 218–219), Fallace continued:

Montessori explained, “the *cephalic index* and the *cranial volume* are the two anthropological data on which the criterion of normality of children’s heads must be based.” She continued, “the dark-skinned children . . . belonging to African races and the tribes of American Indians” belonged to the dolichocephalic racial group with the smallest cephalic index. Drawing upon contemporaneous research in physical anthropology, Montessori confirmed that people of color were not only sociologically inferior, but anatomically inferior as well. (Fallace, 2015, p. 37)

In addition to such astonishingly ethnocentric, racist assumptions and broken “science” embedded in the *theory* of early progressive educators, correlative assumptions were structurally embedded in progressive education’s early *practice*. Witness, for example, John and Evelyn Dewey’s stewardship of the Gary Plan:

The curriculum involved a two-platoon system in which mostly immigrant students studied academic and industrial content in shifts. Progressive education, on the other hand, was exemplified most famously by the hands-on, cooperative learning of Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago . . . and other private and suburban school experiments. (Fallace, 2015, p. 4)

While Dewey’s personal and professional journey towards a benign but arguably provocative cultural pluralism in the 20s and 30s is a complicated story I don’t wish comprehensively to narrate here, the fact of the matter is that even “when faced with white people’s resistance to African American equality, Dewey was willing to compromise his democratic principles” (Feinberg, 1975, in Margonis, 2009, p. 18)—and, thus, to compromise the ostensible anchors of his pedagogy.

“Race Prejudice” and “Friction”

A number of factors help to explain Dewey’s resistance to explicitly engaging with race and racism, and his capitulation to white resistance to African American equality. Even in the course of his evolution later in his career towards a more conscientized notion of cultural pluralism in the United States, from the preposterous quasi-science of early 20th century eugenics that infected a broad swath of academic disciplines, Dewey’s specific understanding of racial tensions and antipathies remained limited. His more purposeful ventures into this terrain in the 1920s, such as the explicitly entitled “Racial Prejudice and Friction” (1922), demonstrated a reductive and simplistic understanding of racial identity and bias: “The facts suggest that an antipathy to what is strange (originating probably in the self-protective tendencies of animal life) is the original basis of what now takes the form of race prejudice” (Dewey, 1922, p. 245). In fact, Dewey suggested that “race prejudice” itself is a little-understood and slippery signifier that masks a variety of “universal” human dispositions and inclinations to protect oneself from difference:

What is called race prejudice is not then the cause of friction. It is rather a product and sign of the friction which is generated by these other deep-seated causes. Like other social effects it becomes in turn a cause of further consequences; especially it intensifies and exasperates the other sources of friction. (Dewey, 1922, p. 253)

This is as far as Dewey got in the sole lecture or publication in which Dewey “explicitly addresses racial prejudice as a philosophical issue” (Pappas, 1996, p. 47). At least 500 lynchings of Black men and women in the decade preceding Dewey’s claims (Gibson, 1979), now known to be many more (Equal Justice Initiative, 2015); the impact of Jim Crow laws in every area of

public and private life in the United States; and the legalized segregation of students in American public schools suggest that Dewey may have been surveying the landscape of consistently racialized tensions, and explicitly racialized violence, through rose-colored lenses. Both the violence of emphatically racialized animus explicitly visible in the early 20th century United States, and the systemic entrenchment of that animus through federal law and public education policy, suggest that “race prejudice” was itself a conspicuous cause of “friction” that deserved more thoroughgoing attention in early progressive theory and practice at the intersections of education and democracy. But Dewey’s seeming reluctance to accept the impact of race and racism—generally in American society, and specifically in American education practice—was less an uncritically accepted resort to an “epistemology of ignorance” (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007) than a requisite offshoot of his explicit developmental theory. Put more pithily, problematic racial implications of Dewey’s progressive theory and practice were not so much a bug in the system as a design feature. This was true of other progressive “pioneers” as well.

Recapitulating Recapitulation Theory

Throughout the evolution of contemporary progressive pedagogy, tracing its development back to its roots in the “new education” of the late 19th century, an unexamined inheritance from biological and social science theory has imbued educational theory with a fundamentally problematic construct of race and racialization. This was known as recapitulation theory, or the belief “that the development of the individual retraced the cultural history of the human race and that non-White cultural groups represented an earlier, inferior, and childlike status” (Fallace 2012, p. 511). Prominent German biologist Ernst Haeckel, “author of the biogenetic law that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (Gould, 1977, p. 203), suggested:

[Reason] is for the most part only the property of the higher races of men; among the lower races it is only imperfectly developed. . . . Natural men (e.g., Indian Vedas or Australian negroes) are closer in respect of psychology to the higher vertebrates (e.g., apes and dogs) than to higher civilized Europeans. (Richards, 1987, p. 596, cited in Fallace, 2012, p. 511)

This quasi-biological construct was adapted in the context of social and psychological theory and accepted uncritically by the majority of white progressive theorists: recapitulation theory presumed “a single continuum of cultural development leading through the stages of savagery, barbarianism, and civilization, and then coordinated these sociological stages with the psychological stages of human development” (Fallace, 2012, p. 512). White culture and white individuals were enshrined as the most advanced on all counts, while racialized cultures and individuals were enmeshed, culturally and individually, in earlier and explicitly more primitive stages. Thus recapitulation theory began with “the same set of first principles” as eugenics (Fallace, 2012, p. 513), at least insofar as it positioned racialized culture as deficient by comparison to white culture—and thus imagined racialized people as deficient by comparison to white people.

These were not simply unexamined theories floating in the air at the time, but specific ideas upon which educational theory and curriculum development were explicitly founded. Upon Darwin’s introduction of the notion of “progressive development,” the new education theorists began to normalize the idea that education could be approached “as the reliving of individual and historic development” through the trajectory of the child’s learning in school (Fallace, 2012, p. 523). Dewey, G.S. Hall, and others attempted to match educational reforms to contemporary

psychological theory, which was inextricably intertwined with these beliefs. Thus Hall argued that Native American art, crafts, and weaponry could be leveraged for educational value among the youngest students “by having students engage in these premodern activities like their savage ancestors did because Indian activity represented an earlier stage of development that aligned with the instincts of the child” (Hall, 1904, p. 179, in Fallace, 2012, p. 524). Similarly, Catherine Isabel Dodd proposed that in the first two years of school, “The child is in the myth-making age, and its tastes must be gratified by fairy tales and stories of the struggles of primitive man” (1898, p. 44, in Fallace, 2012, p. 526).

By the time John Dewey and his daughter Evelyn published *Schools of Tomorrow* in 1915, it was possible to catalogue cutting-edge school programs that reified recapitulation theory as a core tenet of curriculum design. At the University of Missouri’s elementary school, for example, “Pupils study the history of shelter from the first beginning with a cave or a brush thicket through the tents of the wandering tribes and the Greek and Roman house, to the steel skyscraper of today” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, p. 244). In Gary, Indiana, the student “learns to handle materials which lie at the foundations of civilization in much the same way that primitive people used them, because this way is suited to the degree of skill and understanding he has reached” (Dewey & Dewey, 1915, pp. 269-270). As Thomas Fallace, who is primarily responsible for applying this lens to the excavation and exposure of early progressive educational history, confirmed: “These schools had set up their curriculum to coordinate the psychological stages of child development with the sociological stages of the civilized world” (Fallace, 2012, p. 527).

Moreover, the racist assumptions embedded in recapitulation theory were reiterated and reified in popular social studies textbooks. In *An American History* (1911), the most popular text in U.S. schools at the time, David Saville Muzzey explained that Native Americans “had generally reached a stage of development called ‘lower barbarianism’ . . . like the Mississippi negro of today” (Muzzey, 1911, p. 23, cited in Fallace, 2012, pp. 527-528) and begrudged the “race problem” with which white Americans were forced to grapple because “negroes” are “perhaps a century behind whites in civilization” (Muzzey, 1911, p. 619, cited in Fallace, 2012, p. 528). Similarly, Charles Ellwood’s 1919 sociology textbook concluded that it’s “obvious . . . that the negro may, on the side of his instinctive and hereditary equipment, be inferior to the white man in his natural adaptiveness to a complex civilization” (p. 249, cited in Fallace, 2012, p. 529). Through these and a litany of similar examples, Fallace demonstrated that the new education, as a precursor to progressive education, “was forged within a demeaning and oppressive set of first principles that viewed non-White cultures as culturally inferior and deficient” (Fallace, 2012, p. 530).

Dewey’s Engagement With Race and Racism

Although Dewey differed from some contemporaries in explicitly refuting the biological inferiority of Black Americans, he did believe that Black Americans were socially inferior. His was an ostensibly gentler, kinder form of racist hierarchy, if such a thing is possible to say. As Fallace (2010) suggested:

Dewey did not believe that Western society was inherently or necessarily superior to non-Western culture . . . but rather that it was contingently superior because social evolution just happened to have placed it at the forefront of social order and progress. (p. 474)

He along with his contemporaries assigned to aboriginal Australians, North American Indians, and—most importantly for this study—African Americans status as an earlier and more primitive form of society. The cognitive and psychological development of Black students, therefore, followed a different trajectory and recommended different means and ends for education in order to ensure their utility in American society, as evidenced by the Deweys’ early experiments. White progressive theorists did not construe this bifurcation as oppressive but beneficent: they were, after all, only trying to ensure that students made progress according to their needs, and that a society might be transformed, within the natural limits of the reformers’ world view. The starkly racist assumptions underlying the evolving pedagogical and curricular approaches were, put simply, a new “natural order of things.”

By the time that the core tenets of Dewey’s educational theory had already been advanced in his early work, and the foundations of progressive education had already been developed and spread, Dewey had not even started to theorize race but rather uncritically accommodated this inheritance of racist assumptions that imbued recapitulation theory. Black students had been assigned to schools that were the progenitor of trade schools and provided with transmissive and didactic pedagogies; white (and primarily middle and upper class students) had been served with individualistic and experiential pedagogies in the Lab School and elsewhere. The goal of progressive education models—whether in service of predominantly white, middle class students at the Chicago Lab School, or in service of Black students platooned into the progenitors of trade schools—was to be responsive to the developmental needs of the students as defined through this framework. In both cases, as we now say, children were being “met” where they were “at.” Black and white students were simply “at” fundamentally different

levels of capacity and potential. Thus, recapitulation theory “provided an ideological framework that reinforced White supremacy in explicit and implicit ways, while paradoxically justifying a more humane, child-centered approach to education” (Fallace, 2015, p. 35).

I would argue that once this bifurcated construct of education for white and Black students was enshrined in early models—sustained, of course, by the broader context of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation in American schools—it was perpetuated through to the present day. This divide continues to be stark: as Algava (2016) asserted, “While notable exceptions exist, progressive practices, historically and still today, are not often found in public school settings for children from communities and families marginalized by structural racism and poverty” (Algava, 2016, p. 46). Rather, progressive schools “continue to serve children and families whose economic, social, and cultural capital already serves them well” (Algava, 2016, p. 47).

By the time later in his career that Dewey began to engage more explicitly with race and “race friction” in his later work, he did not so much theorize race to interrogate the underpinnings of pedagogy, as respond to conspicuous crises in race relations in American society as a prominent private citizen. It wasn’t until the 1920s that he became self-conscious and self-critical about his reliance on the conceptual framework of recapitulation theory and, until that point, he had “ignored the cultural contributions of non-white societies” (Cohan & Howlett, 2017, p. 17) that may have called his earlier educational theories into question. Only after World War I did Dewey emphasize “reflective thinking, interaction, and plurality as major components of his educational vision” (Fallace, 2010, p. 476). The crucial point to be made here is that by the 1920s, Dewey had written and the educational field has enshrined the foundational ideas of progressive education that continue to anchor common understandings through the

present day. Ultimately, the dilemma we face with Dewey is that he had not theorized race, in the context of his educational theory, until well after his most conspicuous curricular and pedagogical innovations had taken root—all the while normalizing the white child as the beneficiary of progressive pedagogy. I would argue that the dilemmas of race and racism manifest in the current progressive educational movement trace back to this gap, or absence, regardless of the progress of Dewey's own personal racial conscientization in his mid- to late career.

Again, this is not to say that Dewey never positioned himself as an advocate for racial justice, but rather to assert that he never integrated this orientation into his pedagogy. For example, he used his notoriety and platform to advocate on behalf of Odell Waller, an African-American convict wrongly sentenced to death; to support W. E. B. Du Bois and others in the nascent founding of the NAACP; and to respond to overt acts of white supremacy in others' writing and actions (Cohan & Howlett, 2017). Notably, in all of these instances Dewey engaged with and defined racism as individual and intentional, rather than systemic and impacts-based: the racism to which he publicly responded was conspicuous, deliberate, malicious, and deserving of public outcry. However, he did not so much believe that American society and its attendant institutions were structured to reinscribe and perpetuate racialized inferiority and to protect the material and cultural advantage of white Americans; he simply believed that particularly malicious acts of individuals were owed retribution and that Black Americans, by and large, deserved institutions that might protect them from such aberrations. To his credit, Dewey used the platform and the prominence he had earned in the public eye to advance a nascent anti-racist stance; however, he never integrated these beliefs or dispositions in the pedagogical theory or

curricular reform that serve as the foundation of predominant thought about progressive education to the present day.

Same as It Ever Was

To the point, progressive education has always been intended for certain kinds of people and not for others—not only in broad swaths of the public imagination, but also in its practice and even in its earliest experiments. This intention has long been tied to racialized notions of cultural currency and capital, and the “rightful” and “deserved” trajectories of white children and children of color in the American social and economic landscape. The explicit articulation of white supremacist ideology by some of progressive education’s earliest practitioners, the uncritical acceptance of the racist premises of recapitulation theory in the formation of curriculum and pedagogy, and the embedding of white supremacy in progressive education’s earliest experiments, suggest that progressive educators have no right to claim immunity—historically, or in contemporary discourse—from the virus of these ideas any more than other schools of thought, or “schools of schooling,” they might frequently declaim.

Color-Blind Racism and/as Whiteness

Dewey’s emerging mid-to-late career reckoning with race after overlooking it through the formative years of his early opus, the inheritance of recapitulation theory in the foundations of early progressive educational theory, the erasure of Black progressive theoretical contributions from the seminal work at progressive education’s core, the platooning of Black and white students into starkly different iterations of early progressive school models, the predominance of white educators and students in contemporary progressive schools, the dearth of progressive practices in predominantly Black school systems, and many other dynamics signal that

progressive education has a race problem. This study contends that progressive education is founded on hegemonic white norms that must be unveiled, declared, deconstructed, and reframed in order to elicit emancipatory possibilities for Black and other marginalized communities. In the following sections I address the ideology, culture, and implications of color-blind racism and whiteness.

Mills (1997) noted famously that “Racism . . . is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, [and] rights and duties” (p. 3). As such, it consists not only of ideology and discourse, but also confers power on individuals and is enacted and perpetuated through explicit behaviors and implicit cultural norms. In order to examine the manifestations of racism in progressive schools and organizations, it is necessary to understand contemporary constructions of whiteness and color-blind racism, and their role in the maintenance, perpetuation, and defense of hegemonic white norms.

In recent decades, early forays into the field of “whiteness studies” first centered on discourse about “white privilege,” spawned largely by Peggy McIntosh’s seminal work on this concept. In “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), McIntosh drew from her experience in the field of women’s studies the recognition that men will often assert their belief in the rights of women and declare their willingness to advocate on women’s behalf, provided it doesn’t lessen or ask them to surrender the privileges to which they believe themselves entitled. She recognized tendencies in herself and her colleagues to position themselves as white women almost identically when engaging with women of color. Through reflecting on “skin color privilege,”

she came to coin the term “white privilege,” which refers to “an invisible package of unearned assets” (1989, p. 1) benefitting white people despite their denials or unconsciousness of these assets, which in turn confers dominance over people of color despite white people’s protestations to the contrary. Because white people rarely see themselves as agents of racist aggression or dominance—instead deferring to aberrant acts of violence, exclusion, or denial by avowed white extremists—these assets comprising “white privilege” are seldom noticed or acknowledged and, thus, rarely mitigated or transformed. McIntosh concluded her essay by noting that despite the consciousness-raising she calls for,

It is an open question whether we will choose to use our unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base. (p. 4)

The introduction of this new construct to white-identifying and well-intended people provoked a great deal of discussion and reflection, particularly in schools, but reified some problematic concepts as well. As Zeus Leonardo noted:

The theme of privilege obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation [of racial domination] is described almost as happening without the knowledge of whites. It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color. The study of white privilege begins to take on an image of domination without agents. It obfuscates the historical process of domination in exchange for a state of dominance *in media res*. . . . Instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the

advantages that whites receive. *It mistakes the symptoms for causes.* (2009, pp. 76-7, italics mine)

Leonardo noted further that any examination of white privilege in particular, or white racial hegemony in general, “must be complemented by an equally rigorous examination of white supremacy, or the analysis of white racial domination” because “although the two processes are related, the conditions of white supremacy make white privilege possible” (2009, p. 75). White racial hegemony “has to be secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions, and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color” (2009, p. 75). A notion associated with the discourse of white privilege—that white people don’t know much about race, and don’t consciously exert dominance—is problematic to the extent “that it promotes the ‘innocence’ of whites when it comes to the structures of race and racism” (2009, p. 107). Thus, “a critical pedagogy of white racial supremacy revolves less around the issue of unearned advantages, or the *state* of being dominant, and more around direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it” (2009, p. 75). To the point, Leonardo concludes, “Whites enjoy privileges largely because they have created a system of domination under which they can thrive as a group” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 148). This system of domination is enforced by the maintenance of white hegemonic norms that, for Black folks, mark progressive education as a white space and that, in the white imagination, encircle progressive education as *their* space.

The Contours of Color-Blind Discourse

This system of domination is enforced in part by norms of color-blind discourse about race, racism, and racialization in contemporary, predominantly white education spaces.

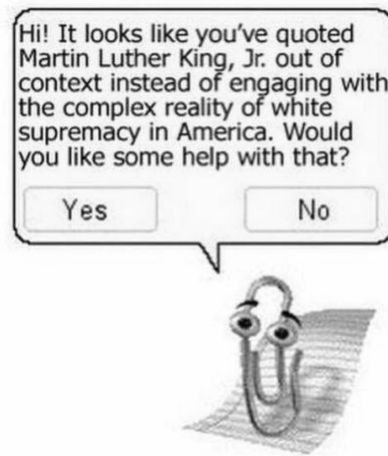
Consistent with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2013) description of a "new racism" in the post-Civil Rights Era that recognizes the continued reproduction of racial inequalities despite changes in professed attitudes among white people about prejudice and segregation, it is composed of a number of elements that distinguish it from the racism of other eras (e.g., during Slavery or Jim Crow). As Bonilla-Silva asserted, these elements include:

- the increasingly *covert* nature of racial discourse and racial practices,
- the avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience "reverse racism,"
- the elaboration of a racial agenda over political matters that eschews direct racial references,
- the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality, and
- the rearticulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations. (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 26)

Ironically, the nomenclature of "color-blindness" derives from misappropriations of terminology from the Civil Rights Movement originally deployed by well-meaning activists to express advocacy against racial prejudice. A popular meme on social media years ago—most frequently deployed on educational Twitter during Black History Month—featured Microsoft's automated "Clippy" assistant commenting on the decontextualization of famous lines from the speeches of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Fig. 2):

Figure 2

Microsoft's "Clippy"



Note. [A parody of Microsoft's digital assistant, "Clippy," offering help to those who use Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words out of context]. Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/AreNazisPeople/status/1217844513445564418/photo/1>

Most notable among such widely-recognized appropriations is a single line from Dr. King's 1963 March on Washington Speech: "I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (King, 1963, para. 15). This sentiment has since been reinscribed somehow to signal that Dr. King saw color-blindness not only as the goal, but as the instrument, of the forward march to racial justice. Former President Reagan incanted famously in a 1986 speech that "We want a color-blind society. A society, that in the words of Dr. King, judges people not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character" (Associated Press, 1986, p. 20). Notably this speech was meant to rationalize the Reagan administration's efforts to eviscerate affirmative action programs: to "see" the racialized identities of historically marginalized communities, and to take proactive measures to mitigate inequities in hiring or admissions on the basis of race, was itself framed as a betrayal of core tenets of the Civil Rights Movement. This fundamental belief

writ large among wide swaths of predominantly white Americans—that one’s “seeing” race is somehow evidence of racist inclinations; that blindness to racial identity and its implications is characteristic of those who wish to overcome racism—is the most conspicuous and arguably most damaging tenet of color-blind ideology. We see this evidenced most perversely in contemporary political rhetoric decrying Critical Race Theory and contemporary legislation in many states that criminalizes discussion of race and racism in classrooms.

Zeus Leonardo (2009) outlined many additional contours of color-blind discourse in contemporary society that protect a white supremacist *status quo*, disavow both the history and the material reality of structural racism and its impacts, and support white people’s aversion to engaging with racism and white supremacy: “Race may be ideological, but it produces material consequences” (2009, p. 134). First, the discourse is founded on the belief that race and racism are somehow declining in significance in contemporary society as compared to the past: we may have struggled with these matters in our early history, but surely the Civil War, Emancipation, and the Civil Rights Movement addressed those fundamental concerns in our nation’s formation. Second, color-blind discourse supposes that racism is largely isolated, limited to anomalous circumstances, and very much an exception to the rule. Third, racism is framed as “irrational and pathological” (Leonardo, 2009 p. 134), evidence of the deviance of individual perpetrators from standards of normal behavior. This focus on individual psychology infuses additional contours of color-blind racism as well. The fourth contour of color-blind discourse is that it “individualizes success and failure” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134), ascribing outcomes to individuals’ efforts, achievements, and merits, and obscuring systemically inequitable factors. This leads to the fifth contour of color-blind racism: people of color are blamed—individually and as groups—for their

perceived limitations in opportunity, access, advancement, and other racially inequitable outcomes.

Leonardo (2009) also noted that contemporary color-blind discourse is characterized by a sixth contour: an examination of race and racism is “mainly a study of attitude and attitudinal changes, rather than actual behavior” (2009, p. 134), ascribing more importance to individuals’ perceptions and intentions than to their actions or their impacts. Seventh, the discourse “downplays institutional relations” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134), occluding the impact of institutional policies on racialized individuals and recasting them as interpersonal conflicts or differences of position. Eighth, color-blind discourse “plays up racial progress” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134), overemphasizing historical progress (such as emancipation from slavery or the conferral of voting rights) in order to minimize the salience of contemporary inequities (such as educational outcomes or police brutality). A ninth feature of color-blind discourse is that it “emphasizes class stratification as the explanation for racism” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134), rather more comfortably framing economic dynamics as the lever of inequity and the context for inter-group inequity and rivalry. Finally, color-blind discourse “downplays the legacy of slavery and genocide” as long-ago and far-away (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134), denying the possibility that contemporary social inequities could be informed by the legacy of the historical past, and divorcing contemporary white people from complicity in racism since they weren’t personally responsible for enslavement or extermination and thus can’t be the beneficiaries of these historically aberrant practices.

These ten contours of color-blind discourse comprise an ideology that “would have us forget history (both in the sense of a past and its continuity with the present), psychologize

racism without the benefit of a sociological understanding, and displace racial stratification with competing explanations, such as class analysis” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 134). The ideology situates racism as a relic of the distant past, and is used as a shield by white people to explain their self-identified ignorance about race and racism and their abject resistance to engaging with it.

However, Leonardo cautioned:

That whites enter race discourse with a different lens than people of color . . . should not be confused with the idea that whites *lack* racial knowledge. Moreover, that they consistently evade a racial analysis of education should not be represented as their non-participation in a racialized order. In fact, it showcases precisely how they do perpetuate the racial order by turning the other cheek to it or pretending it does not exist. (2009, p. 108)

The Five Frames of Color-Blind Racism

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2013) outlined four frames of color-blind racism that govern white supremacist ideology and its enactment in discourse and policy. He noted that once commonplace overt claims by whites about the inferiority of Blacks, legally sanctioned segregation, and other attitudes and practices of the Jim Crow era no longer conspicuously dominate public discourse and public policy, yet “a new powerful ideology has emerged to defend the contemporary racial order: the ideology of color-blind racism” (2013, p. 73). This ideology allows “whites [to] rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and Blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 2). The central and intentional invisibility of race in color-blind discourse recommends examining its four central frames, or “set paths for interpreting

information” (2013, p. 74) and “how whites use them in ways that justify racial inequality” (2013, p. 73). These four frames are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (2001, 2013). The first frame of color-blind racism is *abstract liberalism*, which “involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 76). For example, the principle of “equal opportunity” has been repeatedly invoked in a bad-faith relationship to affirmative action practices because they ostensibly lead to the preferential treatment of minoritized groups: this outcome is deemed, in and of itself, to subvert egalitarian pretenses. Similarly, color-blind ideology identifies each person as an “individual” with “choices,” which on the face of it is construed as conferring one’s living in a segregated neighborhood or attending a segregated school as the enactment of an individual’s fundamental right to choose. Both examples overlook the many structural precedents and practices that caused racially minoritized people to be radically underrepresented in a broad swath of professions, and the systemic factors that cause segregation in housing and schooling: as such, they are bad faith deployments of liberal principles used to justify the perpetration of white advantage. Similarly, color-blind racism features incessant appeals to meritocracy in the context of its abstract liberalism. If cream rises to the top, it should not trouble us that this cream tends to be white: if Blacks’ educational outcomes suffer by comparison as a general rule, then surely this must be explained by the inadequacy of motivation or successful effort. A strict *laissez faire* attitude about such practices as employment and college admissions should be maintained because “the ‘invisible hand of the market’ eventually balances states of disequilibrium” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013,

p. 82), and any more forceful action to remedy inequities would be coercive and thus at odds with liberal tenets about the role of government.

The second frame of color-blind racism, *naturalization*, “allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 76). White people can claim that segregation is natural “because people from all backgrounds ‘gravitate towards likeness’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 76); one’s preference for white friends or romantic partners “is just ‘the way things are’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 76). Although these dispositions seem at odds with color-blindness on the face of it, “Preferences for primary associations with members of one’s race are rationalized as nonracial because *they* (racial minorities) do it too” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 76.). As one respondent in Bonilla-Silva’s study rationalized segregation:

Eh, you know, it’s more of the human nature’s fault. It’s not the government’s fault, right? The government doesn’t tell people where to live. So as people decide where to live or where to move into or where they wanna feel comfortable, [they] move to where they feel comfortable. We all kinda hang out with people that are like us. (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 87)

The third frame of color-blind racism in Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) framework is *cultural racism*, which “relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘Blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (2013, p. 76). While this departs from explicit claims about racialized groups’ biological inferiority to whites, “it presents their presumed cultural practices as fixed features” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 87) and uses these to attribute responsibility or culpability for racial stratification.

Thus myriad factors are alleged to contribute to disproportionate educational outcomes for Black students: respondents to Bonilla-Silva's study cited beliefs about the laziness of Blacks as compared to whites, differences in family structure owing to different attitudes about the importance of family, historical resentment about slavery leading to an alleged sense of entitlement without effort, and a lack of adequate investment in educational progress as defining characteristics of Black "culture."

The fourth frame of color-blind ideology is *minimization of racism*, which "suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances ('It's better now than in the past' or 'There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there')" (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 77). The minimization of racism enables whites to regard everything from police violence against Black citizens, to the government's failure adequately to support predominantly Black residents of New Orleans post-Katrina, as explained by a variety of other random factors: to call these actions "racist" is to be "hypersensitive" or to "play the race card." Thus by definition there cannot be discrimination in hiring practices; there must be disparities in individuals' qualifications or educational attainment that explain perceived restrictions on opportunity or advancement. To suggest otherwise is to rely on practices that may have taken place in a bygone era; in contemporary society, racism is no longer a prevalent factor. As one respondent put it: "People who are intelligent present themselves in a manner that is appropriate for the situation and will not be discriminated against" (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 95).

Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) confirmed the immense power in Bonilla-Silva's (2013) four frames of color-blind discourse: "The four frames enable white people to continue theoretically, morally, and/or otherwise objecting to racism and racial injustice, while rejecting

any real actions, policies, behaviors, and understandings that could work toward dismantling systemic racial inequality” (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 915). And in their study of white students in HBCUs they found, perhaps ironically, that students in these more racially conscious environments “exerted *greater* effort to maintain colorblind frames” (p. 917, italics mine). Because race, racism, and racialization were more explicitly and consistently addressed than in traditionally white institutions (TWIs), they experienced proportionately more challenges to their racial world view and responded with “increased dissonance and defensiveness” as well as “more sophisticated maneuvering and greater discomfort” (p. 917). In turn, Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) coined a fifth frame of color-blind racism—the disconnected power-analysis frame—to supplement Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) four frames:

The crux of the disconnected power-analysis frame resides in whites’ ability to align with racially progressive theoretical understandings of structural racism, whiteness, and counternarratives that challenge racial hierarchy, while disconnecting from a critical analysis of their own positionality, personal narratives, experiences, and/or actions.

(Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 918)

For the purposes of this study, the researchers’ findings were salient in that progressive schools and organizations might actually feature more regular challenges to racism and racial injustice, but thus require more elaborate and intentional efforts by white people within them to deny their personal complicity with or benefit from it and, thus, their responsibility to fight against or to dismantle it.

Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) found that their white participants, as distinct from the participants in Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) study, “had a theoretical understanding of and a language

to discuss racism that went beyond a liberalism orientation” (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 928). Discursive strategies employed by white participants featured, first, a willingness to acknowledge structural racism and critique colorblind thinking by *other* people in order to “build race cachet” (p. 928) they associated with a positive self-image, but not actually to take actions to dismantle racism themselves so much as to identify other white people who should. Second, white participants employed a strategy reliant on the “white relativism effect” (p. 929), primarily by telling stories of other white people’s racism as a mechanism to distinguish themselves as non-racist by implicit comparison. Finally, Jayakumar and Adamian identified a third strategy in which participants distinguished themselves from other white people, alleged a sense of disconnection from them, and thus denied their culpability for analogous actions or beliefs as theirs. This “‘different white’ strategy” (p. 930) enabled participants to deny personal complicity with racism or racial injustice, as well as a compelling reason to act: their “different white” status enabled them “to disassociate with whiteness all together” (p. 930).

Together, these strategies comprising the disconnected power-analysis frame “allowed users to believe they were racially progressive and committed to eradicating structural inequities while maintaining, if not bolstering, their white privilege” (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 931). Crucially, however, Jayakumar and Adamian note:

In the final analysis, it is clear that whites who utilized the disconnected power-analysis frame experienced the same white fragility as their counterparts who had not interacted with people of color and/or learned about racism and white privilege. Indeed, the performance of colorblindness in general, and of white fragility in particular, was more

insidious and covert than the relatively overt defensiveness demonstrated by traditionally color-blind whites from previous studies. (p. 931)

By expostulating on the structures and sinews of systemic racism and denouncing color-blind racism in order to build cachet with others, by declaiming other white people's racism in order to distinguish themselves by comparison, and by identifying features from their personal stories that make them a different kind of white person, Jayakumar and Adamian found that "white people can maintain personal comfort and positive sense of self, avoid racialized vulnerability and white fragility, and ultimately support the preservation of white supremacy" (p. 932).

The Weaponization of White Emotions: White Fragility

Complementing and enriching these five frames of color-blind racism, Robin DiAngelo (2011, 2018, 2021) suggested that contemporary white racism can be said to have evolved to some degree from the post-civil rights color-blind racial ideology explored by scholars like Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2013) and Leonardo (2007, 2009), to one that is all the more resistant to acknowledging racism and staunchly defensive of the racial status quo. This may be the result of decades of color-blind racism providing white people the opportunity to proclaim their resistance to racism, while paradoxically denying the structural existence of it or their personal complicity with it, thus enabling white people to abdicate responsibility to fight against it. Interactions about race and racism are now dominated by white fragility, "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). According to DiAngelo, "These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation" (p. 54). The gap between the white person's professed color-blind beliefs,

and the specter of their complicity in a system of racial oppression nonetheless, results in unbearable discomfort that triggers these behaviors of white fragility. The overt denials and derailments that ensue further insulate white people against critique of their behavior as racist, malign the critic as the “real” racist for singling out the white person, ensure that purposeful personal reflection and critical thought are stymied, and perpetuate the racial status quo.

Notably for the purposes of this study, DiAngelo (2018) asserted that these dynamics are most acute among white progressives, and that “white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color” (p. 5). She explained, further, that:

White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so. (2018, p. 5)

These behaviors include distancing oneself from categorical claims about white behaviors through overwrought appeals to individuality and fairness; attending innumerable anti-racism workshops with an interest in demonstrating solidarity but resisting personal reflection and action; insisting on addressing inequities in “learning styles” or “neurodiversity” without substantially interrogating or mitigating racialized inequities or oppression; appealing to personal trauma in order to liken their experience to the racial trauma experienced by people of color and to disqualify themselves as potential victimizers; and professing shame as a white person about

racial injustice but never guilt as a white person about one's personal complicity (DiAngelo, 2021). On this last note, DiAngelo asserted, "As white progressives we may be more able to admit to guilt and shame, but we still cannot or will not admit to superiority and contempt" (2021, p. 145). The acknowledgement of white racial shame itself serves as a sufficient anti-racist credential in the white progressive imagination: "The white subject that is shamed by whiteness is also a white subject that is proud about its shame" (2021, p. 124).

Conclusion

Color-blind discourse infuses everyday social relations and permeates our institutions in myriad problematic ways, but it is perhaps most powerful when enshrined in public policy. When *NCLB* (2001) received enthusiastic support from both sides of the congressional aisle in 2001, couched in the rhetoric of national defense and nation-building introduced with *A Nation at Risk* (1983) two decades beforehand, it was lauded as the most landmark educational reform since the original *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; 1965)* forty years beforehand. As distinct from such prior policies, which targeted the provision of remedial resources to underperforming schools in order to uplift their students' performance, *NCLB* (2001) instead threatened the defunding and closure of schools (and consequently the scrutiny and dismissal of teachers) that failed to satisfy ostensibly universal standards. Leonardo (2007) asserted that "NCLB is the educational cognate of the Patriot Act following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. . . . if there are any failing schools in the USA, NCLB will 'smoke 'em out'" (Leonardo, 2007, p. 268). *NCLB* (2001) ostensibly targeted the improvement of racially minoritized students' performance in school (as well as students with disabilities, poor children, and English language learners) through accountability structures that defined any

failure to meet universal standards of academic proficiency as an expression of individual or cultural failure:

Americans appreciate the notion of accountability, at least in theory. Students should be responsible for their own learning. Teachers should be responsible for teaching.

Principals and school districts should provide teachers and students the resources needed for success. If any of these people do not carry out their responsibilities, there should be repercussions. When students underperform, they should be failed and their teachers and school administrators should be sanctioned or fired. (Welner & Weitzman, 2005, p. 246, cited in Leonardo, 2007, p. 269)

In its most sinister erasure of race and racialized inequalities, however, *NCLB* (2001) “does not make visible the structural obstacles that children of color and their families face, such as health disparities, labor market discrimination, and the like” (Leonardo, 2007, p. 269), and instead “hides these dynamics even more efficiently, tucked away in the language of tough love and harsh sanctions” (Leonardo, 2007, p. 269). All of this, in turn, is cloaked in color-blind (or perhaps color-aversive) rhetoric that appeals to the mythical conceits of a level playing field, equal opportunity, fair enforcement of the law, and targeted punishments for failing to serve the educational needs of children: *NCLB* (2001) and similar policies “refuse to acknowledge the causal link between academic achievement and the racial organization of society” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 132). The message to racially minoritized students and educators was clear from the start:

When the white referent of *NCLB* is not discussed, these communities receive the impression that they are failing non-racialized academic standards. The upshot is that the

fault is entirely theirs, a cornerstone of color-blind discourse that conveniently forgets about structural reasons for school failure. On the other hand, when largely white middle-class schools and districts meet or exceed their targets, they receive a similar but beneficial message: that the merit is entirely theirs. As a result, whiteness is reified through NCLB behind the facade of a non-racialized process of nation creation.

(Leonardo, 2009, p. 130)

As I discussed at some length in Chapter 1, this reification of whiteness by *NCLB* (2001) and derivative policies has resulted in catastrophic impacts for all of our nation's racialized students, but for Black students in particular: they are attending increasingly resegregated schools (Orfield et al., 2016), are subject to grossly disproportionate rates of discipline (USDOE OCR, 2021a, 2021b), have severely limited access to and achievement in Advanced Placement courses and gifted and talented programs (The Education Trust, 2020; Center for American Progress, 2021), do not see themselves represented adequately among teachers or school leaders (NCES, 2020), and much more. The course of history has shown, in these and many other ways, that racial classifications of the past weren't eroded or discarded but, rather, reinscribed and emboldened by neoliberal education policy—veiled all the while by abstract rhetorical appeals to racial justice and equity by its proponents.

The systemic impacts of *NCLB* (2001) and its enforcement policies have scarred the American education landscape in myriad ways: by instrumentalizing teaching and curriculum to increase performance on high-stakes exams, by disempowering and demoralizing both teachers and students, by defunding and closing an unprecedented number of public schools, by catalyzing the private school and charter school choice movement, by instituting draconian

disciplinary policies, and much more. Indeed, the progressive education movement has amply and repeatedly demonstrated its repudiation of and contempt for many of these policies through its active resistance to high-stakes testing, teaching-as-transmission, the privatization of public schooling, and adherence to universal content standards. Furthermore, the progressive education movement seems at least tacitly better suited to remedy the racialized injustice and inequity of prevailing neoliberal policy and reform, because of its long-standing historical preoccupations with the fulfillment of every child's human potential, and the enactment and cultivation of authentic democracy for us all.

It would seem reasonable to assume that diversity, equity, belonging, and justice “would be more at home in organizations that have missions that are tied up with commitments to social progress” (Ahmed, 2016, para. 9). Yet often progressive schools are the sites of complex and corrosive dynamics that reify white norms, marginalize Black constituents, and mute explicit engagement with race, racialization, and racism in deference to the very assumption—often trumpeted within progressive institutions—that a declared commitment to generalized social progress by the institution is somehow incompatible with the possible existence of racism within it. Thus, as Ahmed noted, “It is the very expectation that diversity and equality are more at home in organizations that are assumed to be more progressive that enables racism to progress” (Ahmed, 2016, para. 8). While it is a commonplace assumption in progressive education discourse that the transmissive teaching, high-stakes testing, classification systems, punitive funding schemes, and other policies and practices of neoliberal education reform are imbued with white supremacist assumptions and produce racially oppressive outcomes, progressive education advocates deny the very prospect of complicity *because* the model proffers itself as the

alternative. As Junot Diaz noted, “White supremacy’s greatest trick is that it has convinced people it exists always in other people, never in us” (2012, para. 5).

In the shadow of the harrowing impacts of neoliberal education reform, progressive education seems to shine a bright light and to mark a path forward. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, it is clear that a variety of problematic racial dynamics have been at play in progressive education theory and progressive schools since their founding. These must be interrogated, deconstructed, and reformulated in an effort to construct a new vision of progressive education—not as a white space, but in the spirit of cultural democracy. In the next chapter, I explain the research design and methods that were employed to engage with Black progressive educators and activists, in an effort to dream this reformulation into being.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Chapter 2 traced conceptual inheritances and philosophical contradictions in the historical development of progressive educational theory that reify white norms and perpetuate racial inequity, and outlined key dynamics of color-blind racism and discourse more broadly in the United States in the post-Civil Rights era. Chapter 3 identifies the strategy and tactics I employed to engage with Black progressive activists and educators to learn from their lived experience of these dynamics in progressive schools and/or organizations—in order to identify those principles and practices that continue to perpetuate structures of racism within progressive schools and organizations, and to imagine alternative approaches that could foster a culturally democratic reformulation of progressive education. The methods employed for this qualitative study featured semi-structured interviews of Black progressive educators and activists designed to facilitate (a) the collection of participants' narratives about encounters with whiteness in progressive education spaces, and (b) participants' contributions to a framework of principles and practices that could disrupt the hegemony of white norms in progressive education spaces.

Research Questions

The ultimate goal of this study was not only to understand the contours and impacts of white hegemonic norms in progressive education spaces, but also and more importantly to produce a framework of principles, policies, and/or practices that could disrupt them. Without transforming the historical and contemporary dominance of white norms in progressive education, it cannot conceivably mitigate the accrued, racialized violence of neoliberal education

policy in contemporary American schooling. Two central research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do the lived experiences of Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces reveal specific ways that the politics of whiteness (e.g., colorblindness, white privilege, and/or white supremacy) have perpetuated structures of racism in progressive schools and organizations?
2. What reformulations of progressive educational philosophy, practice, and/or policy would be required to realize the socially transformative potential of progressive education, and to move progressive education from colorblindness to cultural democracy?

Sawyer and Norris (2013) acknowledged that research questions are “often initially uncertain, relationally contingent, and deeply embedded in experience,” thus “research questions emerge within and illuminate the inquiry” (p. 31). Deep listening, purposeful questioning, and reciprocal dialogue with participants led to refinements of and extensions to these research questions that were incorporated into interviews with participants.

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

This qualitative research study employed critical narrative inquiry as its methodology primarily because of its pedagogical resonance with progressive educational principles, and its ideological resonance with the critical theories at the heart of its conceptual framework.

Recognizing that my own racialized identity and positionality limit my independent ability adequately to understand or to analyze the lived identity or experience of Black progressive educators and activists, and repudiating the purported objectivity of more “traditional”

quantitative or mixed method studies, this study therefore lent itself to “storytelling and questioning inquiry . . . woven around themes . . . as experienced and interpreted through narratives” (Baker, 2005) provided by four Black progressive educators and activists that provided insights into their experience of whiteness in progressive education spaces. As Hammack (2010) affirmed, “Individuals use narratives to construct their identity and position themselves within their sociocultural contexts, while engaging with or rebelling against the grand narratives of a society or culture (p. 508, in Lee et al., 2021, pp. 66-67). The approach therefore suited this study’s aspiration “for the narrator and the researcher . . . to explore human lives critically, and to investigate how individuals are subject to certain social, political, and power dynamics” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 75). Moreover, the highly participatory, relational, reciprocal, and empathetic approach called forth possibilities beyond deepening an understanding of prevailing dynamics, and moving towards the potential transformation of those dynamics: as Clandinin (2016) suggested, “Listening deeply and inquiring into our changed lived and told stories calls forth the possibility of attending differently, of shifting practices, and of creating possible social-political or theoretical places where our work and our lives can make a difference” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 52). Finally, critical narrative inquiry is a “profoundly humanizing” approach, “particularly when facilitated by empathetic listening, critical distance, and caring analysis. Such narrative processes can lead to transformation and reconciliation” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 2).

Alignment With Deweyan Inquiry

The intentionality of the analysis and interpretation of these narratives constituted “a systematic study of experience made public” (Hooley, 2010, para. 6); the co-evaluation of major

themes and the co-construction of recommendations rooted this study in a nascent iteration of a transformed, culturally sustaining progressive pedagogy that the study sought to imagine and promote. Aligned with a Deweyan theory of inquiry, “the regulative ideal . . . is not to generate an exclusively faithful representation of a reality independent of the knower” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 14). Instead, the participants’ experiences were “understood as the continuous interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environments” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39). Thus, as Clandinin (2016) indicated, “The focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals’ experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 12).

Factors Pertaining to Racial Identity

The methodology employed in this study was inextricably intertwined with my own identity as a white progressive educator and activist, intentionally participating in “a research agenda that casts a critical and ‘othering’ gaze on ourselves and seeks to disrupt the privilege of other ourselves and other whites” (Fasching-Varner, 2011, pp. 165-166). The methodology was also intended to enact or express a conceptual framework that fuses critical pedagogy with critical race theory. As a contribution to a “critical theory of race,” this study was closely associated with the practice of “critical race pedagogy,” which Marvin Lynn (1999) defined as “an analysis of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination in education that relies mostly on the perceptions, experiences, and counterhegemonic practices of educators of color” (p. 625). Criticality was rooted in principles at the intersections of critical race theory and critical pedagogy as discussed in Chapter 1: “It can and should take into account all the facets of our

multilayered identities, while arguing that race should be utilized as the primary unit of analysis” (Lynn, 1999, p. 622). Furthermore, to the extent that my own racialized identity and positionality figured prominently in this study, this methodology honored the imperative to “forge a third space for neo-abolitionist whites as neither enemy nor ally but concrete subject of struggle,” recognizing that “this new positionality will be guided by non-white discourses” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 186).

Personal, Practical, and Theoretical Justifications

Jean Clandinin (2016) confirmed that there are misunderstandings at play about narrative inquiry methods. Just as in some domains of academic research:

Funding agencies, government, and other policy makers frequently see the work of narrative inquirers as a simplistic process of going out, asking a few people to tell stories, and then writing the stories down. This simplistic view causes narrative inquiries to be dismissed as merely anecdotal or personal. (p. 35)

Not only to dispatch with skepticism about the method by substantiating its efficacy, but also to guide the researcher during the review, analysis, and interpretation of participants’ narratives, Clandinin and frequent collaborator F. Michael Connelly suggested:

at least three ways in which we need to justify our studies: personally, in terms of why this narrative inquiry matters to us as individuals; practically, in terms of what difference this research might make to practice; and socially or theoretically, in terms of what difference this research might make to theoretical understandings or to making situations more just. (Clandinin, 2016, p. 35)

Personal Justification

The “transformation and reconciliation” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 2) promised by critical narrative inquiry applies not only to the world but to ourselves. I came to the study as a white progressive educator and activist and, as such, entered dialogue with participants with the foreknowledge that aspects of my own complicity with oppressive racial dynamics in progressive education spaces might be unveiled. This study has deepened my self-reflection in resonant ways, and I sense it will lead not only to my professional but also to my personal transformation as a more effective ally and advocate for racial justice and equity in the months and years ahead.

Practical Justification

A deeper understanding of the dynamics of white hegemony in progressive educational spaces, and a framework of principles, practices, and policies that can move progressive education towards cultural democracy, may lead to fundamental changes in practice by progressive educators and activists, at multiple levels from classroom teaching to the culture and practice of leadership.

Social/Theoretical Justifications

Chapter 1 framed the paradox that progressive educational principles have long been positioned as antidotes to the racialized violence of neoliberal education reform. Chapter 2 documented contributions and erasures in the historical development of progressive educational theory that have enshrined white hegemonic norms at its core. This study may help contribute to a reframing of progressive educational theory and practice that centers and thus champions racial justice and equity.

Conclusion

Critical narrative inquiry, then, provided the methodological framework by which the theoretical basis and foundational elements of this study were developed, particularly with respect to the interpretation of how Black progressive educators and activists in this study name their world and propose its transformation (Freire, 2000). Through critical narrative inquiry, this investigative process sought to define the racialized constructs of power that shape the lives of Black educators and activists in progressive educational spaces, to show the relationship of these constructs to current practices and policies, and to propose new principles, practices, and policies that will move progressive education towards cultural democracy in order to realize its socially transformative potential.

Method

To answer my research questions, I conducted interviews with Black progressive educators and activists who were known to me from a variety of contexts in progressive schools and organizations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to: (a) collect narratives of participants' lived experiences encountering whiteness in progressive education spaces and (b) invite contributions to a framework of principles and practices that could disrupt the hegemony of whiteness in progressive education. In the sections that follow, I provide details about the participants, setting, data collection strategy, and analysis plan, as well as discuss the validity/trustworthiness of data and the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to identify four Black progressive educators and activists who were known to me from prior professional collaboration and/or personal

relationships in the fields of progressive education and/or advocacy for racial justice in education. Each participant was selected with the foreknowledge of their self-identification as Black, as well as their having not only professed but also demonstrated significant and enduring commitments to progressive education and to racial justice. The general subject of this study (e.g., race in/and progressive education) was discussed in a general way with potential participants in the year prior to the study in order to cultivate interest and forecast prospects for participation. Subsequent to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, contact was made with each participant by email to provide them with an overview of the study's subject, purpose, method, and timeline, as well as a notice of informed consent aligned with IRB-approved protocols. I then established interview and group meeting dates with each participant to suit their convenience within the limitations of the study's timeline.

Participants as Researchers and Researcher as Participant

Distinct from other research methods in which the role of participants is merely to provide data for subsequent analysis by the researcher, narrative inquiry understands and positions the participants as “actors in . . . the production of culture, construction of meaning, cultivation of ways of being, and identification of paths of future social actions” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 15). This characterizes the distinguished contributions each of the participants has made to these fields, and was the ethos with which participants were engaged as co-contributors to the findings of this study: “Meaning and interpretation are intersubjective and . . . knowledge is not found but rather co-constructed in the process of critical inquiry” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 89).

This positioning of the participants as co-contributors to the study was inextricably intertwined with the unique role of the researcher in critical narrative inquiry: as Clandinin (2016) noted, “We are not objective inquirers. We are relational inquirers, attentive to the intersubjective, relational, embedded spaces in which lives are lived out. We do not stand metaphorically outside the inquiry but are part of the phenomenon under study” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 24). Thus, the identity, positionality, and experiences of the researcher are salient both as they inform the researcher’s capacity to hear and understand the contributions of participants in dialogue and inquiry, and as they affect the researcher’s capacity to analyze and interpret the contributions of participants in subsequent analysis.

Relational Integrity and Ethical Imperatives

The careful consideration and purposeful participation of the researcher was especially important in this study, considering the racialized identities of researchers and participants. As Fasching-Varner (2014) asserted, “White researchers, particularly those in education, have historically conducted research on ‘others,’ often on students and families of color. Those white researchers who examine race are often personally absent in the work” (Fasching-Varner, 2014, p. 162). For this reason, the facts of my racial identity and racialized positionality, as well as the potential implications and impacts of these facts for the integrity of the interview and analysis plan, were the subject of explicit and reciprocal dialogue with participants in the recruitment, interview, and analysis process. Jean Clandinin (2016) reminded us that “relational ethics live at the very heart, perhaps are the very heart, of our work as narrative inquirers” (p. 30) and encouraged “thinking of narrative inquiry as *relational inquiry*” (p. 22, italics mine). Her most

elegant framing of this study’s research approach defined narrative inquiry as “people in relation *studying* people in relation” (p. 23).

Setting

As all participants live in other states, interviews and group meetings with participants were conducted via the Zoom teleconferencing platform (www.zoom.us), owing both to restrictions on flight availability and elevated safety concerns during the COVID pandemic. The researcher was located in his home office, and participants were located wherever they chose: typically, in their home or school offices. Participants were afforded the opportunity to turn off their video or to take breaks if this enhanced their sense of comfort or capacity on Zoom. Further communication—such as incidental communication about logistics, and the provision to all participants of provisional data after initial interviews—was conducted via email.

Data Collection

Clandinin (2016) characterized narrative inquiry “as fluid inquiry, not a set of procedures or linear steps to be followed but a relational inquiry methodology that is open to where the stories of participants’ experience take each researcher” (p. 33). Although restrictions on this study’s timeline limited the number of opportunities to engage with participants, as well as the scope of flexibility to ever-emerging refinements, these principles of relational integrity and openness to adjustment were preserved in the research approach.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two parts to learn about the lived experiences of Black progressive educators and activists’ encounters with white hegemony in progressive education spaces, and to solicit contributions to a framework of principles, policies, and practices to guide the evolution of progressive education towards cultural democracy. After

sharing corrected transcripts of interviews with individual participants for their feedback, group meetings were held to discuss and seek refinements to emerging interpretations of participants' narratives, to extend their contributions to a provisional framework of principles, policies, and practices for future transformation, and to debrief whether and how our racialized positionalities may have affected the research process itself.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were divided into two parts, and conducted in one of two formats depending on the participant's preference: (a) a single 3 hour interview combining parts 1 and 2, or (b) two distinct 60-90 minute sessions separating parts 1 and 2. All interview sessions were held via the Zoom teleconferencing platform (www.zoom.us), utilizing Zoom's native transcription and video recording functions—augmented and safeguarded by a redundant transcription with the otter.ai software platform (www.otter.ai). Otter.ai transcripts were found to provide a more reliable foundation for the researcher's subsequent correction of machine language errors. The use of semi-structured interviews was chosen because of their ability to capture the wide variety of participants' experiences: as Merriam (2009) suggested, “Less structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). Moreover, the flexibility introduced by the semi-structured format invited opportunities for the participants and me to enact the aforementioned co-creative agency suited to this research approach. Transcripts from Zoom and from otter.ai were supplemented by extensive field notes captured during the interviews, as well as memos capturing evolving interpretive insights during the iterative process of analysis, interpretation, and refinement.

Part 1. The first part of each semi-structured interview was designed to invite and to collect the narratives of participants' lived experiences encountering white hegemony in progressive education spaces: in narrative inquiry, as Clandinin noted, "The most frequently used starting point is telling stories, and the methods most commonly used are conversations, or interviews as conversations" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 45). This first part of the interview with each participant evolved directly from and mapped directly to Research Question 1. My approach presumed that narratives would focus on and reveal nuances and contours of racialized dynamics in progressive education spaces, and also potentially to begin unveiling actions, dispositions, behaviors, and practices that are part of "collusive or resistant strategies that narrators develop in relation to the constraints of their narrative environments" (Chase, 2008, p. 75). Initial, albeit speculative prompts were included in an interview protocol that served as the foundation for dialogue that developed organically. The eventual revelations from participants' narratives can be characterized as "knowledge that leads less to generalizations and certainties and more toward wondering about and imagining alternative possibilities" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 52).

Part 2. In the second part of each interview (e.g., following a break if the participant preferred one long interview session, or on a subsequent day if the participant preferred two shorter interview sessions), semi-structured interview questions marked "the transition from experience itself to reflection and interpretation," which "permits us to illuminate our scope of action. This then extends out fruitfully into our capacity for both social critique and social transformation" (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 37). This second part of the semi-structured interview was designed to engage with Research Question 2 by eliciting contributions (borne of participants' experience and insight on racialized dynamics in progressive education spaces)

towards a framework of principles, practices, and policies that could mitigate white hegemony in progressive education spaces, move progressive education spaces towards cultural democracy, and thus redeem the long-promised, but dormant and abstract, socially transformative potential of progressive education as concerns race and racial justice. Initial interview prompts were augmented by clarifying questions and supplementary dialogue.

Group Meeting

Following individual interviews, as well as sharing corrected transcripts with participants, group meetings were convened via Zoom to review initial and emerging findings. Owing to and in an effort to accommodate the participants' busy schedules, two group meetings were scheduled on subsequent days; three participants were able to attend one of the sessions, but one was called in at the last minute to manage a school crisis. These group meetings focused primarily on discussion of the researcher's emerging interpretations of participants' critical narratives, as well as their contributions towards a framework of principles, practices, and policies to mitigate racism and white hegemony in progressive education—thus providing a member-checking opportunity for clarifications or emendations to prior comments (Creswell, 2009), as well as a final opportunity in group dialogue to reveal additional insights. The group meetings focused secondarily on debriefing the participants' experience of the research process, with an emphasis on dialogue about relational ethics as well as the impacts of our racial identities and positionalities on the participants' experience of, researcher's effectiveness in, and validity of data and findings in the research process itself.

Analysis Plan

Jean Clandinin noted that her frequent collaborator Michael Connelly and she “began to use the term *field texts* rather than the term data many years ago to signal that the texts we compose in narrative inquiry are experiential, intersubjective texts rather than objective texts” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 41). This not only affirms the reciprocal and iterative manner of collaborating with research participants in this study, but also emphasizes the importance of purposeful reflexivity and mindful positionality by the researcher in the process of analysis. Field texts for this study were comprised of transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews and group meetings, extensive field notes I took during those encounters, memos I documented during provisional and continued analysis, and electronic correspondence in which I engaged with participants at various stages of the study’s development. All such data has been secured on an encrypted peripheral hard drive and locked in my home office, and will be destroyed by permanent erasure after three years. Furthermore, participants were invited to select their own pseudonyms, and the names of related institutions, organizations, events, and/or coworkers were pseudonymized as well, in order to maintain confidentiality and minimize risk.

Phase 1

Following the two-part initial interviews, transcripts of participants’ narratives were reviewed by the researcher in an effort to unveil “the thought-language with which men and women refer to the reality, the levels at which they perceive that reality, and their view of the world, in which their generative themes are found” (Freire, 2000, pp. 77-8). An iterative effort was made to identify predominant themes both within and between the participants’ narratives pertaining to the dynamics of white hegemony in progressive education spaces. Analysis was

guided by the lenses of the conceptual framework articulated in Chapter 1 and the “inward, outward, backward, forward” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) structure of the Part 1 interview prompts, designed to elicit stories that revealed emotions, environments, past experiences, and future hopes pertaining to the “white space” (Anderson, 2015) of the progressive education movement.

David Morris (2002) noted that in the West we tend to distinguish between thinking *about* stories and thinking *with* stories: in the West we tend to think *about* stories, which “conceives of narrative as an object” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 29). While analyzing participants’ narratives from Part 1 of the interviews, I was “thinking *with* stories . . . a process in which we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as allow narrative to work on us” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 29). Eventually, more than thirty provisional codes for potential themes were aggregated and distilled into five predominant themes, identified in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5.

Phase 2

Following iterative review, reflection, and revision to initial interpretations of narrative themes from Part 1 of the semi-structured interviews, participants’ responses to Part 2 of the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and interpreted using inductive reasoning. Emergent codes were identified and applied to analysis of transcripts of all dialogue pertaining to Research Question 2. Patterns among participants’ responses were prioritized in the generation of an initial framework of proposed principles, practices, and policies: although it was my original intent to share a provisional framework with participants for their review and refinement, this was impossible owing to a very limited available timeline. In the group meetings, participants had the opportunity to correct misconceptions, extend contributions, or generate new insights in

collective dialogue with other participants and the researcher. Following the group meetings, I finished composition of the “final research text” of this study, guided by a “return to the personal, practical, and social justifications of the work” articulated in previous sections (Clandinin, 2016, p. 50).

Limitations

Known limitations of this study, beyond those delimitations intentionally introduced and framed by its methodology, begin with the generalizability of results from a sample of four Black progressive educators and activists. However, Creswell (2009) reminded us that the value of qualitative research does not lie in its generalizability per se, but rather in the specificity of themes unveiled in the context of a specific study. In addition, purposive sampling of these four participants may have introduced my own implicit assumptions and biases in the interpretation of their contributions, emerging from shared histories and prior relationships with the participants—but these shared experiences also helped me to understand the participants’ contributions more intimately and precisely.

Crucially, the predominant experience of progressive schools shared by participants was from their employment in private progressive schools. In part this traces to availability of participants in the context of an aggressive timeline for this study, and in part to the shared contexts in which we originally forged our relationships—but it remains true that the overwhelming majority of progressive schools continue to be independent, nonsectarian private schools. Though there are public schools that are considered beacons of progressive education—Mission Hill in Boston, Wickliffe Progressive in Upper Arlington, Ohio, and others—and although all four participants had considerable experience as teachers in traditional public

schools—only three had been employed by progressive schools *per se*, all of which were private schools. This skew towards the experience of progressive education in nonsectarian independent schools inevitably introduced dynamics salient to private school structures, systems, and cultures—including their profoundly limited ethnoracial diversity, inflated socioeconomic privilege, and limited public accountability as compared to public schools—and suggests that further research should be conducted with Black educators and activists employed in public progressive schools in order to extend and/or augment the findings of this study.

Additional limitations include the range of subjectivities introduced through the intentional co-evaluation of findings with the research subjects and my own reflections on my identity and positionality. In the first case, Sultana (2007) made a distinction between “writing ‘with’” and “writing ‘about’” that’s salient to the intentions of this study (p. 375): recognizing the research subjects as “actors in . . . the production of culture, construction of meaning, cultivation of ways of being and identification of paths of future social actions” (Goodson & Gill, 2014, p. 15) required reliance on their voices as integral sources and interpreters of the study’s findings. As for my intentionally persistent efforts to reflect on my own identity and positionality, both in my analysis and interpretation of narratives and in my co-construction of recommendations, I recognize that this inward-turning gaze might have distracted from clear-eyed views of more systemic racialized dynamics that require mitigation. In this context I align my position with Sultana (2007), who noted:

While some scholars have argued that acknowledgement of positionality, reflexivity, identity, and representation does not necessarily result in politically engaged research and writing, and may not result in destabilizing existing power relations or bring about

dramatic changes, the alternative of not heeding such issues is even more problematic. (p. 383)

Finally, this study—like any politically or ideologically committed research—invited the risk and challenge of confirmation bias. Given that the subject matter of this study emerged from personal experience and convictions, I entered into it with some strong ideas. Wherever possible, I made an effort critically to interrogate findings that aligned with those views I had already established. I did not want this to be a study that simply validated beliefs that I had already formed or conclusions I had already drawn.

Validity/Trustworthiness

As Chase (2008) noted, “[Because] narrative researchers work closely with individuals and their stories . . . narrative inquiry involves a particular set of issues concerning the research relationship, ethics, interpretation, and validity” (p. 60). In this study, the validity and trustworthiness of data correlated with the fidelity of my analysis and interpretation of participants’ contributions to the study. Because this research approach was collaborative, reciprocal, and cogenerative, participants themselves had a shaping role in this study’s findings. Moreover, my having engaged in this study with Black progressive educators and activists who were known to me beforehand, from professional collaborations and personal relationships, mitigated concerns about my positionality as a white researcher investigating white hegemony in collaboration with Black participants, insofar as relational trust and the participants’ comfort/safety are concerned. As previously discussed, participants had the opportunity individually to review and provide feedback on transcripts of all interviews and collectively to discuss and augment initial interpretations of findings in group meetings. Furthermore, explicit

dialogue about our racial identities and positionalities, as well as their potential impacts on the research process, was fostered in all encounters and then debriefed in the group meetings.

Delimitations

Focusing emphatically and exclusively on the experience of Black progressive educators and activists meant that this study could neither account for the experience of all progressive educators of color nor presume that the experience and insight of Black educators and activists would be identical. By focusing on the experience of Black educators and activists, my intention was to outline the contours of whiteness in the progressive education movement with a careful focus on patterns within the Black progressive educator or activist's experience, but not to marginalize the experience of people of color who do not identify as Black nor necessarily to suggest that whiteness can only be understood through the lens of the Black subject's experience. Subsequent studies could explore similar dynamics among progressive educators and activists from Latinx, Asian-American, Native American, and other racial and ethnic groups. Similarly, this study was limited to Black educators and activists in the United States, and did not account for variations in these dynamics that might differ in other national contexts. Finally, while this study recognized the intersectional nature of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), it was not intended adequately to account for factors such as class, gender, religion, ability, or other identifiers that inform, complicate, and extend the nature of oppression with reference to white supremacy. Instead, this study was intended to focus on emphatically racialized dynamics specific to the enactment of white supremacy in the progressive education movement.

Conclusion

A qualitative study was employed to address the research questions, utilizing semi-structured interviews (1) to collect Black educator/activists' stories about engaging with white hegemonic norms in progressive schools or organizations, and (2) to solicit ideas about how progressive educational theory and practice might be reformulated to mitigate the impact of those dynamics. Together the data from these interviews helped to inform this study's effort to make whiteness visible in progressive education spaces so it can be purposefully interrogated and dismantled, and to contribute towards a vision of progressive education that redeems the long-promised but dormant, socially transformative potential of progressive pedagogy. In the next chapter, I provide rich individual accounts of each participant's testimony about their lived experiences encountering whiteness in progressive education spaces, and identify five prominent themes that emerged from analysis across the interviews.

CHAPTER 4

CRITICAL NARRATIVES

The primary purpose of this study was not only to understand the contours and impacts of white hegemonic norms in explicitly progressive education spaces, but also to offer a provisional framework of principles, policies, and/or practices that could disrupt them. Without transforming the historical and contemporary dominance of white norms in progressive education, it cannot conceivably mitigate the accrued, racialized violence of neoliberal education policy in contemporary American schooling.

Two central research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do the lived experiences of Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces reveal specific ways that the politics of whiteness (e.g., colorblindness, white privilege, and/or white supremacy) have perpetuated structures of racism in progressive schools and organizations?
2. What reformulations of progressive educational philosophy, practice, and/or policy would be required to realize the socially transformative potential of progressive education, and to move progressive education from colorblindness to cultural democracy?

Sawyer and Norris (2013) acknowledged that research questions are “often initially uncertain, relationally contingent, and deeply embedded in experience,” thus “research questions emerge within and illuminate the inquiry” (p. 31). The same was true of the interview questions I posed to research participants. Deep listening, purposeful questioning, and reciprocal dialogue with participants led to extensions, augmentations, and refinements to these interview questions as my

conversations with research participants unfolded, as I checked for understanding of experiences I had not myself endured, and as participants' contributions stimulated further thought about the core preoccupations of this study.

This was particularly true in the first part of each interview. In Chapter 3, I described a research method centered on critical narrative inquiry—informed in part by the alignment of this method with my theoretical framework, my reliance on stories from the lived experience of Black educators and activists to provide insights into salient dynamics that well exceed my own, and the resonance of this approach with Deweyan inquiry and pedagogy. I explained that interviews with four research participants—each of whom I'd known from prior professional collaborations and/or personal relationships—were conducted in two parts: the first mapping exclusively to Research Question 1, and the second mapping primarily to Research Question 2. These interviews were followed by group meetings that provided the opportunity for me to clarify my initial understanding of participants' contributions to the interviews, provided participants the opportunity to offer feedback on any problematic or otherwise inadequate representations I may have been inclined to make, and provided all of us an opportunity to debrief the manifestation in, and/or impact of racialized power dynamics on, participants' experience of the research process itself.

Interview questions for the first part of each interview focused, again, on the personal stories of each Black educator/activist's encounters with whiteness in progressive education spaces, such as schools and activist organizations—providing immensely rich, precise, and revealing insights in response to the first research question: “How do the lived experiences of Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces reveal specific ways that the

politics of whiteness (e.g., color-blindness, white privilege, and/or white supremacy) have perpetuated structures of racism in progressive schools and organizations?” The first part of each interview employed four core, open-ended questions designed to elicit participants’ unfettered storytelling, and to invite a wide variety of follow-up questions and discussion:

- How and by whom do you recall being introduced to the field of progressive education?
- How did you come to work in a progressive school / for this progressive education organization?
- As a Black educator/activist, can you tell me about your encounters with whiteness, or the dominance of white norms, in progressive education spaces?
- As a Black educator/activist, can you tell me about your experiences interrupting or resisting white dominance in a progressive education space?

A similarly open-ended question was included at the start of the second part of each interview: “How do white supremacy and racism play out in progressive schools/organizations?” This question was included in part to reinvigorate memories of earlier discussions and in part to prepare for a series of much more closed-ended questions about principles, policies, and practices that should be reformulated in the interests of cultural democracy.

Given the sheer scope and complexity of participants’ responses to these open-ended questions and the rich, vital discussion that ensued, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to sharing substantial representations of the participants’ efforts to shed light on their experience of whiteness in progressive educational spaces. In the section that follows, I provide rich individual accounts of each participant’s testimony that illuminate salient dynamics. Subsequently, I

identify five prominent themes that emerged from analysis across the interviews. In the following chapter, I provide more substantial discussion of these five themes, cite correlations of participants' testimony with these themes, summarize feedback I received in the group meetings, and present high-level recommendations that were revealed both in dialogue with participants about their stories, and by more closed-ended questioning in the second part of each interview.

Black Educators' and Activists' Lived Experiences of Whiteness in Progressive Schools and Organizations

Two interviews were conducted with each of four Black educators and activists; we revisited these interviews and extended them with reflective debriefs in group meetings thereafter. These participants are pseudonymized as "Anne," "Louis," "Aziza," and "David." Table 1, on the following page, provides a summary snapshot of participants' demographic information. In Aziza's case, interviews were conducted via Zoom on separate dates; in all other cases, these interviews were conducted via Zoom on the same date, with an extended break between discussions. The following accounts emerged from open-ended questions about the participants' experience of whiteness in progressive educational and activist spaces.

Table 1*Participants and Key Identifiers*

Pseudonym	Ethnoracial Identifiers	Gender (M/F/NB)	Region	Role (School/Organization)
Anne	Black (Biracial)	F	North Central Midwest Midwest —	HS Division Head (Ind) HS English Teacher & Dept. Chair (Ind/MPDS) HS English Teacher (Pub/MHS) Board President (Progressive Advocacy Org.)
Louis	Black (Afro-Latinx)	M	Northeast — Northeast	E.D. of Racial Justice Advocacy Org. Author, Speaker, & Education Activist (Various) MS Math Teacher (Pub)
Aziza	Black (Jamaican American)	F	Midwest Midwest — Midwest	HS English Teacher (Ind/Weston Progressive) Curriculum Designer & Facilitator (Various) Writer & Afrofuturist Theater Artist (Various) HS English Teacher (Pub)
David	Black (African American)	M	South — South	Director of Diversity & Coach (Ind/Aiken HS) E.D. of Equity PD Organization (Pub & Pri) Track Coach (Pub)

Note. M = Male; F = Female; NB = Non-binary; Ind = Independent; Pub = Public

Anne's Story

At the time of the study, Anne was the high school division head of a prominent independent college preparatory school in a city in the north central states. She identified as a biracial Black woman and was married to a white man; they raised two college-age children. Anne had a 25+ year career in schools, serving previously to her current position for several years as Chair of the English department, and as English teacher for several years before that, at a prominent progressive independent school in a midwestern city. Prior to that, she taught English in a large public high school in that same midwestern city. Notably, Anne was also the former board chair of a national organization that promotes progressive education, provides professional development, and networks its member schools.

Anne remembered first learning about progressive education from Meg DePuy, who had written a book about progressive pedagogy that Anne used in a university education course she taught while teaching English at Middleton High School (MHS) a large public high school: “It was through Meg that I learned that not only was progressive education a thing, but that there was a progressive school in Middleton.” At the time, Anne was beginning to think about leaving the public high school, and Meg taught at Middleton Progressive Day School (MPDS), an old and well-regarded beacon of progressive education in the midwest. Anne remembered Meg speaking to how progressive education was much more student centered than the traditional approaches familiar from MHS; what struck Anne more about Meg was that “there was an interesting way of, you know, decentering herself as a white woman in the classroom,” which Anne said Meg demonstrated in interactions with Anne’s undergraduate students. Furthermore, Anne was struck by Meg’s book, particularly insofar as “she spends a lot of time in it investigating her own white identity before she begins.” Anne had the impression that Meg “really looked at the lived experiences of our students through the lens of race and identity,” and made some broad assumptions about these being features of progressive education more broadly. In addition, as someone who was considering leaving her position at the public high school, Anne was impressed by the support Meg had received from MPDS: “Knowing that she got a sabbatical to do this book; that then had a huge impact on the courses that she taught and the way that she showed up differently with her students.”

Anne periodically reflected on these associations as she continued to teach at MHS and to grapple with strong feelings about its neoliberal educational practices:

How I came to work at a progressive school is, essentially, I was done with standardized testing. I was done. I was done with No Child Left Behind [2001]; I was done with MAP [Measure of Academic Progress] testing; I was done with AP testing. And, moreover, I was done with ramming my head against the brick wall of leadership.

In particular, Anne was “done” after a particular experience with high-stakes testing with explicitly racialized implications:

I had students who came into high school reading at a third-grade level, and I was told on the MAP test, you know, you have to move them this many percentage points by November, and then another set of percentage points by February, and another set of percentage points by June. And I remember very distinctly, you know, my humanities enriched class—it was 12 kids, all Brown and Black kids, in a computer lab—you know, moving through this MAP test. And I’m, like, proctoring this test, and I’m looking over someone’s shoulder, and there is a passage from Willa Cather on the screen. And on another screen, there is a Shakespeare sonnet. And on another screen there was a poem by Emily Dickinson. And my students were being asked to read and interpret and analyze, and I was like, this is, you know, how are we doing this to these kids? So I was done with that.

At that juncture, Anne reached out to Meg to learn more about Middleton Progressive Day School, and what it might be like to work there: eventually—“through total serendipity,” on Anne’s account—she was hired by MPDS and left MHS. In moving to MPDS, Anne grew excited by the dawning opportunity to advance her practice; anticipated freedom from standardization, rote curriculum, and the other apparatus of the neoliberal regime; remembered

broad assumptions she drew from Meg's example about MPDS's recognition of the centrality of race and identity to the students' experience; and wondered, "What's it going to be like to be in this space where there's much more concentrated privilege?" owing to MPDS's geographical location in a high-income zip code and its tuition-based enrollment model.

What Anne hadn't prepared for were the dissonances between her assumptions and the lived reality she began to experience upon arriving at MPDS. Spending time with her acquaintance Meg—as a colleague, now—Anne saw evidence of Meg's understanding of and investment in students' racial identity and positionality in the classes that she taught. But Anne started to realize, "I don't know how much the work that she did for her book really tracked into the way that she interacted with colleagues." Anne noticed that:

There was a lot of whiteness in how she, you know, held fast to, I guess, white supremacist structures, you know what I mean? Like, meetings had to go a certain way; conversations had to go a certain way; there were . . . there was very little flexibility.

In addition, Anne had assumed that:

There would have been a greater spirit of collaboration amongst the faculty members, and Meg was as rigid as they came. So though the work that she did was really broadening about providing equitable experience and diverse content to students, like, anything outside of that little bubble—that didn't sort of align with her way of thinking—was totally intolerable. And so that, yeah, so that just felt counter to me.

An all the more notable dissonance came into play when Anne realized that she "was the first Black woman hired in the English department—probably the first Black teacher hired in the English department in the history of the school, which had only just recently celebrated its 100

year anniversary.” Although Anne indicated that she “knew that I was moving into a much whiter space” as compared to MHS, I asked if MPDS was transparent with her in the hiring process about her being the first, and possibly the only, Black woman hired in the department.

Anne responded:

No. No. And like, as I’m thinking right now, what I felt when I, you know, arrived is very much this sense that a lot of our Black and Brown kids also experienced, which is like, “Well, you’re here. So we’ve done our work.” You know, like, that is absolutely how I felt being in the space.

Anne quickly realized that “in the entire high school faculty, there may be three or four of us” but that:

Anyone else who was a person of color in the Upper School Division was part of the staff. And the student body was not very racially diverse either, but the feeling was 100% like, “We’re so glad you’re here. We know you’re going to be good at your job. So just kind of do your thing.” And there was no transparency about, you know, sort of my onliness.

Anne indicated that it was at least three or four years after her arrival at MPDS that an affinity group formed at MPDS—after colleagues of color prodded the administration—to offer a space of sanctuary for colleagues of color in an otherwise predominantly white teaching culture. In the interim, Anne attended her first NAIS People of Color conference (POCC): “I think that’s when I really started to understand the difference in terms of where I was, and what it meant.” In the essentially monocultural, predominantly white context of the MPDS faculty and administration,

POCC “helped me understand some of the other facets of my experience that I was feeling, but didn’t really have words for.”

When asked about her subsequent encounters with whiteness, or the dominance of white norms, in progressive education spaces, Anne shared anecdotes that extended misgivings she developed in early experiences. She referred to Mike, a former white colleague at MPDS:

He is just perpetually engaged in a struggle against his own whiteness, and the way in which he embodies white supremacy. Like, it’s actually ridiculous and kind of comical after all this time, but, um, you know, for what I think about him, his name is Mike.

Anne cited, first, an occasion in which Mike asked teachers in the department to read an essay by Eula Biss (2015), a white female author, ostensibly to help “unpack race.” One of Anne’s colleagues, a white woman whom Anne considered to be authentically invested in anti-racist work, asked, “What am I supposed to be getting from this piece?” She described this colleague’s response: “She was having, like, a big reaction to the piece because she’s like, this is bullshit! Like, this is *not* about her whiteness. This is her pointing the finger and sort of like everything’s being externalized.” Anne was surprised by the suddenness and extremity of Mike’s response:

Mike took such umbrage to [her] questioning of the essay that he got red in the face, and he nearly stormed out of the meeting. And it produced a rift in their relationship that exists to this day, because he’s so resistant. You know, I think I would describe his identity work as very performative.

In addition to being unable to substantiate the legitimacy of the Biss (2015) essay to collective dialogue about race, despite his having impelled the faculty to read and discuss it, Anne illustrated Mike’s performative anti-racism with a second anecdote. Mike asked a friend—a

white author who had written a book about Black literature—to lead a student assembly about the life of a prominent Black poet who lived and worked in Middleton. Just prior to the arranged assembly, Mike emailed departmental colleagues to ask for the names of students who could support the assembly by reading excerpts of the poet’s work. When a colleague sent in names, Mike’s response was, “Well, I hope some of these are Black and Brown students, right? Because it would probably be a good idea to have some of them on stage.” As Anne explained:

So, like, that just sort of like quota-based, performative—not really being able to interrogate how fucked up it is that “my friend is coming to do this [assembly] about, like, the greatest Black poet ever produced by the city of Middleton in the 20th century. And I can’t name a single Black or Brown kid who might be able to connect to this.” Like, you know, he crystallized for me the way whiteness works: it’s sort of like, “Oh my God, you know, we have this event that we’re doing, and yeah, but maybe we should get some Black and Brown kids.” It just points to the fact that he has no relationships with those kinds of students; he’s not thinking about the framing of the event as a whole. He’s not seeing the, like, the juicy irony. Like everybody, everybody he’s bringing to the stage—he’s not seeing, you know, the tokenism that he’s sort of asking for.

The notion of “tokenism” reminded Anne of another example. The history department had just concluded an unsuccessful search for a history teacher, and had postponed the hire until the following year. But then the white head of school, Dave Brown, insisted that they hire a Black candidate he’d met:

They hired a completely incapable Black Ph.D. Never had any experience. But they hired him because the head of school, Dave, found him at a job fair, at the last minute—after an

entire hiring procedure process had already taken place. They interviewed four candidates. They didn't like any of them. But then they found a unicorn at a job fair. And Dave Brown, who's a white man, as you know, said, "You gotta hire this guy. He's a Black Ph.D. in history." This man is an utter disaster. He's an utter disaster in the classroom. He's terrible. [Yet] he will get tenure. Right? Like he will get tenure this year. So that unilateral shit, without thinking about the fact that it can sometimes be more damaging to bring diversity into your predominantly white space.

Among these stories of performative anti-racism and the problematic centering of whiteness in DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) work, there was one that Anne identified as an "in my face encounter with whiteness." Some years ago, MPDS had a new diversity director, Diane Lewis, who identified as white. She decided that it would be a good idea to have an all-school assembly on the subject *of* whiteness. Anne and two Black faculty colleagues approached Diane to urge her to understand that "this is a very, very, very bad idea" for a number of reasons:

Because you're thinking about 3rd graders through 12th graders; we don't know where conversations about race and identity have shown up in the curriculum that leads us to this moment of having a 45 minute assembly, you know, for everyone in the building to hear people sort of audition their identity, right? We don't know what kind of follow-up is going to happen in classrooms; we don't know how the faculty members think or feel about the concept of whiteness. This is not like, "Let's take a look at my butterfly collection." This is "let me tell you about my whiteness, and what it means to me."

In addition, Anne told Diane that she disagreed with launching this assembly as a parent: "My own child was going to be in that audience," Anne told her, and Anne did not believe that

imposing this discourse on the children without appropriate preparation and scaffolding—not only at school, but also at home—was a responsible thing to do. Anne and her colleagues suggested ways that the school could move towards an event by first doing “some groundwork to sort of figure out how this kind of a conversation might land in a variety of spaces” and to put “some scaffolding around it.” Anne was floored by Diane’s response:

And so here’s the white supremacy, right? Like, she looked at us—these three, you know, veteran educators, Black women all. And she said, “Thank you for your input, but we’re going to do it because this community needs it.” And we were like, “Good luck, sister.” And the explosion that happened afterwards was ridiculous. Like there were children, just in all different states of emotional distress. And there are white kids popping off, and there are Black kids absorbing that shit. And there are Black and Brown kids who are trying to hold the space and hold their shit together. Like, it was terrible—just like we predicted.

Subsequently, a Black family demanded a meeting with the administration to ask how they could have let this assembly happen. Anne and her aforementioned Black female colleagues were invited to that meeting. The head of school and associate head listened in silence as the parents asked, again, how the administration could not have known about what was going to happen. Upon their silence, Anne volunteered, “They knew,” and described the earlier meeting with Diane Lewis as well as subsequent efforts to help the administration course-correct—which were also dismissed—with a conspicuous silence:

And when I tell you that Mara Wilton, Dave Brown, and Diane Lewis said not a word in that meeting, I am dead serious. They said nothing. It was horrifying. They took no

ownership. They took no responsibility. They said nothing. It was just like this big ass listening session, And I was like, “I’m—I’m saying something because they knew. They all knew.” Diane Lewis resigned.

According to Anne, this whiteness assembly and its aftermath was an objective correlative to the deep concerns of conscientized Black faculty about the performativity, inauthenticity, and spectacle of the school’s DEI efforts, and the centering of white norms and comfort in most discourse about race, for years to come at MPDS. The word Anne used to describe her feelings—both in this instance, and in others that were tokens of the same type—was “gaslit.”

Furthermore, Anne discussed a common pattern of the concerns and suggestions of Black colleagues being treated dismissively not just by silence, but by *silencing*, and the expression of resentment and outrage at critical feedback:

And so I feel like, you know, in these moments where whiteness shows up, it’s sort of like, the common thread is like, “How can you even ask me that question? How dare you ask me that question? What?! How *dare* you ask me why are we reading Eula Biss? She’s talking about race, you know: how *dare* you ask me about whether or not it’s a good idea to do this whiteness assembly?”

Additionally, Anne suggested that these were among the many moments that the school’s status as a progressive school was trumpeted as a badge to silence objection. Anne used a mocking voice to imitate the spirit of the stance adopted by white progressive school leaders:

It’s about race and equity. And we’re thinking about justice, because this is a school, you know, called Middleton Progressive Day, that is a progressive school. And so we can

handle it. Right? Like we can have these messy, hard conversations because we're a progressive school, and we're thinking about equity and justice.

Anne's response to such a facile, ill-considered stance was serious, and emphatic:

No, you're not—because sometimes thinking about equity and justice means that you keep your damn mouth shut until you could get into an affinity space with a small group of people who can really take a look at what the fuck it is we're trying to do. . . . It's just—if we're really thinking about the student experience and the humanity of the people that we're working with, you have to decenter yourself. You have to. You know? And—and the lack of empathy that accompanies, you know, these moments of in-your-face whiteness is what's so striking to me.

And yet, without Black colleagues offering critical feedback, Anne indicated that white school leaders would consistently address racial justice issues with a colorblind lens that perpetuates racial inequity—and that despite such perceived high stakes to offering critical feedback, Anne felt the burden of educating “up.” A case in point followed an incident at a school sports event, which she reviewed on available videotape. A Black MPDS student whom Anne identified as a “superfan” was passionately yelling and cheering as he does at all such events, seated amongst an overwhelming white group of MPDS students doing the same:

And a white parent from the opposing school comes down out of the stands, gets in this—like, horse collars this boy this young man, and says, “You can't talk to them like that. They're kids. You're being unsportsmanlike.” . . . This man single handedly pulls out the one Black kid, adultifies—like, makes an adult out of him.

When that Black student’s mother contacted the school with the expectation that this white parent be held accountable for assault—“I want the tape. I want the name. I want a police report.”—Anne recalled her conversation with the head of school, an older white man:

And so [he] says, “Well, I don’t think—I don’t know if it was a racialized event. He didn’t say anything about race.” And I was like, “You don’t have to say something about race, for an interaction to have racialized overtones, or undertones, or any kind of tones.” . . . Like, it’s that simple, like, having to explain. And again, you know, my boss is like, “I was at a cocktail party and I had to explain critical race theory to all these people.” I’m like, “Okay, so—so if you get critical race theory, my man, how are you not seeing race at work in this little incident that we’re talking about?”

Anne emphasized that these silencing and colorblind behaviors were maddening, in light of the fact that the school’s hiring of Anne and other Black colleagues over the years was frequently deployed by the school as a badge seemingly adequate, on its own, to certify the school’s commitments to racial equity and justice. She said more than once, obliquely and sarcastically imitating school leaders, “Oh, we’re so glad you’re here.” But she made it clear that this was a tacit, fragile stance that was reframed as soon as critical feedback was offered about the school’s racial justice commitments. She experienced a similar dynamic when onboarding as the first Black board member of a national organization promoting progressive education, and eventually becoming the board’s president: “‘We’re so glad you’re here. Now our work is complete.’ [But] as soon as I started getting ideas, and as soon as I started, you know, having success in the space, the gloves came off.” She remembered playfully teasing other white board

members about their progress on a joint initiative she was leading—“I playfully was, like, ‘Now, y’all didn’t do your homework, did you?’”—and getting more of the “How dare you?” treatment:

And I got *blasted* for that. Like, “How dare you?” . . . And then, when I was elected to lead the organization it was, “Oh, you led this bloodless coup. You couldn’t look at us. You”—It was just all this gross, dog whistle bullshit, you know, and I, you know, I remember calling it out. And what was her name—that Linda woman—she was like, “Well, you’re pulling the race card.” . . . You know? So yeah, it was very much like, “Oh, we’re so glad you’re here,” until they’re *not*.

At MPDS, Anne recalled a variety of ways, through the years, that she and other Black colleagues felt scrutinized and hypervisible explicitly because of their racial identity. Early on, for example, she recalled:

I was highly, like, hyper-aware of being sort of like the poster child—you know, as the first one. People were, like, listening a little bit more carefully, or at least pretending to listen to me a little bit more carefully.

Moving forward, she felt the pressure—as illustrated in her aforementioned interactions with the head of school, and typically in the face of white administrative inaction—to “push in” at moments of racial tension: “You know, having to explain the way that race walks into something, and having to have the vocabulary.” She felt similarly positioned by students when she acted on her felt responsibility to interrupt aggressive, identity-based behaviors and language such as racist and misogynist microaggressions: “Oh, she’s, you know, like, she’s the mean, Angry Black Lady teacher who’s going to come call us out on our bullshit, but nobody else is going to do it.” At the same time as they were silenced when posing critical questions—

paradoxically, perhaps—she and other colleagues felt *expected* by school leadership to be the employees who'd volunteer, simply because they were Black, to support the needs of all Black students and to assume the mantle of responsibility for advancing institutional DEI priorities—provided, of course, that they did so in ways that abided by white leadership's often reductive, misguided, reactionary, and performative DEI vision and priorities.

When asked about her experiences as a Black educator/activist interrupting or resisting white dominance in progressive education spaces, Anne was quick to clarify her relationship to the core implications of the question:

I think the first thing that came into my brain . . . is, you know, it's like what did Alice Walker write? Like, "resistance is the secret of joy" [Walker, 1973, p. 278] or something like that? And so I don't—I don't necessarily think about resistance as being full of tension, or like a fighting back, or a "fighting with" in all cases.

At times, she construed interruption or resistance as summoning the courage for "calling out the silence, and being the one to say the thing in the space." At other times, she described it as something more generative: "articulating into different conversations and spaces, you know, some possibilities for understanding things anew." She felt emphatically that the most contributive form of interruption or resistance to the dominance of white norms was through the exercise of her leadership and initiative. For example, she described having been selected to coordinate the school's accreditation self-study as an opportunity, ultimately, to disrupt the status quo:

I directed a process, right, that was going to be meaningful in the life of the school. And I think that's a mode of interruption or resistance, right? Because I am going to bring a different style of running a meeting, or co-authoring a document, or what have you.

Eventually, the protocols she developed for the self-study in the English department were adopted by all other departments:

You know, I think that's really powerful. And it wasn't because I was trying to step into a space and assert my power or dominance. I was asked, I said yes, and then I came in and I did the thing. . . . And I think one of the things I've learned about being a leader in a progressive space is that it's all about bringing the knowledge, power, skills, and service, right, to the outside—without the assumption that yours is going to be the one that wins the day.

That thought led to discussion of the metahistorical implications of such a stance:

And I think about, you know, the legacy of progressive education that includes someone like me—who maybe, you know, understands, like, you know, progressive education is about bringing the inside out and the outside in—and what does that look like, you know, in the hands of someone like me? And is that something that, you know, Francis Parker or Flora Cooke [prominent early 20th century progressive educators] or, you know, John Dewey himself—like, could they have ever imagined it? And I—my guess is the answer is no.

This was not the only time Anne invoked either the white, monoracial core of progressive education's acclaimed founders, or the erasure of contributions by Black educators, researchers, and theorists in the last century since then. She felt it very important for Black educators "to

know and understand the history of progressive education” and to “acknowledge the power of just being in the space.” Ultimately, she felt that progressive schools’ and organizations’ silence on the problematically racialized history of the movement was *itself* a primary way that the hegemony of white norms was demonstrated:

In a way, you know, labeling one’s school as progressive, without labeling the problematic history of progressive education, is an element of racism and white supremacy, right? Like any progressive school that neglects naming the history as problematic, first of all—but as you know, deeply connected to whatever present work, temporary moment, it exists in is an erasure. And I think white supremacy is really good at erasing truth. And perpetuating untruth.

Louis’s Story

At the time of the study, Louis was a man in his late thirties who identified as Afro-Latinx (e.g., who identified racially as Black and ethnically as Latinx). He lived with his wife, a public school administrator who identifies as Latinx, as well as their middle-school-aged son, in a major city on the Eastern seaboard. Louis was a public middle school Math teacher for around fifteen years, during which time he distinguished himself as a highly visible and influential progressive activist and writer in the movement against high-stakes testing and other mechanisms of neoliberal control, particularly with regard to its impacts in Black and Brown communities; then an author of a popular book rooted in the same activism; and then as the founder and executive director of a national organization advocating for racial equity and justice in education, as well as the foregrounding of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) educators’ voices in the formation of national education policy.

Louis positioned and identified himself as a progressive educator, but didn't credit any particular person, people, or organization for orienting him to the principles of progressive education early in his career:

My grad school studies had introduced me to folks like John Dewey, and then Paulo Freire eventually, and these folks just kind of whispered in and out every so often, and I was cool. So, I don't think I had one specific person.

Furthermore, he had never taught in a progressive school *per se*, notwithstanding his efforts to enact a progressive pedagogy in his own public middle school classrooms. In terms of broader teaching and learning dynamics, he acknowledged the rampant ambiguity of an agreed-upon definition of "progressive education," but associated "progressive pedagogy" with "inquiry-based" practices, with "autodidactic" students, with cultivating students to be "self-driven," with "active listening on the part of the adults involved," and with conferring agency and power, individually and collectively, to students. For several years, the primary space of Louis's investment in progressive education was in conjunction with his activism, organizing, writing, and speaking in resistance to neoliberal education reform:

So activism and progressive education, given how ill defined some of it is for so many people, it just—it just kind of melted together, especially in an era of over-emphasis on standardized testing. And the high stakes. I guess those two fields kind of felt like one for a lot of different people: it just became part of the air, given the activism work.

Front-of-mind for Louis were explicitly racialized dynamics he saw as always and already embedded in the notion of progressive education: "I think there was a general sense that some renditions of progressive pedagogy were for rich white kids, specifically Montessori." This

association with whiteness was inextricably intertwined with the dominance of progressive models in independent schools:

And really, even when I started teaching, there was an understanding that independent schools were likely to go into progressive education, because they had more flexibility. Whereas a lot of our public school counterparts would either have the overemphasis of testing, which meant more regimented education, or you would have to go in, again, a predominantly white public school and have a principal who can shield you from all that overemphasis. So, like, long story short: it just became, like, the whiter the school, the more likely it was to see progressive elements.

Louis cited two related factors as accounting for the limited enactment of progressive pedagogy in public schools serving predominantly Black and Brown communities:

One of which is that many people—actually, I’ll just say all adults, really—don’t want the education they see to be all that different from the one they experienced. So if the vast majority of folks didn’t see a set of pedagogy that one way, then they would necessarily gravitate toward the one that they were more familiar with as a form of legitimacy. And so a lot of what we recognize is that that pedagogy doesn’t get into the schools where parents feel like they have less options.

Given the essentially monoracially white origins and founding narratives of progressive education, Louis was describing in effect a self-perpetuating cycle: the limited enrollment of Black parents in progressive schools in previous generations would lead to this sense of unfamiliarity and illegitimacy when considering educational prospects for their own children. In

addition, Louis referred to systemically embedded, racialized assumptions about the fitness of Black and Brown children for progressive education:

And then, there is an unnamed—a perhaps implicit, though it becomes explicit, bias against Black and Brown people writ large about their capacity for progressive, inquiry-based learning—because so much of what is considered “progressive” is still centered on notions of whiteness. So, for example, how . . . students are supposed to talk to one another; how students are supposed to interact within their learning; whether the students can actually be left alone with materials; whether students can self-navigate and self-regulate. Those bits and pieces end up creating a lot of what we consider to be a good education.

Much later in our conversation, Louis returned to the subject of these racialized assumptions about Black and Brown students to describe how white supremacy “plays out” in progressive schools and organizations as well: “Some of the fundamental ways include student capacity for learning, and what type of learning that students can do. This notion that students can’t actually think for themselves.”

As a teacher in a public school serving predominantly Black and Brown students that did not identify institutionally as a “progressive” school in any way, Louis recognized nevertheless that there were “pockets of subversives” who identified as progressive educators, and considered himself among them. He discussed the caution with which he needed to strategize to integrate more progressive approaches:

And even when I tried to create crevices for some form of progressive education and students being self-driven in that way, that was often rebutted and rebuked by those very

administrators who I mentioned. I think I had a shot with the last one. But, you know: by that time, I was already applying for doctoral work, and of course I got in.

Butting up against the rarity of progressive education models in public schools serving Black and Brown populations, and against the resistance of administrators to his enactment of progressive strategies in his classroom, Louis purposefully found progressive schools to visit early in his career, and eventually progressive organizations in which to involve himself as an activist, presenter, and facilitator:

I would say over time, what ended up being true for me was that I needed to go to some of these progressive education spaces, because they gave me hope to come back to the spaces that I was in. . . . Like, I needed to go to those spaces; I needed to know that there were spaces that allowed for kids to be themselves, and what pieces could I pick up that I would eventually pull back into my own classroom. And that there were not just a handful of educators, but a plethora of educators having this conversation—like, that was another form of activism, right? Like, there’s the activism of the streets, but there’s also the advocacy of the classroom. So those of us who aspired to get activated through our curriculum, pedagogy, assessment—especially assessment. We needed progressive education as that space. . . . So, I needed it—like, *I* needed the space—because otherwise I wouldn’t have had it.

Thus, for Louis, the progressive schools he purposefully visited, and the progressive educational activism organizations with which he became increasingly involved, were the wells he went to for the libations of hope, inspiration, and solidarity to sustain himself, and to support his students, in spaces less friendly to progressive educational philosophy and methods.

Louis didn't recall the earliest steps of his ascent to his positionality as a prominent progressive educational activist, or his involvement with a variety of progressive educational advocacy organizations: "I don't necessarily remember exactly the moment that I decided to, you know, step outside the bounds of what a classroom teacher was supposed to be. I just knew that I had a voice and I wanted to leverage it." What he recalled unequivocally were the racial dynamics—particularly, the overwhelming whiteness—he witnessed and experienced in these spaces; particularly in progressive activist organizations: "So, um, what's fascinating is, I sought these spaces out, even though I knew full well that when I sought them out that these places were superduper white." Referring to the national organization advocating for racial equity in justice in education that he subsequently founded and leads, he continued:

And we thought that, like, the very, very original, very first version of it, was, you know, nobody else. It was just me and another progressive educator from another independent school. And we both looked at each other, like, every—*every* conference like this is white; like, every single one is predominantly white, and even though we sought to go into the spaces—because it satisfied the, I guess, the pedagogical, the structural, the more aspirational elements of the work that we did—it didn't satisfy the more relevant racial and social justice elements, especially in the context that *I*—because he serves in a very white context—that *I* was working in. The sort of education that my students would have loved and eaten up if they had gotten it.

These experiences in progressive spaces—including early experiences speaking to racial dynamics *within* these spaces themselves—informed the trajectory of Louis's subsequent ascent as a racial and social justice advocate in following years. Regarding the consequences of his

early efforts to speak to racial dynamics within the progressive activism movement, Louis offered:

And I want to thank those leaders for being responsive enough to, you know, make sure that those environments were more inclusive of all sorts of renditions of what progressive education could be. But that doesn't happen without, like, someone like me saying, like, I want to make sure this thing stays alive. This thing needs to stay relevant. And it can't, if you bring the same set of faces who don't respond to the current context. I mean, we couldn't do it: we were in the middle of another visual reckoning with, you know, any number of people who were getting, you know, brutally murdered in the streets. Not to mention students straight up saying, like, "Hey, you're not responding to things that are happening in our world, because you just want to keep going and being as white as you want to be; as techie as you want to be." So those are the elements that I had found myself fighting, as I got into those—into becoming who I am today.

When I asked Louis to speculate on the reasons why these progressive education activism spaces were—and, in many instances, remain—so overwhelmingly white, he first generalized about the financial resources and professional latitude required to attend these organizations' conferences and related events: "So who can do that sort of thing? Generally, white people can—specifically, white middle and upper class folks." Considering the durability and persistence of whiteness in those spaces—despite many disruptions, interventions, and organizational changes since then—Louis continued:

The second part, which I think you're also alluding to, is that, um, I think there is an understanding—no, actually, I *know*, unfortunately, that there are people who at once felt

that they wanted some form of racial and social justice, but wanted it on their own terms. The umbrella that they sought to create was one that would adhere to things they valued. And if you didn't have as much power within that space, then you may have had a say, but you had less of a say—and those who had more power either already had the power given to them, or they better aligned their message to the powers that be, right? Instead of thinking about what it would mean for them to open up that umbrella a bit more, or shift their umbrella somewhat.

As a distinct example of that dynamic, Louis cited one such organization's efforts to partner with Tea Party leadership in resistance to implementation of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010):

I was often taken aback by activists who felt that partnering up with people who created the Tea Party would actually be a good idea, in the way of taking down the Common Core. That was untenable to me, given the racial—the racial justice of my work, but also the different intersections that I aspired to do better on—especially issues of gender, sexual orientation, disability—I mean, you could go down the list, but generally, a white supremacist organization is not one that I felt we should join up with—even if we had common ground on one issue.

Louis extended these comments to situate this moment as a token of a type of rampant dynamic within the predominantly white power base of progressive activism against high-stakes testing and other elements of neoliberal educational reform, leading to discontent among those who wished authentically to fight for racial justice:

There were some prominent people across the board who felt out of place within activist spaces because the same set of people kept trying to, like, control that narrative. . . .

Specifically about how public education should go for folks who, by the way, had options to straight up ditch public education, and just leave the system altogether. We needed a robust system that would address everyone's needs more thoroughly. But that wasn't the point of activism: the point of activism was just to try to temper down the overemphasis on standardized testing which—right on—but it was evident that once that was done for predominantly white districts, then it was okay for every other district that was Black or Brown—and of course, I would also say Asian, too, even though that's another conversation—when those majority Black/Brown/Asian districts would continue to feel the effects of standardized testing in the ways that white districts did not, then that movement died down for a lot of people. So that's where, from the beginning, a lot of us were already, like, kind of questioning where the principles were and how—how dedicated people would be to said activism.

During the years of his ascent to prominence as an activist and advocate for racial justice, Louis recalled a variety of scenarios in which his Blackness made him subject to hypervisibility, scrutiny, and alienation in the white spaces of progressive education activism. For example, he recalled his recruitment into an elite education writers' space as the result of his writing on education issues, “where I would say the nation's most revered education researcher invited me into her circle” to attend “a book party of some sort, at a big institution.” Louis continued:

And so, you know, the book stuff is going on—yadda, yadda—you know, I'm happy to be there. Because A, I get a free book. B, I get to be in a really dope institution. But then,

C, like, I was asked to be in this space because of the work that I've done in terms of my advocacy, especially from writing. Right? That puts me somewhere, right?

But then things took a turn:

After the party ended, I tried to spark up conversation with fellow attendees, who, you know—these folks [who] believed themselves to be aligned to the conversations that were happening around the overemphasis of standardized testing. Even if they thought they were aligned there, I would try to strike up conversation—and that led next to nowhere. There were still elements of, “Why is he talking to me? Why? Who does he think he is?” Not from the person who invited me, but from other attendees. So I did feel some sort of way about that. And it definitely added more evidence of things that I had already thought about when it came to who was getting deified in our spaces. Who was getting elevated when it came to our work. So I found myself saying, okay, like, “I got to rethink a lot of this stuff.”

Louis recalled similar incidents in other conference spaces where he was increasingly invited to keynote. He referred to “people who didn't know that I was a speaker yet, and then eventually found out [and] it was, ‘Oh. *That's* him?!’” He went on to describe his experience of some of these encounters:

There were levels of aggression that I couldn't have imagined—like, people outside of education are not aware that there are a lot of really petty and, frankly, some of them are *awful* people within our space. And then you start asking yourself, why are they in front of our children? Some of these flaws really stand out when it comes to practitioners who espouse, you know, progressive values so to speak—but in their daily interactions with

their brethren of color, who they swear up and down they're in solidarity with, all of a sudden decide that white supremacy matters more. So that—*that* becomes a thing.

Another telling moment came when Louis was invited to present a session at a conference hosted by a school that served a predominantly Black population:

But that school actually had students as their volunteers. And the students looked at me, like, and the students were Black, they looked at me like, “*You're here? Oh, snap! Like, I didn't know that we had Black attendees to this conference.*” So that became part of my feedback, because I felt that the white principal needed to know that, like, their students had directly mentioned this to me, and had reacted to me in that way. Because that tells me that this conference—even in a school that is, you know, has a large Black population—still had a lot of work to do when it came to normalizing a truly diverse conference space.

Hearing about similar experiences of hypervisibility, alienation, and marginalization across a variety of experiences, I asked Louis whether it was Louis's personal identity as a Black man, or his commitment to activism around racial equity and justice, that led to the dynamics he regularly experienced. He answered, “Any and all. All of it.”

Neither the cold responses he received at times to his involvement, nor the hot pushback he received to the ideas he advocated, seemed to phase Louis much: instead, what he learned informed his continuing evolution and ascent—eventually leading to his founding and leading a national organization championing racial equity and justice in education. What *really* bothered Louis was a different manifestation of contempt from some white colleagues:

The number one adverse reaction that I got was a pseudo empathy when it came to issues of oppression. It was always like—the normal reaction would always be, oh, like, you know, “We have it bad, too.” For other people it feels small, but I’m just, like, these are just levels of aggression. And I just, I don’t even call them “micro”—it’s hey, they’re aggressive. People really need to mind themselves, and think more carefully about what they’re trying to elevate here. There’s systemic oppression, and it’s, like, a little beef you may have with a couple people here and there. They don’t weigh the same.

I asked Louis if he considered this pseudo empathy as, perhaps, an ill-considered effort to demonstrate some modicum of performative solidarity—a “pseudo solidarity,” if you will—and he was inclined to agree.

There was one conference event where his own tokenization served as a defining moment for Louis, and led directly to his founding the national organization that advances racial equity and justice work in education. Owing to his own “activism around the overemphasis of standardized testing,” Louis was asked to join a panel of very prominent colleagues—all otherwise white—who’d invited a national union leader to the conference to join them for this session. Leading up to the event, Louis discovered that the other panelists were essentially planning to needle this union leader in front of the event’s national audience, under the guise of broader dialogue they’d framed in their invitation for her to participate: “They were going to try to target the national union leader for her approval of the Common Core. So that was the more subversive element of their agenda for bringing her into this big conference.” As online, back-channel dialogue between the white panelists continued to elevate the planned attack, Louis’s disappointment and opposition grew:

I thought it would be best to truly address why is it that, you know, the vast majority of the folks who think that they're right on the issue, did not create more seats for the people who are often most ignored when it came to racial and social justice. So that *that* became a thing.

In the midst of the actual session, Louis said what he needed to say: “At some point, I said, ‘Look at this program, everybody. Look at this program.’” And Louis proceeded to name the overwhelming whiteness of the organization’s leadership model, the conference’s speaker lineup, and the preponderance of representation in the audience—as well, crucially, that there were apparently no sessions in the lineup that would explicitly attend to matters of race or racial justice, except in the service of the organization’s preestablished goals around standardized testing and related high stakes. In this profoundly and purposefully disruptive moment, Louis considered his own positionality and the white panelists’ motivations to invite him into the session:

And I hate to say it in this way, too, but they thought they could just change the faces without changing the direction of their work. Like, if you have a boat that’s about to crash, and you say to yourself, alright, if we just changed the captain to one that’ll just keep swimming the boat the same way, Then what—what exactly is changing? But if you try to actually ask people who can see all sides of the boat a little differently, then you might get a different result than the one that’s about to crash into this iceberg, right?

Unfortunately, this organization decided that they would rather just crash it to the iceberg and full speed ahead—even as they kept putting different faces on it, they weren’t trying to fully embrace a lot of what was happening there.

As he was telling the story of his disruption, Louis mentioned that “I think a couple folks still may not be happy with me for it,” and later echoed this sentiment by saying, “I think some of them said, ‘Well, you know, maybe he’s not one of us anymore.’” The hypervisibility of his presence in this predominantly white space was compounded by the sense of betrayal some white activists seemed to project for failing to perform the role for which he’d been cast. Louis indicated that he was satisfied nonetheless: “I didn’t get a lot of, like, kudos from folks who were part of, like, the religion—but I most definitely, you know, did what I needed to do.”

When asked explicitly about models of Black interruption and resistance to the dominance of white norms in progressive education spaces, Louis was careful to unpack and reframe any assumptions about that resistance that may have been implied by that question:

So I want to say, belonging was—is such a critical part to this whole conversation, right? And so I didn’t aspire to interrupt, to try to dismantle any sort of organizations. In fact, I thought, this is how you get better. And I’m being very clear to you why I’m doing this. And if you decide not to go this route, then you will have self-imploded, not because of anything I did, but because of what you refuse to do.

Louis seemed to be indicating that he took these repeated invitations to be included in these predominantly white progressive spaces at face value, disregarding the sometimes severe repudiation he experienced. He brought what he could to the space in service, and on the tacit assumption he belonged there regardless of whether white colleagues’ behaviors endorsed that belonging. He affirmed the characterization I made to check for understanding: “You didn’t aspire to interrupt, but in a way to *belong*—and to have those ideas belong in those spaces.” As Louis continued:

So me naming the things. . . . You know, I could have—I could have screamed to the rooftops and be like, this, that, and the third—but . . . I try to be generative, where I can, and even in my interruption I don't seek to, like, completely destroy something. I'd rather, like you, build upon something.

Ultimately, experiences such as these informed Louis's founding of the national organization he leads and that has achieved a position of prominence in the landscape of racial and social justice advocacy in K-12 education. Early on, its ambitions were simple: "We wanted it to be a clearing house of some sort for educational diversity within conferences." Eventually the organization's goals expanded in the wake of, and in response to, a series of highly publicized acts of racialized police violence:

And then this thing with Trayvon Martin happened. And that's when it was like, "No, there's a bigger conversation than that. There's a much bigger conversation that is not happening, and not being proffered in so many of our spaces. And it's one thing for us to join up with the people who are doing racial justice work on the streets, and it's quite another to try to figure out who within our education spaces was at least in allyship, if not in direct work, with these folks, right?"

In this spirit, the national organization he founded united educators and education activists of color, along with white allies, in a collective that together advances racial and social justice goals in the education space: "I wouldn't even say in resistance to—but I guess, *in relation*, right?"

More than once in our conversations, Louis referred to a kind of arrogance with which he perceives progressive schools and organizations position themselves in discourse about racial justice. First, they adopt a position of moral superiority by trumpeting their progressive identity

or credentials: “And because we name ourselves ‘progressive,’ that also means we’re right.” Second, they confuse their whiteness and their access to material resources with excellence: in progressive schools, for example, “Too often, there’s a sense that these predominantly white schools are the best schools—simply for the fact that they are more white and more well-resourced.” This further alienates Black and other BIPOC constituents, such as students:

Even as we see experiences of students of color—Black students, Brown students, Asian students within these spaces—sometimes they become averse to them, because of how right they think they are. There are countless stories, including ones from my own son’s classroom, where the students went out there to get a better education in predominantly white schools, only to notice that, like, these independent, progressive-type schools were not responsive to children’s needs, concerns, stories—and, of course, because they found themselves at such a position, they thought that they were exclusively the holders of that which we consider progressive education.

Finally, Louis characterized a profound confusion within predominantly white, and most often independent, progressive schools in their shared sense of mission or vision with regard to racial justice: “For them, it’s not about creating space; it’s about delivering a form of charity.”

Throughout our discussion, Louis reiterated that some of the problematic dynamics revealed through his stories were themselves embedded in some longer-term historical dynamics. First, he noted the ethnoracial identity of progressive education’s luminaries:

The people who are often pillars of progressive education are still white. So, thereby, their values are still being proffered over those who also have progressive means, but also have been hidden in our history. Like, in my view, for example, the Black voters across

the south during Reconstruction were way more progressive than John Dewey was, but he gets the bust and they don't.

Second, he referred to the ambiguity and uncertainty of the very definition of progressive education, in the educational field as well as in the popular imagination:

The definition of progressive education, I think—I mean, a lot of people have taken some good cracks at it. But without a, I guess, a common set of throughlines, or characteristics of progressive education, it still ends up reifying the very thing that we seek to disrupt.

Later, Louis amplified this point:

And what is determined to be progressive? Is it the same as democratic? Is it the same as sociological? Is it the same as even quasi-liberal or “moving forward?” These are questions, I think, we can do a deep dive in.

Synthesizing and illustrating both of these dynamics, Louis cited Bob Moses—mathematics teacher and scholar, Black civil rights activist, and co-author of *Radical Equations* (Moses & Cobb, 2002), who passed away in 2021—as a contemporary example of the implications of these dynamics:

He's a very—that's a very easy example of what progressive education ought to look like. Inquiry based, experiential, active listening on the part of the adults involved, and ensuring that the answers come from the people with the knowledge. . . . [Y]ou think about how he doesn't get elevated, because of the population he was trying to elevate, right?

One of Louis's comments late in our discussion seemed to me to capture Louis's spirit, as well as the overarching implications of his contributions: “But what does ‘progressive’ mean to you,

right? So, kind of goes back to that. And so, all these interrogations of power are necessary in order for us to create better renditions of progressive education.”

Aziza’s Story

At the time of the study, Aziza was a Black woman who had taught high school English at a distinguished progressive high school in Weston, a major midwestern city, for several years. Her work in education also extended to designing transformative, equity-oriented curriculum frameworks and leading faculty professional development. She had written passionately and profusely across a variety of genres, and was engaged in a burgeoning career as an Afrofuturist theater artist as well. Aziza immigrated to the United States after spending her early childhood in Jamaica. At the time of the study she lived with her daughter Rita, a middle school student, in Weston.

Though Aziza originally taught in a large, public high school in Weston, her first introduction to progressive schools was actually in her capacity as a parent. Aziza explained that, in part owing to Rita’s birthday falling just past the kindergarten enrollment cutoff, she decided to enroll Rita in an independent school that explicitly identified itself as progressive: “Because I was born in Jamaica, the idea of . . . quote/unquote ‘private school’ wasn’t foreign to me,” Aziza said, although it was a bit of a mystery to her what exactly Rita’s school meant when it declared itself a “progressive” independent school:

So they use this label. And then—so I would see it in the documents: you know, a “progressive school.” And I thought, “What are you people talking about? What do you mean? Aren’t all schools progressive? ‘Progressive,’ as opposed to what?”

Aziza found the vagary of the school’s responses to her questions to be notable:

And so I remember going to some of the conferences, and they would go into the tours and going into the—all of the, you know, the coffees with the principal—and they talked about being a progressive school. And they would say things that, for me, didn't really... They weren't—they were these vague statements, like, you know, "We really care about the child." And, you know progressive schools: "We use the principles of John Dewey." And I thought, "Listen, I just finished a teacher ed program: like, so does public school." So I kept sort of listening. It was when I first started—I started to listen. Why are they saying that they're a progressive school, as if the principles they're advertising are some kind of unheard-of thing? So it lived in the literature. It lived in the rhetoric.

At first she drew on observable impressions: the school seemed to be more "student-centered," to have remarkable access to material resources, and to have remarkably little discipline and an inordinately dysregulated student body. But still she couldn't pin down school leaders on what they explicitly meant by "progressive": "So it was vague. It was very strange. It was very vague. So they kept using it as a kind of badge. And as some sort of, there was some dog whistling going on with this term, 'progressive.'" Over time, Aziza came to conclude that the primary meaning of "progressive" in Rita's school context was "individualized." And that was reassuring to Aziza at first, as she wanted teachers and the school's staff to have a good understanding of her daughter's disposition, goals, and needs. However, "at the same time, I was watching this little Black girl get significantly stereotyped." Before long, Aziza realized that the "dog whistling" she sensed to be intrinsic in the school's deployment of the term "progressive" adhered to problematically racialized dynamics.

Aziza acknowledged early in her account of her experience of Rita's progressive school that "there were lots and lots of red flags." The first was the ambiguity of the term "progressive," and the rest were the interrelated racialized dynamics that explained some dimensions of that ambiguity. As Rita declared at one point, for example, "What I keep seeing in these progressive schools is there's a call for this kind of diversity—and there is a conditional 'yes.' You know, 'Yes, we're really diverse.' And then there is the unsaid, 'However dot, dot, dot.'" In the case of Rita's school, the first of these "dot dot dots" was the reality of its profoundly limited ethnoracial diversity: "I think she was one of the only Black children," Aziza recalled, and there was an almost exclusively white teaching staff and leadership team, begging obvious questions about the school's touted claims about "diversity." The second was the way that Rita's kindergarten behaviors were characterized before long. Though Rita's white teachers straightforwardly acknowledged waning Black enrollment and the limited ethnoracial diversity of the class, they promised in response that "what we can offer is, we can treat Rita as an individual." Aziza took comfort in this assurance—presuming that her daughter would be seen and understood in regard to her Black identity in general and her "only" status in particular—until things changed before long:

By, you know, the sixth or seventh week, you know, it's like "Rita is being really aggressive" and "Rita is pushing the children." And I'm like, "Well, hold on. Because if anybody's touching Rita's hair, like she *does* have instructions from me to protect herself."

Despite her substantial misgivings about the pathologization of Rita's kindergarten behavior—seeming to identify Rita as a "problem child" for no particularly good reason—Aziza tried to

give the school a chance: “I wanted that learning experience for her, and what the school had to offer. So I took the risk.” But as Rita continued to feel isolated in her identity, and continued to be stereotyped by her teachers, Aziza decided that Rita should switch schools:

And we did our two years, and then we left. Yeah. And then, part two: Rita goes on to, you know, public school. And, you know, we *did* need to see more Black educators. We *did* need to see more people who had some consciousness around some of this.

At a writing conference not long after Rita’s transfer to public elementary school—at a time that Aziza was beginning to consider a switch from teaching in her large, metropolitan public high school setting—Aziza was approached by a friend of hers who taught in a prominent progressive independent school in Weston:

And she said, “You know, I teach at Weston Progressive. Are you familiar?” I said, “Oh my goodness, I’m absolutely familiar.” . . . And she said, “Are you interested?” And I was like, “You gotta be kidding me. Absolutely not.”

Initially, Aziza’s experiences parenting Rita through those two years of a progressive school were adequate to dismiss the invitation. But Aziza’s friend persisted:

And so she called a few times, and she said, “No, no, no: you should come and visit.” and I was like, “No, no, no, girl: that place is insane. These private schools are nuts. They’re floating in a distorted universe.”

Ultimately, Aziza’s interest in a new professional setting for herself—independent of her concerns about Rita’s experiences as a student—outweighed her strong misgivings:

I knew I was looking for a shift. And this felt kind of safe. It's like, alright, "I'll know what I'm doing. It'll be in this different kind of space. But I'll know what I'm doing. And what are these private schools up to, anyway?"

Aziza was given a tour of Weston Progressive: "And immediately, Chris: even on the walkthrough, I could spot so many contradictions."

The first of these contradictions was that in stark opposition to Weston Progressive's claims about the importance of diversity in faculty and leadership, there were clearly racialized patterns that mapped to power:

I remember walking through the building. And literally, I said, "Alright, got it. All of the security guards are Black people. Check. All of the maintenance people are Black people. Check. All of the administrators who I'm meeting are white. Check. All of the secretaries to the assistants are all Black. Check." And so I was watching who was holding what role.

The second was when Aziza asked to see copies of the curricular sequence to glean what mattered most pedagogically in the educational program, and to learn about the specific intervention protocols that were provided for teachers to support students with learning differences: much vaunted features of the school—including on this personalized walkthrough of the campus that Aziza was provided—were its purposefully progressive pedagogy, and its attention to the needs of students with complex learning profiles. Yet Aziza was stunned to learn that neither formal curriculum documentation, nor specific protocols for student support, were available or in use at the school. Regarding curriculum, Aziza recalled thinking, "Wow, I think these are the white people who are sort of lawless. They—they *don't* have a clear curriculum.

They *don't* have, like, clear understandings.” With regard to the support of students’ learning differences, Aziza was all the more poignant:

So I go right to the thing they were preaching to me about these learning differences. And they said, “Oh, we don’t have any, you know, programmatic—we don’t really have those interventions for classroom teachers.” And so immediately, I walked out of that first kind of walk through, Chris Thinner, I was like, “This is a complete farce.” I said, “Wow. This is what they do.” And I said, “This is—it’s sophisticated.” So it absolutely intrigued me and I applied for the position. I don’t know what that says about me.

In our interview, I couldn’t help but laugh at the irony of Aziza’s choice to apply for the position not despite, but *because* of the contradictions that she sensed and her consuming curiosity to investigate these dynamics further. As I laughed and shook my head, Aziza continued:

It was stunning. And I thought, “Something is—something is awry here. This is completely—what is being said, and what’s being practiced, is completely out of alignment.” So, yeah: those are some of the contradictions I was able to discern within the first few hours.

Within a few months following Aziza’s personalized tour and subsequent reflections, a position came open and Aziza was hired:

And I came in, Chris Thinner, very, very, very aware. I did not—and this ended up hurting me, professionally—I did not come in “on script” about the glory of progressive schools. I came in and I did a stellar job, and it stunned people. And I said, “Yeah, I am using all the principles from public school teaching, and from my master’s degree in education. There’s no way I would walk in here and just kind of willy-nilly it.”

Still teaching at Weston Progressive several years later, Aziza had plenty to say about her encounters with whiteness, or the dominance of white norms, in progressive education spaces. The first feature she cited pertained to silence by school leaders in response to racialized dynamics at the school:

The silence around race was epic. The double speak. Literally, I had at the time a very, very nice upper school head, where there were all kinds of racialized incidents that were happening, both with the adults and with children. And that upper school head would literally politely sit, and would listen, and would literally say nothing—would say, “Well thank you for sharing that.”

Later in our conversation, Aziza returned to this vexing silence on racial issues that were brought to the attention of white school leaders, and said, “So yeah: it was this kind of lo-fi—I call it ‘polite indifference,’ like the Atticus Finch model. You know, ‘Thank you very much.’ Very, very kind. ‘We’re glad you’re, you know, we hear what you’re saying.’” At times, this silence manifested as a kind of misnaming, or mischaracterization, of explicitly racialized concerns that were brought to the attention of the administration:

There’s a vagueness—a kind of refusal to name exactly what is happening. So instead of naming the white supremacy, or the racism, or the sexism directly, it becomes “these issues.” Or it becomes sort of rerouted into like, “Oh, these are people issues,” or, “These are personality issues.” “You know how Kathy is.” “You know how Joe is.” So there’s this kind of misnaming, or this vagueness.

In these senses—whether through literal silence, through vagary and misnaming, or through the attribution of structural inequities to individual dispositions—the school leadership’s silence

around racial issues also manifested as a kind of silencing of Rita and her Black colleagues: “Playing that game of, like, ‘Oh, I’m,’ you know, ‘we hear what you’re saying.’ But there is no activation behind that beyond, say, POCC and having some, like, pizza and affinity meetings.” In these and related ways, Aziza saw the white administrators’ silence as an abject failure to honor this progressive school’s declared commitments to racial justice. It was more than reticence or trepidation, but rather an “administrative abdication,” in Aziza’s terms, of the school’s ostensible commitments to racial justice.

The second dissonant dynamic that Aziza cited was related to this administrative silence around issues of racial justice: school leaders may have made the choice to be silent, but they also manipulatively transferred the responsibility they had abdicated to Aziza and other employees of color:

Every time there was some sort of racial incident, the colleagues of color who would be bringing issues to the admin, as we were asked to do, but they went nowhere. All of a sudden, they were pulled in and asked to clean up. Manage some sort of crisis. Totally not on our job description at all. No support. In some ways, kind of absorb the shrapnel. “When there’s a crisis, go and get some of these people of color.” And, you know, the school leaders were pretty wise: they knew which people of color would do what kind of work.

This unspoken and unwritten expectation of school leaders for employees of color to attend to racialized concerns was a point Aziza pressed home more than once:

There’s an expectation that hiring a person of color, you’re getting a two- or three-for-one. So you’re getting somebody who can do whatever the job is—you know, they can

work in the accounting department, or they can work in recruiting, or they can work in admissions, or they can be a math teacher—but by virtue of them having more melanin, they're also supposed to be able to, quote/unquote, "take on these issues." There's this hiring with this expectation that if you're a person of color, you're supposed to want to jump into [gestured with air quotes] "these issues" or address "these issues," or you have some competency with "these issues."

So on the one hand, the racialized concerns registered by employees of color were silenced:

Aziza suggested, "And that's all it takes is, you know: if the people of color are kind of, like, seen and heard then that's enough." Yet on the other hand, those self-same colleagues were made responsible for attending to those very concerns. The aggregate of these related dynamics was maddening in a number of ways—particularly in the high-stakes and sometimes surreptitious pressures that were imposed on employees of color for declining to assume lead responsibility for the school's racial justice commitments:

Yeah, and this is where I think it gets real, real tricky for people of color. Because if you are a person of color who's not interested in the conversation, that person of color is—and I've seen it happen with so many of us—you know, we're considered not to be team players. I've had leaders of color come to me and say, "You not stepping into this diversity thing is hurting your trajectory professionally."

In these ways and others, it became apparent to Aziza that the hiring of Black and other BIPOC employees was itself construed by the school as a demonstration of the school's trumpeted commitments to racial diversity, equity, and justice—yet this rested on the school's stance of holding these employees responsible for supporting all students of color, mitigating the damage

of any racialized conflict, and supporting the school's superficial and questionable DEI vision and strategy:

And so this is why I don't think representation alone is going to be some sort of panacea or magic bullet—like, “We'll just get, you know, all kinds of people of color.” Although, Chris, I'm seeing like that—that's really all it takes. And that's why I don't buy any of it. Because I'm watching so many places, you know, continue to just hire people of color, and then it just kind of stops there. The deeper changes—

At that moment, Aziza shook her head, her voice trailed off, and she proceeded to speak to yet another layer that compounded the complexity of this dynamic: the ways in which the hegemony of white norms affected other dimensions of the hiring process:

All of those people of color are going to be expected to probably come through and be sort of validated by very, very white institutions: you know, Ivies, Ivy-adjacent; definitely, if not a Ph.D., absolutely, you know, a master's degree and some level of like deep, deep, deep scholarship and experience. All of those are, you know, a value system that's still a white value system.

The aggregate of these confounding and compounded dynamics—the silence of white school leaders in response to racialized concerns; the silencing of Black and other BIPOC employees' voices; the abdication of responsibility by administration that was imposed on Black and other BIPOC employees; the presumption that representational racial diversity serves as an adequate proxy for equity or justice; the pressure to indulge and to advance misguided DEI strategies; and the dominance of white norms in the hiring process overall—imposed inordinate pressure on Black employees trying to navigate these dynamics:

Those people who are hired are going to be expected to—they will burn out; they will overwork; they will over-function. That is actually written into the algorithm. They will get exploited. Their genius and what they'll create will be taken, and it'll be owned by that entity; that person will be gone.

Furthermore, these dynamics led to the internalization of false and damaging beliefs by Black and other BIPOC colleagues. She cited, as a case in point, the school's recent search for a new DEI director and her recent conversation with a Black candidate in which she tried to share with him some information about the disparity between the school's declared and practiced commitments to racial justice. She took his naivete about the stakes of these dynamics—and his insistence that he, uniquely, might find a way through them—as evidence of a pattern she'd seen before:

And so it was another example of a brilliant educator who has fallen for that, “I'm gonna be, like, the Magic Negro. I've got the—none of the other people who've come before me have ever thought this.” You know, so it's—it's something. And this is where I feel like the educators of color are really, really trapped. And, Chris Thinner, they don't want to hear it from me. I bet you, though, if a white person said that to them, they would listen.

Later, Aziza returned to this phenomenon to characterize it further:

This is it, you know: it's a really stunning loop, if you will. But I feel like it—it's something I can speak directly to as a person of color, watching so many people of color, “No, no, no. They'll listen to me, because I'm exceptional.” And it's like, “Aw, darling. Oh, no. No, no, no, no, *no*. You *are* exceptional. But your exceptionalism isn't around rerouting these children from 500 years of this practice. Your exceptionalism lies in

something else altogether.” And most—what I’m seeing is most scholars of color in independent schools, they don’t trust their own exceptionalism removed from white authority.

Aziza acknowledged that she didn’t presume to have a comprehensive “fix” in mind for such profoundly fraught and complex dynamics, but that at its core “it really is a kind of reconfiguring so much more than which people are hired.” This led to Aziza introducing a kind of thought experiment to provoke further reflection:

And so what else is there? For me, I’m curious about what else could there be? So if there were, for instance, no people of color to hire, what then would an institution do to ensure equity for all its students?

At several points in our conversation, Aziza made it plain that there was a wide variety of “DEI work” taking place on campus as a matter of routine—but that this work seemed ultimately to be superficial, transactional, ineffective, and ultimately performative. As Aziza explained:

I also noticed that there was this sort of attraction to that kind of singular outward event—so, bringing in, like, *the* speaker: so it’s Colson Whitehead, or it’s Nikky Finney, or it’s Ta-Nahisi Coates. . . . So there are these sort of isolated moments of big names.

Aziza saw these events as somewhat performative spectacles that didn’t have much impact on ongoing racialized dynamics at the school, so much as serving as a signal to the broader school community that it “cared” about these issues in a generic way. Similarly, there were plenty of other activities on campus that seemed to map to the school’s purported DEI commitments:

We will do the work when we can curate it in a very specific kind of way. So, you know, right now, if you look at—I mean, if you looked at all of the recent hires; if you looked

at, you know, we've got SEED [Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity] meetings happening every other day. You name it, in terms of racial equity, it is happening here. Somehow, none of it is penetrating.

Aziza underlined the irony of the dissonance between the number of DEI initiatives that might have been in motion, and the observable scope of their impact:

I still don't see a significantly different approach. I see *more*. I see lots of "more." I see more people of color. I see more speakers. I see more texts. I see more bulletin boards. I see more, like, philanthropic engagement. I see more, but is it different? . . . I'm always the person who is looking for the transformational energies. And I don't feel or sense a lot of transformational energies. I feel lots of *moreness* happening. But that doesn't necessarily equate to transformation.

When asked about whether there were any aspects of the school's racialized dynamics that *had* been successfully transformed, Aziza stated that the only time the school leaders enacted significant policy changes was in time of legal threat or crisis:

Um, the changes that I saw, I can link to reactions to something that might be litigious. So if there was a potential for the lawyers to be brought in—there were a lot of changes that were made because of a crisis. . . . So what I continue to see is that the changes that *were* happening were a result of some major crisis that came about—and it could have been a crisis at a classroom level, or at a broader school level.

To Aziza, this phenomenon seemed baked into the thinking of influential school leaders and board members. She recalled, for example, the chair of the board's declaration in a board diversity committee meeting:

“The diversity consultant is going to come to us and let us know some key phrases that we need to be aware of. He’ll be here to present to us *as a security measure*.” And I’ve been working on some writing around that specific quote. Because it was—it was brilliant in its truth. “He’s going to be working with us *as a security measure*.”

Thus, guarding the school against parent complaints or against lawsuits would inspire school leaders to enact reactive changes, but little traction was gained when more substantive, transformational, and proactive efforts were suggested from within:

Meanwhile, there are faculty and staff members who are saying, “Listen, we would like to be able to start to do something like *this*. Something that has a more sustained intervention. Something that begins to look at capacity building, and it’ll cost you all of, you know, 7500 dollars.” And there was no money for that. So the strategic placement of money—a real strategic placement.

When asked about successful efforts to resist or interrupt the dominance of white norms at Weston Progressive, Aziza was quick to clarify her stance:

I actually didn’t even come into the school with any intention to interrupt or disrupt or resist any of it. I actually came into the school fully aware of what it was and how it functioned. . . . And so for me, I was more committed to what it is I could build on my terms, versus trying to disrupt and dismantle what was a long practice. And so it was very easy, though. People confuse that. They confuse what I was doing. They thought—it was a convenient story for them to say, “Oh, the Black woman’s coming in, and she’s gonna come in, and she’s gonna speak up, and she’s gonna let them know, and she’s gonna roll her neck and tell them that they’re full of it.”

To some extent this comment helped me to recognize the extent to which I may have embedded some analogous assumptions into the language and the pattern of my questioning. Aziza clarified her activist stance by qualifying the mode and manner of the work to which she devoted herself:

I just sat and chiseled and built, and I wrote some good work around, you know, curricular interventions. And so what somebody else would say—“Oh, yes, Aziza. She’s—she’s trying to disrupt”—I had, I didn’t fall for that. So how did I leverage that? I started to build more curriculum. I started to write about it, I started to present about some of the patterns that I was seeing with these diversity initiatives. I built frameworks around that. And I started to build a lot of frameworks around, like, covert group dynamics. So really, what somebody thought was disruption, I was like, “No, no, no.” And in some ways, it was received for a couple of years there. . . . I created work for the faculty and the staff that was about a holistic way to step into a more conscious curricular design.

Aziza led this work with a small cohort of teachers for a year, and “it went remarkably well.”

Then things started to shift:

All 12 of the faculty members approached the principal and said, “We’d really like to keep going, because the speakers who are coming in, they’re—they’re fine, but they’re not helping us, on the ground, to make a lived change. The equity consultant who we’ve hired kind of, you know, blows in and out. But again, they’re not helping us to make a sustained change. Aziza and [her partner in this work] are helping us to do that.

Aziza explained that this was a signal moment of a shift in the prevailing dynamic at Weston

Progressive:

There was traction being gained amongst—I wouldn't say; of the dozen, I think we might have had one person was a person of color—there were enough key stakeholders, white participants—so, white participants who had both power and influence in the school—who were starting to see the difference between “Oh, so if you bring in Ta-Nahisi Coates, this is what gets evoked and this is what gets addressed” and “If you really want to get into some more true change agency, that might really start to shift the depths—the root system of how we do things—oh, we're gonna need something like—oh, so then Aziza and [her partner in this work] would be doing this ongoing, sustained work.”

The crucial shift boiled down to this:

So there were enough white people who were no longer being seduced by the single spectacle. And I think, Chris, that becomes a very different kind of leverage and momentum than the people of color who are harmed and wounded. So there's kind of plenty of space for that. “Have some pizza, go to POCC.” When white people start asking for more, that then becomes a fundamental shift. And so that's what I think started to happen. There were enough really savvy, smart people of color, who were starting to offer up some very profound pathways to manageable change. And I just don't think that this is a place that is ready for that kind of commitment.

Yet subsequent to these white teachers' request that the administration support the continuation and expansion of this more transformative work “intended to shift the depths—the root system of how we do things,” neither Aziza, nor her collaborator, nor the white faculty members heard anything back from school leaders:

And, Chris, there was never a response. Not to the 12 who asked, and not to me and [my partner in this work]. I literally have the email where we said, you know, “Here are the evaluations. We would like to continue this.” And Chris, I didn’t have a release in workload. And there is no response to that email. Silence to this day.

When I expressed disbelief at the audacity and cruelty of this particular act of silencing, Aziza continued, making oblique reference to a report I had written years ago when I was hired by Weston Progressive to consult about their DEI vision and strategy:

I mean, it—it went into the place where, you know, you came in and you did a fantastic sort of institutional read—and it’s probably sitting right next to it, I assume. I think the work that is really specific, and the work that is holding a 360 degree of integrity—it just doesn’t move in this place.

In that moment, I recalled never having heard back from Weston Progressive following my submission of that report years ago.

Over the course of our conversation, particularly as our second session came to its conclusion, Aziza spoke to how some of the problematic dynamics and philosophical contradictions we discussed in regard to Rita’s progressive school, Weston Progressive, and other progressive education spaces were set in motion by historical dynamics:

It’s necessary to even go right back to the core, you know, when we were making these decisions about these philosophical tenets [of progressive education]. Who was made—the John Deweys: okay, so we know who is at the table. None of this; none of these philosophical tenets—they didn’t exist in a vacuum. What—what really is the unspoken history of how these philosophical tenets were designed and developed? What’s the

benefit of keeping them all white? You know, keeping—like the kind of white mythology around, you know, all of these quote/unquote “progressive education people.” Where were they in contradiction from the start? Because they were. So how to reformulate that, in a way that’s not so much about, you know, “these bad people back then—they were, you know, racist, and they were slave owners.” But, you know, there was a price to pay to form those philosophies. I’m interested in what price was paid then—and it’s real simple to see, you know, the price that’s being paid now, in the progressive pedagogies.

Aziza distilled the learning point as follows: “We’ve got to tell a more complete story about both the origins, and why we keep doing some of these things over and over and over and over and over again.” Until such a time as that work can be done, progressive education institutions will continue to use their “progressive” institutional identities as a vague and self-contradictory signifier to trumpet the values that imbue their purported commitments to racial justice, while resisting transformative work that might enact those commitments through authentic structural and systemic changes.

At the conclusion of our second dialogue, Aziza again made reference to the strategic deployment of the term “progressive” ironically to defend and protect the racialized *status quo*:

There’s a real, like, *romanticism*. It’s a little saccharine, the romanticism with progressive education. Um, and it’s because of—there’s so many elements of it that feel very human. But there’s this sort of, like, borderline arrogance about it—just because it has these human tenets, this exploration—this “let’s see the whole human, the whole child, the whole whatever”—there is a way that somehow—that absolves them from, like, the racism and the white supremacy that is far more entrenched than any of their progressive

educational principles. So there's something going on with, like, ego and lack of humility in the overwhelming message around progressive education. Like, "If we just, you know, play well enough together, it'll work out." And white supremacy will eat progressive education for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

David's Story

At the time of the study, David was the veteran Director of Diversity and Inclusion at Aiken High School, a much-vaunted independent, progressive high school in a major southern city. He was also Aiken's lead high school track and field coach, and a three time state Coach of the Year. In addition, David was the founder and executive director of an organization that hosted a cohort-based professional development program for experienced diversity practitioners in the public and private school sectors. At the time of the study, David was in his late forties, grew up in this same southern city, and lived with his wife who is also an independent school educator. David and his wife both identified as Black.

David recalled his onboarding to Aiken as the first exposure he'd had to progressive education: "Frankly, I'll be clear when I say I never heard about progressive education until I landed at Aiken." As David's wife was completing a master's program in Mathematics, she was offered a position at Aiken "to fulfill a sabbatical year for a math teacher there." At the same time, David was "transitioning out of law school, and absolutely hating my law school experience, but I started athletic coaching in a public school." David recalled his wife's initial stance: "My wife, knowing her value, was very clear to say, 'If you want me at your school, I'm not coming in to be a sabbatical filler: you either want me as a full time employee or you do

not.” Shortly thereafter, David’s wife secured a permanent position at Aiken. But David and she found out more about Aiken before long:

She was coming to the school at a time that I then found out that they had never experienced a Black educator at the school for anything longer than four years. You heard that correctly: prior to my wife, there had never been a Black educator at Aiken that lasted more than four years.

This fact alone amplified David’s reflexive thoughts about what he took Aiken to represent and to value. Early in her tenure, his wife would regularly invite him to attend “one of these obligatory dinners we always have.” David would have none of it:

I would say, “No,” every single time. I was like, “I am not going anywhere near that space. It feels disconnected from Black folk. Uppity.” I had all of these terms that I had for what that space was. And so I refused to go anywhere near the space.

Eventually, David relented when he told himself, “You’re being a bad spouse and partner. Go to one of these dinners with your wife.”

At the dinner he finally attended, Aiken’s head of school initiated conversation with David that marked the beginning of his long leadership odyssey at the school, his career as an expert diversity practitioner, and his leadership in the broader community of schools:

The head of school at that time—which at that time, they called themselves *headmasters*—actually invited me to, or really cornered me at the dinner, and said, “I heard you have a skill set that might help us out as a school.” And I’m like, “Really? I don’t know what you’ve heard. But I’m willing to have a conversation.”

The proposal offered by the school was both surprising and intriguing to David, who said, “The conversation was essentially in the direction of ‘Would you investigate, for our school community, what diversity and multiculturalism needs to look like? And I would like to hire you for a year to investigate that.’” This offer was complemented by an invitation to teach an African American Studies class as well as the opportunity to serve as a coach. Disenchanted by his law school experience and not fully captivated by his public school coaching position, David figured, “I’m in transition. Maybe I should try this on.”

Both as part of his general onboarding, and to inform his DEI consultancy charge, David and the head of school initiated a series of weekly dialogues that provided David with extraordinary access to that senior leader: “The head of the school really spent time with me explaining what the school was all about, and the history of the school.” In their early meetings, the head of school oriented David to the school’s progressive roots:

A lot of the conversation was about the principles that Dewey introduced early on, and how those played in the life of the school. It was conversation—I remember the head of school talking to me about *The Eight Year Study* [1942]—that the original head of Aiken was one of the people involved in that study.

The Eight Year Study, of course, was the Progressive Education Association’s 1930-1942 study in which 30 primarily southern progressive high schools reframed their curriculum and pedagogy in alignment with progressive principles to explore students’ trajectory into and fitness for college (Aikin, 1942). To some extent progressive education was an entirely new world of ideas for David, who was nevertheless mindful of the broader social dynamics—nationally, regionally, and locally—with which he was entire familiar:

Mind you, knowing when you're talking about the region, you're talking about one of the most segregated educational social dynamics you can find in the country, for a whole host of reasons. So, you know, it's all of that backdrop that I really think makes the storyline for me pretty unique about how I was introduced into the progressive education world, but it was just this. For me, it was this recognition of doing education a different way than I had ever been exposed to.

David felt as though he was being offered an important grounding:

I was being given the code to what progressive education was all about, and how much it tied into some really key sort of philosophical lines of thinking. And for me, it was very much just this early looking at, you know, what are the core characteristics as a school that made them say they were particularly progressive? Because for me, in many ways, I just thought it was a traditional prep school.

When I asked David to share with me the progressive principles to which he was introduced, he spoke about the school's commitment to service, and to the notion of being "a private school with public purpose." He understood his charge to create a DEI vision for Aiken in that context: "The work they were asking me to investigate was a part of that bigger, public purpose." He also discussed the school's emphasis on student engagement in the classroom:

There was a reason why all of our classrooms are set up seminar style: for everyone to really make sure that it wasn't just always being the teacher or the faculty member talking down to students, but this exchange between the faculty member and this exchange between the students and really deeper, more authentic, and curious kind of ways of engaging with a lot of critical thoughts.

The head of school also emphasized the school's commitment to collaboration: "I almost want to say more in the direction of *cooperative*, if it makes sense to say it that way." This complemented the progressive school's "commitments to democratic process" as evidenced by a strong student government structure, as well as a unique tradition that continues at Aiken to this day, "where at any given time a student can request to stand in front of the entire student body—just to share what they're thinking about any particular idea." Furthermore, the school seemed to position itself in stark opposition to neoliberal pedagogy and assessment strategies. He described this stance as follows:

We don't teach to a test. We don't feel like, you know, that we have to have this strong commitment to particular texts, but we want to expose you to a lot of different modes and ways of engaging with knowledge.

The head of school would also speak about the school's commitment to "assessing in ways that go far beyond sort of the rote, boilerplate kind" and favored "really talk[ing] deeply about who you were in the classroom space, and the kinds of work that you were doing." What really blew David's mind, however, was the experience of observing students' transitions from classes:

I would go visit the commons area where students would hang out between classes, and they were continuing to talk about what they were just talking about in class. And that was just this whole earth-shattering, fascinating thing. That's the furthest thing I would have ever imagined wanting to do or doing—and yet that was very much in the character of the place that I think really caught my attention.

Throughout his account of the progressive principles and practices to which he was introduced, David emphasized the extraordinary nature of his access to the head of school:

I can't honestly say everyone was getting what I was getting; I think I was in a unique position. That I was this—this new hire being asked to do this new and different thing in the community, which gave me access to the head of school who felt the need to share all of those things in order for me to more fully do what I was being asked to do.

Nevertheless, David continued to labor on the assumption that this was a temporary job that would only last one year:

My intent was never to stay around. That I was, you know, I was fairly crystal clear going into it, that I was just going to provide a blueprint of sorts; a roadmap for them to take; and that it wasn't going to involve me, you know, implementing any of it.

As David continued to enjoy his unique access to the head of school and to become more intrigued by the promise of progressive education, he had a profound experience that invoked his long-standing concerns about racialized dynamics at Aiken, and refined his ongoing inquiry into them:

You know, there was a very telling, early conversation that I had with one of the grounds staff at the school—one of the most beloved employees in the life of the school, who happened to be one of the plant operations/ground staff individuals in the school. He came in, and he sat me down, and we probably talked for over 90 minutes. And he gave me a full history of every Black student who had ever walked through the school from the—because he was there from the first Black student who entered the school, until the time that I joined the school.

This older Black colleague, according to David, “was very clear and explicit with me in doing that: he said, ‘I’m doing that so that you can navigate this place better. I want you to know what you’ve walked into.’” On the one hand, David was very grateful for this personalized attention:

It was the most amazing sort of expression of helping me figure out what I was walking into that I could have ever imagined. So, you know, being with the head of school and having access, and hearing all this stuff about progressive education, you know, that was all important. The *most* important conversation was that conversation I had with that staff.

When I asked David if he could share more about the themes of that extended conversation, he began by saying, “The theme was: you have to survive the place.” David continued to describe this Black facilities staff member’s advice:

It may not always be about the thriving in the moment you’re there. But if you survive it, you will have a trajectory unlike any others. And that was a big theme. And I can tell you that, you know, one of the ways that I was able to dig deeper—and this was on the recommendation of that same staff member—they asked me, or they suggested to me, “Look at the actual written paragraphs for all of the Black students in the yearbooks each year, and that will tell you a story.”

David acknowledged that he went on to read that material, and it taught him much about the school and its culture:

They told me that exact story of people struggling to survive the place on a whole, you know, host of experiences that really, you know—it told me that you had to navigate the place in what most of us would call a “go-along-to-get-along” kind of way.

Ultimately this exchange grounded David in an understanding of the racialized dynamics of Aiken—always and already situated in the broader context of southern racism with which he was already quite familiar—that informed and inspired his practice in the years to come:

At the same time that I valued what that staff member was saying to me, I was actually disturbed because he essentially was telling me, “Keep your head down. Don’t create too many waves. Address this one as ‘Sir,’ and ‘No, Sir.’” And I got all of these lessons—which, frankly, were in my home training anyway—but the way that I was receiving it from this employee of the school, it actually did disturb me. Um, and you know, when I started to observe how everyone called him by his first name, and I was like, “I can’t do that with you.” Those kinds of messages told me something about the institution. It told me something about what it meant to be in Black skin in that space. And what it very clearly signaled to me is, I have an opportunity, even a responsibility, to figure out what in my power I can do to shift some of what I perceive to be an unhealthy dynamic.

In order to ensure my full understanding, rather than proceed on assumptions, I asked David:

When that gentleman who was on the facilities staff gave you that download, and talked to you about surviving the place as distinct from thriving in the place, “the place” in a way sounds like it’s euphemistic—“the place”—for whiteness and white folks in that school space. Is that fair to say?

David confirmed my understanding:

That’s absolutely fair to say. And the way that I always describe it is that he was sharing with me what the DNA of the school happened to be. And that DNA was very much rooted in the white, independent school experience that was created as an exclusionary

factor rather than an inclusionary one. For a populace in a region that was steeped in that. And yet, what I understood was that if I approached it in a particular way, I might be able to mutate that DNA.

I found David's use of DNA as a metaphor for whiteness to be a singularly powerful way to illustrate the deep-seated, enduring, and persistent dynamics with which David has had to contend at Aiken for well more than two decades. Similarly, I noted that the school's identity as a progressive institution was subsumed to its status more broadly as an independent/private school and to its enmeshment in the dynamics of whiteness.

When I asked David what helped him to sustain himself despite the overwhelming whiteness of the institution, David's thoughts were most always with the students—particularly with the Black students whom he hoped to help navigate this system:

It was always a projection of sorts about what I felt like my being and doing could contribute to their ability to actually thrive and not just survive the place. So it all still goes back to sort of that original sort of challenge that I felt, and purpose in being there. . . . As I sometimes like to say, in my family line, we have the gift and the curse of being servants, who are built around maximizing others.

At another juncture in our dialogue, David spoke to his investment in the relational dynamics of the place: "The core of me is about creating deeper relationships with people. And I was so invested in the relationships I was forming, that that became the sort of the. . . ." David's voice trailed off, until he chose after a moment to reveal his thinking:

Well, and I want to say this a slightly different way, cuz I haven't reflected on it this way before. I really think I wanted to prove the facilities person wrong. I actually wanted him

to see that I could walk and navigate through that place with my head held high, challenging the place, getting the place to shift and change in ways that he wouldn't have to do that either. I took that on as a challenge.

Owing in part to the entrenched nature and dynamics of whiteness at Aiken, and in part to the hypervisibility of his charge as a Black employee, the intentionality with which David had to define and adopt a strategic posture—at one and the same time to ensure his effectiveness in the position, and the sustainability of the position—cannot be overstated. Early on, he spent time with an equity consultant who offered advice that helped to steer him: “Whatever you do, make sure you interact in the place with a strategy that is *the cunning invasion of your intelligence.*” When I asked David to unpack his understanding of that phrase, he shared what it meant to him:

In everything I did, I had to treat it smartly. I had to almost—in a, I don't want to say manipulative, but I actually do; I'll actually say “subversive” way—I had to convince them what they were currently doing wasn't going to serve them well moving forward. And that in order for me to make it happen a particular way, I was going to have to prove it in some really deep, intellectualized, intelligent, driven kinds of ways that would cause them to move in ways they probably would not if it was just at the request of a Black man.

The stakes for David, again, were high: as he confessed, “The reality is, I was convinced I would last one year. And I would have to leave. That there was no way that I would be able to sustain myself in the place.” David knew he had walked into his position at Aiken “with so many pre-baked ideas about what I was walking into.” Part of this was recognizing “that there wasn't a

significant critical mass . . . of people of color in the space,” despite the school’s public declarations of its commitments to diversity. In addition there was the matter of longevity:

The actual [Black] educators who *had* been in the space prior to, frankly, my spouse and I, had not lasted long in the place. So all of that early information really let me know that there were things that, again, were deeply rooted in the place.

In addition, David noticed the propensity in Aiken’s community of attributing most conspicuous inequities to class issues: “A lot of it, to be clear, would get classified—I say, “classified”—would get actually positioned as if it was a class dynamic. When for me, it was clearly a racial dynamic.” Eventually, David came to the core of the strategy he used to guide many of his successful efforts in the years to come:

So bottom line is, I was zero—I was so focused in on what really were the normative standards of whiteness that existed by the very nature of the fact that that school existed. And so, for me it was, how do I figure out what the code happens to be? Okay? And—and how that was being delivered in both the written—and more so in the unwritten—ways: in the culture, in the traditions, in the climate, in the people, in the programs, in the policies of the place.

David set himself to learn “the code” of whiteness moving forward:

There was nothing that I saw happening in the place that did not in some way, shape, or form exude what I always believed to be, frankly, what whiteness is. In ways that even—they couldn’t even recognize it as such, because it was so normalized for them—but for those of us that were experiencing the school differently, we could see it and we could name it for what it was.

David leveraged this understanding and experience to help sustain his Black colleagues early on:

One of the things I always tried to do a lot educationally in the school, around the experience of Black folk in it, was in a very Du Boisean way, talk about the double consciousness from which we had to navigate the school [Du Bois, 2018]. And I spent a lot of time and energy making sure all the Black folk in the school understood that that's what was happening and what they were doing.

Over time, David shared this insight more widely: “But I also wanted the white folk to know that that's what we were being *forced* to do.”

As David began to unpack “the code” he identified a key dynamic pertaining to the ways in which white people imagined Black employees, as well as Black students for that matter:

It was a presumed assumption that the people of color in the space either had—either were exceptional in some way—so it was the exceptionalism kind of argument—or that in their own sort of progressive, liberalized way, “the white man's burden” was in place. Okay? Where we're going to help up these lowly folk who don't have the—the opportunities, particularly. At some times it came through in the intelligence to be in a space like this with “us.”

Thus David came to realize that there were two modes in which white members of the Aiken community could fathom the presence of a Black student or employee: they must either represent a remarkable exception to their inherited beliefs about limited Black intelligence and ability, or present an opportunity for white folks to discharge the obligation that comes with their intrinsic superiority: namely, to contribute to the Black students' and employees' well-being as a matter

of charity. By way of follow-up, I shared my best approximation of some the implications of this dynamic:

It sounds like there could not possibly have been the freedom to be fully human, to be average on any given Tuesday, to make a mistake. Because—and the stakes! You know, because the instant you make a mistake, you fall back into this category of dehumanized Black folks who we already told you, you know, we already thought ought not properly and could not possibly qualify to be part of this glorious institution and hallowed tradition. Is that . . . is that all fair?

David affirmed and extended my understanding:

That is all fair, and spot on. And even to the level of what I would say is—there was this stream of conversation that somehow the diversifying of the school was negatively impacting the educational excellence of the place. And so there was just this constant, sort of, proving you had to do, that that’s not what was happening.

At various points in our conversation I remarked on David’s resilience, stamina, and longevity at Aiken despite the seemingly overwhelming, corrosive dynamics of whiteness within it. David spoke to this, while adding additional dimensions to my understanding of the unique position he was in:

I don’t remember who first coined this about me, but they call me “Mr. Teflon.” Yeah, they said people might throw some things at me but it’s gonna slide right off. . . . I’ve lasted in the institution for a long time, because of the teflon-like effect that I seem to have.

I realized this wasn't always a blessing, as David continued his commentary:

But there are other educators of color that have come through the place that couldn't survive the place. No matter how much effort I put in to support them, and retain them, and keep them meaningfully engaged—they could not stay in the place. And here's the interesting thing that I just—I'm going to name it for what it's worth. I think part of the challenge why they couldn't do that was rooted in the fact that there was this expectation that they were going to be Black folk just like I am; in the same ways that I am. And so part of the exceptionalism for them became, "If you don't present in the way that David presents, then we're going to treat you a particular way." And that—that's something that I have fought with everything in me over the years. I feel like I finally have gotten the institution to a place where that's not the expectation anymore. But I would say for, you know, the first two thirds of my time here, that was the dynamic.

I sighed in recognition of the cruel irony of the dynamic he'd just explained. He continued:

Exactly. Yeah. . . . So, troubling in every way that you could imagine that, you know, I felt like I was learning the code, and not translating it in a good enough way for others to be able to navigate.

At one point I speculated—recklessly, perhaps—that David's intentionality in positioning himself strategically to advance the school's DEI initiatives leveraged, in a way, all that he'd explained about Du Bois and double consciousness:

It sounds like you kind of, like, doubled down on investing in double consciousness almost as a strategy, or a technique, for like—like, you made it your own way to hold yourself. And I suspect—I don't know, but I suspect—that at some moments, it maybe

helped you to remove yourself a bit. To, you know, study an object outside yourself. Whereas if you didn't have that capacity—I don't want to use the word “dissociate,” because it's got its actual meaning, but—both to survive, and to thrive, and to navigate these dynamics, being able to step away from them, and almost will yourself into “I'm observing a phenomenon; I'm not experiencing an aggression.”

David's response both affirmed part of the salient dynamic that he had experienced, and underlined what I took to be a slight I'd made in framing it:

That is so the vibe, and wow—wow! Even just the way you described it, even knowing that's the vibe—it's still—it's still disturbing to me. On so many levels that—that really has been a part of—of my reality in the place. My relationship with the place. Ugh. I don't like that you just—you just named that in the way that you did. But I get it.

In our group meeting some time thereafter, I brought this topic up again in an effort to amend any offense: I realized that my use of the word “dissociate” pathologized David's posture and his experience in a way I hadn't intended. My intention wasn't to imply that David had been defeated, broken, or otherwise fractured by his experiences at Aiken, but that he had intentionally formed and necessarily assumed a stance that made it plausible not only to survive at the place, but to thrive—and fundamentally to catalyze transformative change within it over the years. In the original conversation, David qualified the thoughts my framing brought up for him:

In all the phenomenological ways that I think you, you meant to speak to that, I think what, what it reminds me of—and again, this will resonate with you for all the right reasons—it reminds me of the moments that I've had throughout my time there where

I've always questioned how complicit and complacent I'm being, because of how I get to exist in the place in ways that others don't have the power and privilege and position to navigate. Because I've been afforded—both by position, and whatever it is—by, you know, skill set and credibility and reputation that I've been able to garner in the community—I know there are so many things that I don't have to navigate that others do. . . . I still always have to recognize the fact that I have it easier than most. I just do.

As David continue to decipher “the code of whiteness” in this progressive, independent high school in order to share his learning with other Black colleagues and students, and to use “the cunning invasion of intelligence” to reshape schoolwide systems and structures over time in the interests of racial equity and justice, he realized another key feature of the code was that the culture of teaching and learning was enmeshed in a preoccupation with individualism:

One sort of philosophical tenet that has always perplexed me is individualism. And all the ways that shows up. Particularly when you're dealing with a lot of other cultural communities, individualism is not their primary philosophical commitment—and it's not what they bring to the actual teaching and learning that could and should happen in that community. That it's more built on this more, again, cooperative, community-based—it's a different worldview, frankly, altogether.

At a general level, David found this problematic because it seemed to confer greater importance to individual needs and interests than to the welfare of the community: “And, you know, how you interrupt the ‘me, myself, and I’ part of the way we do schooling, I think is a really important piece to this, if that makes sense.” But this was particularly problematic at Aiken, in

David's view, insofar as this preoccupation with individualism was situated in a uncritical acceptance of meritocracy:

[W]hat I'm partly suggesting is that a lot of the racism and the white supremacy that I think is embedded in American education is—is elevated by the dynamic of how we decided to talk about merit—and the systems of meritocracy.

David explained his concern with meritocracy with reference to a conversation he had with Dr. Eddie Glaude—distinguished Princeton professor, author, and MSNBC contributor—during a visit to Aiken a few years ago, in which they discussed the contradictions that meritocracy veils—in general, certainly, but particularly in David's experience of progressive school culture at Aiken:

And one of the amazing contradictions of American democracy is this whole idea of really being tied to the democratic ideal, while at the same time operating out of this deep belief that others are valued—well, let me be direct: that white people are more valued than others. Okay?

All this reminded David of a question posed in a text he'd assigned in an African American studies class, addressing free Negro populations in the Antebellum South and posing the question, "What does it mean to actually experience the freedom of America, yet the burden of its hypocrisy?" (Berry & Blassingame, 1982, p. 33).

What it meant for David is that meritocracy itself—or, more precisely, the criteria used to determine merit, or eligibility, or access, or opportunity—are always and already enmeshed in white supremacy:

I think the way we do and talk about what is meritorious is directly connected with that sense of—by design, this has to work out for whiteness. And so I’m going to elevate this thing called whiteness as being the standard by which all other things are measured, to make sure it always wins.

Thus, although the culture of this progressive institution prided itself on its commitment to individual needs—and imagined itself as committed to supporting each individual child’s success on the arc of meritocracy, regardless of their racial or ethnic identity—there was little or no space for Black students to imagine success except within the bounds of white norms:

It becomes an outcomes conversation so frequently. That you’re looking for, amongst different constituents, and particularly different racial and ethnic groups in your school community, that somehow, again, will reference back to this standard of whiteness that you’ve held up for the institution, right? As opposed to, “What does it look like to create these multiple streams of what we think merit and success and achievement look like?”

And then to design processes and practices that allow all those things to come to fruition.

To check for understanding of this key point, I ran this formulation by David:

Authentic belonging and authentic equity rests on understanding, perhaps, that there are multiple forms and permutations of “success” that might be suitable and different—or appropriate to, and evolving out of, different cultural experiences—that need to be recognized as equally valid and equally reliable indicators of success.

David nodded to affirm this understanding, and extended it: “And not just as contributive to this—to this industrial, economic, political, and social machine that whiteness built.” At this I joked, impertinently perhaps, that “The donors are not going to like that.”

At another point in our conversation—related, obliquely, to these notions of individualism and meritocracy—David also suggested that “the code of whiteness” also rests on what he called “status seeking behaviors:”

And by status seeking behaviors, I mean—whether or not, you know, you have names on particular buildings. Okay? You know, whether or not, you know, there’s a particular endowed chairship or scholarship that is connected to a particular person and/or purpose. Subsequently, David correlated other school practices—such as ability group tracking, the subsumption of educational priorities to college placement imperatives, and “the absolute allegiance to the standardized test world”—to this category of “status seeking behaviors . . . that are so deeply rooted in some key concepts of white supremacy.” When it came to these behaviors, and others broadly associated with this dynamic—from the hallmarks of independent school fundraising, to well-financed private schools’ frenzied applications for Paycheck Protection Program loans during the pandemic²—David suggested that these tendencies are rooted in a misguided conception of power:

It’s built on such a scarcity model. As opposed to an abundance model. And it’s—I love the way that, you know, Brittany Packnett Cunningham [social justice activist and cultural commentator] says it’s the failure to recognize what power *sharing* looks like, because you’re too busy power *hoarding*.

² Though public schools were ineligible to apply, \$6 billion in forgivable loans from the Small Business Administration were sought by and awarded to private and charter schools during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ujifusa, 2020). Hubler and Nierenberg (2021) discussed several notable private schools’ successful applications for these loans despite ample finances and sizable endowments.

When I asked David about his experiences interrupting or resisting white dominance in a progressive education space, he was quick to root his response in the kinds of precise, intentional, and thoroughly considered strategies he had used over the years, meaningfully to effect change within the bounds of an institution whose declared commitments to progressive pedagogy had been dwarfed for many decades beforehand by its reflexive investment in the norms of white supremacy culture. He didn't cite isolated acts of public interruption, overt defiance, or resistance, so much as a variety of generative and artfully crafted strategies to amplify the voices of others:

So, for me, a lot of it was—and a lot of it has always been centered in—how can I bring other voices to the table that don't tend to get invited, frankly. And being really intentional to committing to that in every kind of way. Because the minute that you bring voices to the table—it's that dynamic of "you can't unknow what you now know." And so it was me always wanting to make sure that in everything that I was doing, I was bringing in those voices that weren't typically being heard, and I was putting them in front of audiences, that they couldn't unknow it anymore.

In some instances this involved bringing outside speakers to the campus to introduce unfamiliar and provocative ideas. In other instances, it involved enlisting students of color and supporting them to make their needs known as a collective:

I could say all I wanted to, or other adults in the community could say all they wanted to, but until I got the student to voice it in front of them—what they wanted, what they needed, what was going on in their experience of school—you know, all my stuff could get pushed away and punted for years down the road and off the line, but the students?

In one such case, David recognized that he'd been advocating for a number of years for the school to create and adopt a formal DEI strategic plan; somehow, this initiative was stalled at the board and senior leadership level. David considered the predicament, and enlisted a group of Black students to report to the board on their experience at the school:

And so I had primed and prepared them. And they showed up, and they laid it all on the table in ways that I couldn't have even imagined. And while having that very moment—literally within the next month, guess what we started? Building a new strategic plan. And it totally changed the trajectory of the work that we were going to do as a school community.

David helped me to think more expansively than I had about strategies and tactics of resistance. He captured the proactive, intentional, and to some degree subversive approach he'd formulated over time as follows:

Interrupting is one thing; resistance is another thing. And I just want to be clear when I say that resistance for me comes in a lot of forms. And there's, you know—there's that common stream that we'll often talk about, of what it means to be reactive, versus responsive, versus proactive. And for me, I was always trying to figure out how could we develop resistance in all three of those streams?

David felt that moments of reactionary advocacy—loud, spontaneous, spectacular—were what were primarily understood by white folks to be forms of Black resistance. David's reset was quite simple, at some level: "Some of the proactive things that we might imagine, were just as resistant as anything else." All this resonated with the extremely thoughtful and precise thinking

David had shared about his experience at Aiken, and the keys he'd discovered to leading the school towards a more culturally democratic vision of progressive education through the years:

Particularly when you're dealing with something as woven into the DNA of an organization as white dominance, white supremacy, white privilege—you give whatever name you want to the whiteness. When it's that woven and deeply entrenched in what the place is, you have to be that strategic about how you are moving through it in deep and organizationally changing types of ways.

Major Themes From the Critical Narratives

The testimony of these four participants—Anne, Louis, Aziza, and David—unveiled many nuances and contours of their experience of whiteness within progressive schools and organizations. Analysis of the participants' accounts revealed a pattern of five predominant themes that resonated across the group of interviews:

- “The Pretense of Progressive Claims about Racial Justice: Virtue Signaling, Inadequate Investment, and Ambiguous Commitment”;
- “Representational Diversity is Not the Same as Racial Justice: Inclusion Versus Belonging”;
- “‘How Dare You?’: Black Hypervisibility, Silencing, and Assimilation”;
- “Reconceiving Black Resistance and Responsibility for Racial Justice: Building and Belonging”; and
- “Excavating and Mitigating Erasures: Towards a More Expansive History and Definition of ‘Progressive Education.’”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided rich individual accounts of each participant's testimony that reveal significant nuances and contours of their lived experience of whiteness in progressive educational spaces, and identified five prominent themes that emerged from analysis across the body of interviews. In the following chapter, I provide more substantial discussion of these five themes, cite correlations of participants' testimony with these themes, summarize feedback I received from participants in the group meetings, and present high-level recommendations addressing Research Question 2 that were revealed both in dialogue with participants about their stories, and by more closed-ended questioning in the second part of each interview. These recommendations provide insights on how progressive Black and white progressive educators and activists, progressive school leaders, progressive advocacy organizations, and university researchers might most effectively position themselves to advance cultural democracy in progressive education in the months and years to come.

CHAPTER 5

THEMATIC DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Chapter 4, I provided rich individual accounts of each participant's testimony that revealed significant nuances and contours of their lived experience of whiteness in progressive educational spaces, and identified five prominent themes that emerged from analysis across the body of interviews. In this first section of this chapter, I provide more substantial discussion of these five overarching themes, reference salient literature on the subject matter, and cite correlations of participants' testimony with these themes and their constituent dynamics: together with the data from Chapter 4, this section constitutes a discussion of responses to Research Question 1. In the following section, I summarize and reflect on feedback I received from participants in group meetings that followed individual interviews, focusing on our debrief of racialized dynamics in the research process and participants' reminders about the critical importance of active listening. Subsequently, I establish some provisos for the reception and interpretation of these themes in order to mitigate misunderstandings that may ensue from the study's focus on highly personalized accounts of participants and the predominance of their experience in private progressive schools. Finally, I present high-level recommendations addressing Research Question 2 that were revealed both in dialogue with participants about their stories, and by more closed-ended questioning in the second part of each interview. These recommendations provide insights on how progressive Black and white progressive educators and activists, progressive school leaders, and progressive advocacy organizations and university researchers might most effectively position themselves and refine their practices in order to

interrupt institutional racism, disrupt the hegemony of white norms, and advance cultural democracy in progressive education in the months and years to come.

Predominant Themes from Critical Narratives

In Chapter 4, five predominant themes were identified that emerged from analysis of the full transcripts of critical narratives from all participants. The following complex dynamics pertaining to Black educators and activists' lived experience of whiteness in progressive education spaces were revealed through participants' stories:

- “The Pretense of Progressive Claims about Racial Justice: Virtue Signaling, Inadequate Investment, and Ambiguous Commitment”;
- “Representational Diversity is Not the Same as Racial Justice: Inclusion Versus Belonging”;
- “‘How Dare You?’: Black Hypervisibility, Silencing, and Assimilation”;
- “Reconceiving Black Resistance and Responsibility for Racial Justice: Building and Belonging”; and
- “Excavating and Mitigating Erasures: Towards a More Expansive History and Definition of ‘Progressive Education.’”

In this section, each of these five themes are explicated in summaries that include references to related literature. Following each of these summaries, participant testimony is cited and collected that further correlates with those themes and their constituent dynamics. In combination with the data presented in Chapter 4, this section serves as a discussion of this study's response to Research Question 1: “How do the lived experiences of Black educators and activists in progressive education reveal specific ways that the politics of whiteness (e.g., color-blindness,

white privilege, and/or white supremacy) have perpetuated structures of racism in progressive schools and organizations?”

**The Pretense of Progressive Claims about Racial Justice:
Virtue Signaling, Inadequate Investment, and Ambiguous Commitment**

Something is—something is awry here. This is completely—what is being said, and what’s being practiced, is completely out of alignment.

—Aziza

All of the participants noted a fundamental dissonance between the claims progressive schools and organizations make about their commitments to racial equity and justice, and the legitimacy of those claims as evidenced by their lived experience in those progressive spaces. They noted that the term “progressive” was itself deployed intentionally by these institutions as a kind of shorthand for known, generalized associations between the word “progressive” and the concepts of racial justice and equity, consistent with Ahmed’s (2016) description:

Many of my interviewees spoke of . . . a disappointment of an expectation: that diversity work would be more at home in organisations that have missions that are tied up with commitments to social progress. *A genealogy of progressive racism is a genealogy of this expectation.* It is the very expectation that diversity and equality are more at home in organisations that are assumed to be more progressive that enables racism to progress. (para. 9)

As Aziza described her onboarding to her daughter’s progressive elementary school, she noted the repeated deployment of the term: “It was very strange. It was very vague. So they kept using it as a kind of badge. And as some sort of—there was some dog whistling going on with this term, ‘progressive.’” Each participant affirmed that these institutions relied on commonplace assumptions about progressive education’s preoccupation with democratic education and social

transformation to leverage communal faith and belief in their commitments to racial equity and justice.

Yet these participants experienced progressive schools and activist organizations as “white spaces” (Anderson, 2015) in which the hegemony of white norms went essentially unchallenged despite what Aziza called the “topical and optical” commitments to DEI work that may have been visible from day to day, and seemed to satisfy the interests of predominantly white leadership, but didn’t seem to alter the dynamics of racialized isolation, marginalization, or exclusion they experienced. Darder (2012) described similar dynamics:

[T]he dominant culture is able to manipulate alternative and oppositional ideologies in a manner that more readily secures its hegemony. In the golden era of multiculturalism, celebrations of *Cinco de Mayo* and Martin Luther King’s birthday served as prime examples of how these initially radical concepts—intended to resist and push back cultural invasion—have been appropriated in such a fashion that they now do little to challenge the real basis of power of the dominant culture. (p. 41)

Similarly, participants noted that their schools often had affinity groups, SEED meetings, or other forms of professional development that map broadly to racial justice goals, but that the schools were particularly preoccupied by “one-off” events with expensive speakers that seemed more like spectacles in which the school’s declared DEI values were publicly performed, than like carefully considered interventions mapping to lived experience “on the ground.” In addition, the progressive spaces these participants navigated ascribed more institutional value to the recruitment of Black employees than to the support of their humanity once employed. Aziza described her overall impression at one point:

I see lots of *more*. I see more people of color. I see more speakers. I see more texts. I see more, but is it different? . . . I feel a lot of “moreness” happening. But that doesn’t necessarily equate to transformation.

Latent in the subtext of these dialogues was the notion that because most progressive schools are independent schools, and because most independent schools are predominantly white, that this facile use of the progressive “badge” helped to serve and protect the broader interests of a predominantly white clientele by signaling a virtuous alignment with the values of racial justice, but not committing to potentially more uncomfortable, disruptive, or transformational work on racist systems, structures, and norms. (The same was true for Louis in the context of predominantly white progressive activist groups.) Despite the latent potential of social transformation seeded amongst progressive education’s earliest roots, particularly amongst the radical progressives (Vaughan, 2018), Algava (2016) confirmed the contemporary predominance of progressive pedagogical models in private schools and its most conspicuous result: “And yet, nearly a century later, progressive schools typically . . . continue to focus their attention on child-centered pedagogies and continue to serve children and families whose economic, social, and cultural capital already serves them well” (p. 47). In fact, when more transformational work was developed and suggested internally by Black educators or activists—and sometimes even supported and sought after by conscientized white colleagues—these proposals were serially rebuffed by leadership in favor of seemingly tokenized hiring, the isolated spectacles of PD events, and what Aziza at one point referred to as an administrative “abdication of responsibility” for addressing topical racial concerns and/or advancing school-wide change.

Further Correlations to Participants' Narratives

Anne alluded to this phenomenon when trying to imagine why Diane Lewis thought the spectacle of a student assembly on whiteness, with no communal preparation or forethought, was a good idea:

If I had to guess, I would say she probably came to Middleton, and thought, you know, “This is a space of justice and equity.” You know. “This is a brave space where we can have these kinds of conversations.” And because it’s a progressive school, you know, everybody here thinks about race and justice and equity in the same way, like we’re all on the same team. Right? Like, I would be willing to place money on that bet.

She explored this further when she alluded to a common notion of progressive schools:

I think about, like, a progressive school—that sort of, like, hangs its hat on this idea of democracy—it’s that stupid, you know, shining city on the hill image that we got from whatever founding father, you know, who was probably also a slave owner, you know. . . . But a progressive school, you know, just hanging that shingle out—really, you know—so what are you trying to amplify here? Um, and once you know—once the mess starts getting exposed—how do you respond to that? And if you’re responding by sort of reinforcing the structures of white supremacy and racism, then you’re totally screwed.

Louis recognized these dissonances between progressive education’s broader claims of socially transformative potential, and the reality of its practiced commitments to racial justice, early on his career:

So, um, what’s fascinating is, I sought these spaces out, even though I knew full well that when I sought them out that these places were superduper white. . . . And even though we

sought to go into the spaces, because it satisfied the, I guess, pedagogical, the structural, the more aspirational elements of the work that we did—it didn't satisfy the more relevant racial and social justice elements, especially in the contexts . . . that I was working in.

Louis also proffered an explanation, drawn from his experience in progressive activist spaces, as to the root causes of this dichotomy:

I know, unfortunately, that there are people who at once felt that they wanted some form of racial and social justice, but wanted it on their terms. The umbrella that they sought to create was one that would adhere to the things they wanted.

Thus, a progressive organization trumpeting its “progressive” status can serve as a mechanism of control to preserve the racialized status quo:

[W]ithin progressive schools, we see a dynamic where . . . because we name ourselves progressive, that also means we're right. Even as we see experiences of students of color within these spaces—sometimes become averse to them, because of how right they think they are. There are countless stories . . . where the students went out there to get a better education in predominantly white schools, only to notice that, like, these independent, progressive-type schools, were not responsive to children's needs, concerns, [or] stories.

David's experience and perspective as pertains to this dynamic were much aligned with Louis's thoughts concerning progressive schools' deployment of the “progressive” badge. David suggested an interpretation of the latent subtext:

I want to be able to be seen for what I have. And I want to put up pretty pictures and facades that I'm doing X, Y, and Z, but really all I want to do is to control this particular

thing, in a particular way that is not particularly built around the broader democratic ideals that we said were so critically important philosophically.

Aziza echoed this insight when she spoke to the dominance of white norms in her progressive school's culture despite a broad slate of initiatives ostensibly devoted to racial justice goals:

The actual impact is that the core remains the same; the core foundation of why so many of these schools exist, they simply remain the same. So there's enough going on, sort of in the visual realm, to say, "Oh, wow, there's lots of changes here." But there is a core that is unwavering. A core of serving a particular clientele that's unwavering—that always has to get dealt with.

Reflecting in our second session on the broad associations people make with progressive education, and the use to which these are put when progressive organizations signal their "progressive" status, Aziza captured the hypocrisy at the core:

There's a real, like, romanticism. It's a little saccharine, the romanticism with progressive education. Um, and it's because of—there's so many elements of it that feel very human. But there's this sort of like borderline arrogance about it—just because it has these human tenets, this exploration—this "let's see the whole human, the whole child, the whole whatever"—there is way that somehow—that absolves them from, like, the racism and the white supremacy that is far more entrenched than any of their progressive educational principles. . . . Like, "If we just, you know, play well enough together, it'll work out." And white supremacy will eat progressive education for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

She assessed the core of the problem with a simple, telling statement: “The humility that is needed to face this racial thing—it’s just absent.”

Representational Diversity is Not the Same as Racial Justice: Inclusion Versus Belonging

And I hate to say it in this way, too, but they thought that they could just change the faces without changing the direction of their work.

—Louis

Just as participants shared about these institutions’ preoccupations with “singular outward events,” as Aziza called them, to performatively signal their alignment with racial justice goals, so too they seemed to perceive the mere fact of hiring a Black educator, and the visibility of that Black educator in the midst of their community, as positive proof of their authentic investments in racial equity and justice as an institution. These institutions positioned Black students similarly: the mere fact of their enrollment, without regard to their sense of belonging, was taken to validate the school’s racial justice work. George Yancy (2022), in dialogue with Robin D. G. Kelley, cited this dynamic as a hallmark of contemporary liberal multiculturalism:

I assume that our inclusion is designed to communicate that we have arrived, as Sara Ahmed [2011] would argue, and that any critique at all is superfluous. For Ahmed, diversity in this world becomes then a happy sign, a sign that racism has been overcome. So, I think that we need to resist such a happy sign and its attempt at obfuscation. (Yancy, 2022, para. 15)

From one lens, the participants’ shared experiences simply comprise a demonstration of the most abject form of tokenism in progressive education spaces. From other lenses, this phenomenon conceals the preposterously low numbers of Black folks employed or enrolled by these

institutions, unveils the superficiality of the institutions' commitments to DEI, and distracts from unsustainable dynamics that are imposed on these same few Black educators once they're hired.

Elijah Anderson (2015) described an aspect of the perceptual calculus of Black folks entering and assessing the safety of white spaces:

When present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally "off limits." (p. 10)

Similarly, every participant noted that they found themselves among very few Black colleagues in their progressive school or activist organization, and that in some cases they were or may have been "The Only." Those participants who worked in schools also witnessed very limited and/or declining enrollment of Black students. They also noted the predominant patterns of Black hiring in relation to positions of power: leadership tended overwhelmingly to be white, for example, while Black folks tended to occupy facilities staff, clerical, and other hierarchically inferior positions. Participants described these representational dynamics as being construed by the dominant culture as part of a familiar or natural order, consistent with Bonilla-Silva's description of the naturalization of racial matters as one of the four frames of color-blind racism (2001, 2013). And these Black educators felt at times that the simple fact of their having been hired was perceived in and by the schools as evidence of the validity of the institutions' ostensible commitments to racial equity and justice. Yancy (2022) referenced this phenomenon as typical of liberal multiculturalism: "Liberal multiculturalism says, 'Yes, we see you, Now be happy'" (para. 13). Anne summarized the spirit of this latent symbolism at MPHS: "As I'm thinking right

now, what I felt when I arrived is very much this sense that a lot of our Black and Brown kids also experienced, which is like, ‘Well, you’re here, So we’ve done our work.’” And yet—to whatever extent “our work” should also include ensuring that Black educators are supported in every dimension of their humanity as colleagues—that work was rarely undertaken, with the exception of such provisions as schools supporting meetings of ethnoracial affinity groups, or providing funding to attend POCC or other analogous external conferences. By and large, as Aziza put it, “Your humanness gets managed on your own.” This is a far cry from Darder’s (2012) insistence that:

[E]ducators must create the conditions for a genuine form of cultural democracy to take root . . . one that not only creates the space for all aspects of their humanity to be expressed but also allows their cultural particularities to be in critical conversation with the universal human dimensions that are also vital to their identities and relationships with others. (p. 55)

Instead, what many of the participants experienced was a heightened sense of scrutiny, an overwrought expectation of loyalty, and the projection of the belief that they as Black educators should rest content with gratitude for their appointment. Two participants, Anne and Aziza, perceived school leaders as presuming that they should simply be grateful not to be teaching in a public school, as though they should consider their appointments as a prize. They were, after all, highly trained, highly skilled, and highly practiced well before they arrived at a progressive institution’s gates. But despite the fact that they were unquestionably qualified for their positions—arguably, overly qualified—they were instead treated as though they’d been conferred a special, unearned privilege of some kind by virtue of their hiring. In the end,

participants felt they were imagined by the institutions either as exceptions to normalized beliefs about Black inferiority, or the recipients of the institutions' charity. They saw this to be true of how Black students were imagined as well, and decried ways these phenomena positioned their humanity between the narratives of Black Exceptionalism and "the white man's burden."

In addition, most participants were uncomfortably familiar with a crucial irony: despite their presence being trumpeted by the school as evidence of its thoroughgoing commitments to racial justice, they and their few Black colleagues were shouldered with the primary responsibility to advance those commitments in the day-to-day life of the school. Aziza framed this phenomenon of transferring responsibility for managing on-campus racial concerns to Black and other BIPOC employees:

There's an expectation that hiring a person of color, you're getting a two- or three-for-one. So you're getting somebody who can do whatever the job is—but by virtue of them having melanin, they're also supposed to be able to, quote/unquote, "take on these issues."

In the contexts of the cultural incompetence of predominantly white leadership, the silence or vagary with which racial issues were addressed in common discourse at the school, and the ineffectiveness of school-wide DEI initiatives, this responsibility was deemed by most participants to be unreasonable, overwhelming, and disingenuous.

Finally, every participant alluded to elevated standards of intentionality and self-protection with which they had to carry themselves in progressive spaces. For example, David repeatedly spoke to "the cunning invasion of intelligence" with which a consultant advised him to approach his leadership work: to operate strategically and subversively to advance new ideas

and approaches in a space that wasn't particularly receptive to suggestions from Black folks. Other participants echoed this sentiment with reference to choosing one's battles carefully—more carefully, in other words, than white colleagues might need to choose theirs—given the demonstrated precarity of the institutions' investment in their long-term retention. Every participant in this study spoke to an elevated risk of being pushed out of their position, and/or to frightful rates of turnover for Black colleagues they had witnessed over the years. All of these dynamics are crucial illustrations of the fraught dynamics navigated in progressive education spaces in the process of biculturation (Darder, 2012). A memorable comment by Dr. Eddie Moore, scholar and founder of the White Privilege Institute and Conference, captures the core of this theme: “You don't get to equity through diversity” (E. Moore, personal communication, October 14, 2021).

Further Correlations to Participants' Narratives

Only after having been hired and beginning to onboard did Anne come to learn a crucial fact:

I was the first Black woman hired in the English department; probably the first Black teacher hired in the English department in the history of the school. . . . And, like, as I'm thinking right now, what I felt when I, you know, arrived is very much this sense that a lot of our Black and Brown kids also experienced, which is like, “Well, you're here. So we've done our work.”

Anne saw a similar dynamic at play in the otherwise mundane circumstances of an administrator's thoughts about an assembly honoring the life and works of a Black poet, when he enlisted eleventh hour support from Black teachers to identify students who could participate:

“You know, he crystallizes for me the way whiteness works. It’s sort of like, ‘Oh my God, you know, we have this event that we’re doing, and yeah—but maybe we should get some Black and Brown kids.’” Similarly, at a school-based conference, Louis realized what he had walked into when Black student tour guides expressed their surprise at seeing him: “*You’re here?* Oh snap! Like, I didn’t know that we had Black attendees at this conference.” At a much more prominent event in which he was recruited as the sole Black panelist engaging with a national union leader, Louis flipped the script by deciding to call attention to these dynamics:

I thought it would be best to truly address why is it that, you know, the vast majority of the folks who think that they’re right on the issue did not create more seats for the people who are often most ignored when it came to racial and social justice.

Ironically—or, perhaps, predictably—this move evoked the ire of the white panelists who’d invited him. It was at this juncture in our conversation that Louis got to the core of this dynamic: “They thought they could just change the faces without changing the direction of their work.” Referring to these dynamics with regard to the recruitment of Black students a bit later, he added, “For them, it’s not about creating space; it’s about delivering a form of charity.”

David had certain assumptions about Aiken Progressive High School before he onboarded: “I am not going anywhere near that space. It feels disconnected from Black folk. Uppity.” Although he shared those thoughts with a lighthearted smile, he revealed before long what he came to learn about Aiken, nearly a century after its founding: “You heard correctly: prior to my wife there had never been a Black educator at Aiken that lasted more than four years.” As David tried to get his head around his charge to articulate a vision for authentic DEI

work at Aiken in the years to follow, he took these patterns as evidence of deeper-seated problems in the culture of the school:

And part of it . . . was recognizing, one, that there wasn't a significant critical mass of people of color in the space, that the actual educators who had been in the space prior to, frankly, my spouse and I, had not lasted long in the place. So all of that early information really let me know there were things that, again, were deeply rooted in the place.

Of course, the most overwhelming testimony on this dynamic—for me, at least—was David's story of sitting with a veteran Black member of the facilities staff to share with him some thoughts about how David “might survive the place”—or, rather, how he would suggest to David to adopt a “go-along-to-get-along kind of attitude” in order to do so.

Aziza paid very careful attention to the racialized dynamics of power in Weston Progressive's administration, faculty, and staff:

Alright, got it. All of the security guards are Black people. Check. All of the maintenance people are Black. Check. All of the administrators I'm meeting are white. Check. . . . And so I was watching who was holding what role.

Later, she noted the disproportionate emphasis that was paid by Weston to simply hiring Black and other BIPOC employees, without attending to more substantial and transformative racial justice leadership or providing adequately humanizing support to those employees:

I'm watching so many places, you know, continue to just hire people of color, and then it just kind of stops there. . . . Those people who are hired are going to be expected to—they will burn out, they will overwork, they will over-function. That is actually written into

the algorithm. They will get exploited. . . . It really is a kind of reconfiguring so much more than which people will be hired.

With regard to these and related dynamics, Aziza offered a most provocative thought experiment that helped substantiate the tension that is central to this theme:

For me, I'm curious about what else could there be? So if there were, for instance, no people of color to hire, what then would an institution do to ensure equity for all its students? . . . Because I promise this: if all the Black educators disappeared tomorrow, progressive education schools will open up the next day; they will put some sort of banner somewhere to say, "Man, I don't know where all the melanated people went, but we're going to keep it rolling." And guess what: they would pretty much keep rolling the way they are now.

"How Dare You?": Black Hypervisibility, Silencing, and Assimilation

So yeah. It was very much like, "Oh, we're so glad you're here," until they're *not*.
—Anne

This theme invokes a complex of dynamics that affected all participants—in part because they found themselves among very few, if any, Black colleagues in progressive education spaces, and in part because these institutions were dominated by colorblindness and the hegemony of white norms. One of the core dynamics of this complex is the hypervisibility each participant experienced in progressive education spaces as a result of their Black identities: they felt themselves to be the objects of a white gaze (Anderson, 2015) that was curious and uncomfortable. Anne, for example, recalled her early days at Middleton Progressive:

There was definitely a time when I first started working at Middleton, where I was highly, like, hyper-aware of being sort of like the poster child—you know, as the first

one—like, recognizing that in some spaces people were, like, listening a bit more carefully . . . or at least pretending to listen more carefully.

This experience aligned with Anderson’s (2015) description of the phenomenon:

When the anonymous black person enters the white space, others there immediately try to make sense of him or her—to figure out “who that is,” or to gain a sense of the nature of the person’s business and whether they need to be concerned. (p. 13)

In addition, as previously discussed, some participants were offered bland assurance of the predominantly white community’s acceptance of their presence in the space. Participants also described an excessive and seemingly performative kindness or “niceness” that was lavished on them. DiAngelo (2021) described this behavior and its reception:

Some Black friends have told me that they prefer open hostility to niceness. They understand open hostility and can protect themselves as needed. But the deception of niceness adds a confusing layer that makes it difficult to decipher trustworthy allyship from disingenuous white liberalism. (2021, p. 53)

The more these participants exerted agency—either by activating to register concerns about racialized dynamics they witnessed or experienced, or by investing themselves in the generative work of curriculum building or project leadership—they were met with silence and with *silencing*.

Most of the participants referenced the silence around racial issues they commonly experienced. In some cases this was subtle, as in David’s head of school engaging with him privately about racial matters but rarely discussing them in larger groups or public forums. In the other participants’ cases this silence was even more stark, manifesting in some cases as the literal

refusal to engage in explicit conversation about race, and in other cases as either the skepticism that matters were worthy of concern or the demonstration of resistance to critical feedback or suggestions about the school's response to topical crises or broader DEI initiatives. This silence was consistent with Bonilla-Silva's description of the minimization of racism as the fourth frame of color-blind racism (2001, 2013).

Given the participants' racialized identities, concerns about racial conflict and critical questions about the school's DEI approaches sometimes overlapped with their own experiences and struggles at the school. In these cases, the prevailing silence on or vagary about these issues converted to a kind of silencing of crucial dimensions of their identity and experience. As previously mentioned, because these educators were Black, and because their presence was interpreted through the lens of the prevailing myths of Black Exceptionalism or The White Man's Burden, they were meant to be grateful for their jobs. The registration of racial concerns, or critical questions or suggestions about broader DEI initiatives, were tersely acknowledged with an "I hear you" or a "we hear you" but the issues of concern were never themselves directly addressed. As Aziza put it, "If the people of color are kind of, like, seen and heard, then that's enough."

Most disturbingly, when participants exerted the conspicuous agency independently to design new curriculum frameworks, introduce new ideas in conference spaces, speak truth to power, or respectfully question the propriety of certain leadership decisions, they were treated as if they had gone "off script" from the loyalty and complacency they were otherwise seemingly expected to demonstrate as Black employees. In these instances, they were either explicitly chastised, or otherwise shut down in silence. Anne was reamed by a board member for "playing

the race card” after becoming the president of the board; Louis was alienated by white progressive activists for speaking to the inadequate diversity commitments of the organization; Aziza never received acknowledgment from school leadership about the continuation of programming she designed that threatened to make the school’s DEI commitments more authentic and substantial. These experiences resonated with Anderson’s (2015) suggestion:

The most easily tolerated black person in the white space is often one who is “in his [or her] place.” . . . Such a person may be believed to be less likely to disturb the implicit racial order—whites as dominant and blacks as subordinate. (p. 13)

The only participant who did not speak explicitly to this experience was David—but David had long since adopted a strategically subversive posture once a veteran colleague gave him the “go-along-to-get-along talk” and he realized he would have to navigate Aiken’s culture differently “in order to survive the place,” resonant with Darder’s account of the process of biculturation (2012). However, David witnessed many “other educators of color that have come through the place that couldn’t survive the place” as the result of similar dynamics.

At one point, in passing, Anne commented on the standards of protection of white people in progressive institutions:

I think the protection of—the protection of white fragility is a practice in probably all modes of education. . . . The protection of the well-intentioned white person, I think, is an element of white supremacy, right? Where intention is greater than impact, as opposed to the reverse?

In some instances, these Black educators’ being silenced can be mapped to moments when their registration of racialized concerns, or doubts about institutional DEI programming, may have

been taken personally by white leaders as insinuations of their own cultural incompetency—which, in turn, they met with silence or with outrage, the hallmarks of white fragility:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves . . . These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54)

Regardless, the normalization of white fragility in progressive institutions both obscures its corrosive impacts on Black educators and activists, and begs the question of what is done to protect the fulness of their humanity.

Further Correlations to Participants' Narratives

Anne recalled the experience of this dynamic not long after having been elected to the board of a national progressive organization:

And, you know, this soap opera—like as soon as I started getting ideas, and as soon as I started, you know, having success in the space, the gloves came off. Right? And, and it was, “Well, you know, we don’t really do it that way.” . . . Right? Like that kind of patronizing bullshit.

Later, when she was leading an initiative on a board work group, she remembered lightheartedly teasing other board members about their not having followed through on a deadline: “And I playfully—I *playfully* was like, ‘Now, y’all didn’t do your homework, did you? Come on now!’ And I got *blasted* for that. Like, ‘How dare you?’” When Anne was subsequently elected to the presidency of the board, the dynamics exploded:

I mean, for me, it was kind of like, “Oh, you’re getting a little uppity, Anne,” you know . . . “Oh, you led this bloodless coup. You couldn’t look at us. You”—It was just all this gross, dog whistle bullshit, you know, and I remember calling it out. And what was her name—that Linda woman—she was like, “Well, you’re pulling the race card.” . . . So yeah, it was very much like, “Oh, we’re so glad you’re here,” until they’re *not*. Right? Until they’re not. Until you start piping up, and sharing ideas and thoughts, and like, you know, like being part of the team and collaborating.

Louis recalled moments of hypervisibility and a very cool reception in multiple progressive activist spaces. At a gathering of an elite group of education writers, he recalled, “I would try to strike up conversation—and that led next to nowhere. There were still elements of, ‘Why is he talking to me? Why? Who does he think he is?’” In another conference space he recalled white participants reacting coldly to their discovery that he was a keynote speaker:

“Oh, *that’s* him?” Levels of aggression that I could not have imagined—like, people outside of education are not aware that there are a lot of really petty and, frankly, some of them are *awful* people within our space, that are not quite generous, and then you start asking yourself, why are they in front of our children? Some of these flaws really stand out when it comes to practitioners who espouse, you know, progressive values so to speak, but in their daily interactions with their brethren of color, who they swear up and down they’re in solidarity with, all of a sudden decide that white supremacy matters more.

David was forewarned of some of these dynamics in his conversation early on with a veteran Black colleague who worked on the facilities crew:

It told me that you had to navigate the place in what most of us would call a “go-along-to-get-along” kind of way. . . . And that was, you know—at the same time that I valued what that staff member was saying to me, I was actually disturbed because he essentially was telling me, “Keep your head down. Don’t create too many waves. Address this one as ‘Sir,’ and ‘No, Sir.’”

This forewarning informed David’s approach to his work in the years to come:

Those kinds of messages told me something about the institution. It told me something about what it meant to be in Black skin in that space. And what it very clearly signaled to me is, I have an opportunity, even a responsibility, to figure out what in my power I can do to shift some of what I perceive to be an unhealthy dynamic.

Aziza spoke about the haunting and oppressive silence with which the registration of most racialized concerns was met:

The silence around race was epic. The double speak. There were all kinds of racialized incidents that were happening, both with adults and with children. And that upper school head would literally, politely sit, and would listen, and would literally say nothing—would say, “Well, thank you for sharing that.”

Ironically, once Aziza piloted an equity-focused curricular development program with a dozen, primarily white teachers—all of whom were convinced of its transformative personal and professional potential, as compared to less substantial and transactional professional development activities with which they were familiar at the school—Aziza’s offer to continue and expand the program on a broader basis was met with utter silence: “And Chris, there was never a response. Silence to this day.”

Reconceiving Black Resistance and Responsibility for Racial Justice: Building and Belonging

So, of course, you know: get all of the people of color to handle it.

—Aziza

All participants noted ways in which white leadership abdicated responsibility for directly attending to racial concerns in progressive education spaces. This type of evasion was explored by Zeus Leonardo: “[It] should not be represented as their non-participation in a racialized order. In fact, it showcases precisely how they do perpetuate the racial order by turning the other cheek to it or pretending it does not exist” (2009, p. 108). Crucially, this abdication of responsibility was associated by participants with the displacement of responsibility to Black educators or activists. Typically, this presented as silence by white school leaders in response to the emergence of an obvious crisis or the representation of a related concern, followed by calls to Black employees to clean up the mess. This seemed predicated on the presumption that Black educators and activists, by virtue of their racial identity, must therefore be deeply invested, profoundly knowledgeable, and highly skilled in matters pertaining to DEI such as racial identity development, cultural competency, or facilitating intercultural dialogue. This aligns with Bonilla-Silva’s account of the naturalization of racial matters (2001, 2013), in this case mapping racial literacy as the proper and exclusive domain of racialized subjects. As mentioned earlier, Aziza captured this dynamic precisely:

There’s an expectation that hiring a person of color, you’re getting a two- or three-for-one. So you’re getting somebody who can do whatever the job is—but by virtue of them having melanin, they’re also supposed to be able to, quote/unquote, “take on these issues.”

Asare (2021) contested this presumptuous stance unequivocally:

Not every Black, Indigenous, person of color (BIPOC) is equipped to lead . . . DEI efforts. And similarly, not every BIPOC *wants* to lead these efforts. We cannot assume that every racially minoritized individual is interested and invested in DEI. (para. 2)

This transfer of responsibility to Black educators or activists—“outsourcing,” as Aziza called it at one point—came with little to no room for them to question institutional protocols or programming, which were met with either silence or outrage as expressions of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018). Instead, they were meant unquestioningly to accept the approaches that had been identified by white leadership. The frequency of these uncommunicated calls to clean up racial “messes” was exhausting, according to all participants who spoke to this, in part because it afforded little authentic agency in the effort to mitigate or resolve crises, and added significant burdens to the jobs they were actually hired to do. Furthermore, this phenomenon was associated by some participants with the damaging internalization of an exaggerated belief in their own abilities individually to resolve situations and dynamics well beyond their control. And yet these participants and their Black colleagues were left with little latitude to step back from expectations to address “these issues:” Aziza, for example, was informed more than once that her unwillingness to invest additional time in some opt-in DEI initiatives—in an explicit effort to care for herself by refusing to participate in this matrix of toxic assumptions—was damaging to her professional trajectory.

Discussion of this topic was amplified by participants’ responses to one of my interview questions: “As a Black educator/activist, can you tell me about your experiences interrupting or resisting white dominance in a progressive education space?” Participants’ responses helped me

to realize that I had some facile assumptions about the modes and methods of Black resistance that, obliquely, resonated with these institutional assumptions about the responsibility of Black educators and activists to interrupt whiteness and related racial dynamics and to assume responsibility for the advancement of racial equity and justice. In part these were rooted in past experiences of working with a number of remarkably courageous Black educators and activists who've never demonstrated reticence to take significant personal risks to interrupt fraught racial dynamics in education spaces; these assumptions were also rooted in my limited experience of other white educators who've been willing to do the same. Nevertheless, I entered the research process with some simplistic mental images of what Black resistance would look like: overt, explicit, confrontational, and typically in semi-public reaction to offenses enacted in group spaces.

Instead, the testimony of all participants indicated that they construed “interruption” and “resistance” to the problematic impacts of whiteness and racial inequity quite differently: as something generative, contributive, unifying, and uplifting. Far from being a spectacle, Black interruption and resistance could also be subtle, and tacitly invisible. The participants' varying strategies accorded with Darder's (2012) conceptualization of a “consciousness of resistance” among bicultural subjects:

From this perspective, the consciousness of subordinate cultures cannot be equated with . . . one-dimensional characteristics. Instead, this consciousness has to be recognized as a complex arrangement of ideas and practices that, to one degree or another, is active in the world. Hence, it can be said with little doubt that there is an ever-present *consciousness of resistance* that engages, consciously or unconsciously, in an ongoing struggle with the

external social forces of domination and the internal human forces that seek humanization. (pp. 40-41)

According to Anne, sometimes resistance could be something as innocuous as “articulating into different conversations and spaces . . . some possibilities for understanding things anew.”

Sometimes resistance could be the acceptance of responsibility to lead a group initiative, or the choice to develop new curriculum or protocols in service to the broader community. For David, resistance often manifested as the strategic decision to amplify students’ voices, or to bring in a PD speaker who could offer new insights from an unfamiliar perspective. For Louis, interruption was devoted to the welfare of the organization in order to offer it the opportunity to save itself. Aziza, in particular, called attention to my own limited thinking when she initially responded to my interview question:

I actually didn’t even come into the school with any intention to interrupt or disrupt or resist any of it. I actually came into the school fully aware of what it was and how it functioned. . . . And so for me, I was more committed to what it is I could build on my own terms, versus trying to disrupt and dismantle what was a long practice.

Further Correlations to Participants’ Narratives

Anne’s first response to my interview question was to search her memory for an Alice Walker quote: “Resistance is the secret to joy” (1973, p. 278). She was intentional in declaring to me, from the outset, “I don’t necessarily think about resistance as being full of tension, or like a fighting back, or a fighting *with* in all cases.” She revealed some of the nuances of her thinking by describing an accreditation project she led:

I directed a process, right, that was going to be meaningful in the life of the school. And I think that's a mode of interruption or resistance, right? Because I am going to bring a different style of running a meeting, or co-authoring a document, or what have you.

Ultimately, the work she led was adopted across all of Middleton Progressive's academic departments. Anne reflected on its significance: "I think that's really powerful. And it wasn't because I was trying to step into a space and assert my power or dominance. I was asked, I said yes, and then I came in and did the thing."

With reference to interruption and resistance in activist spaces, Louis provided feedback that also seemed to apply to school-based scenarios:

There's a delicate balance between trying to introduce people of color to spaces of power in these organizations, but then they shouldn't have to do the heavy lifting either. So, there are those of us who have taken that responsibility on, and welcome it. And there are others who shouldn't be bothered.

In any case, he was quite clear about his motivations in those instances that he spoke out in some public forums:

So I want to say, belonging was, is such a critical part to this whole conversation, right? And so I didn't aspire to interrupt, to try to dismantle any sort of organizations. In fact, I thought, this is how you get better. And I'm being very clear with you why I'm doing this. And if you decide not to go this route, then you will have self-imploded—not because of anything I did, but because of what you refuse to do. So my naming the things—you know, I could have screamed to the rooftops and be like, this, that, and the

third—but I try to be generative, where I can, and even in my interruption I don't seek to, like, completely destroy something. I'm like, I rather like you *build* upon something.

David's calculated and deliberate leadership stance as a Black school leader focused on building relationships and cultivating trust. He saw interruption and resistance as opportunities to include and amplify more voices: "So, for me, a lot of it was—and a lot of it has always been centered in—how can I bring other voices to the table—bringing in voices that weren't typically being heard." He spoke to his bringing in outside voices to present new ideas to the community "that couldn't be unheard," and to an experience amplifying students' voices that "totally changed the trajectory of the work we were going to do as a school community." As such, David interrupted and resisted fraught racialized dynamics and discourses at Aiken by honing in on amplifying others' voices as a most effective tactic.

Aziza clearly described the problematic displacement of responsibility for DEI work onto Black educators at Weston Progressive:

Every time there was some sort of racial incident, the colleagues of color who would be bringing issues to the administration, as we were asked to do, but they went nowhere. All of a sudden, they were pulled in and asked to clean up. Manage some sort of crisis.

Totally not on our job description at all. No support. In some ways, kind of absorb the shrapnel. So when there's a crisis, go and get some of these people of color.

Aziza also helped me to see the limitations of my own preconceptions about Black resistance:

They thought—it was a convenient story for them to say, "Oh, the Black woman's coming in, and she's gonna come in, and she's gonna speak up, and she's gonna let them

know, and she's gonna roll her neck and tell them that they're full of it." And I just sat and chiseled and built.

**Excavating and Mitigating Erasures:
Towards a More Expansive History and Definition of “Progressive Education”**

I mean, how worth it is it to hang on to a label like “progressive education,” if it doesn't evolve over time?

—Anne

When reflecting on their introduction and enculturation to progressive schools or activist organizations, all of the participants had assumptions about what the word “progressive” meant—from individualized, to personalized, to inquiry-driven—but no one of them expressed certainty from the outset what exactly they might encounter in their daily practice. In some ways this is resonant with a pattern noted nearly a century ago by Reisner, though it's most remarkable that this uncertainty has persisted:

For years the term has been in constant use and presumably its meaning is clearly and comprehensively understood. And yet there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding just what progressive education is. . . . Even among educators—educators organized in panels for the discussion of progressive education—there appears to be a deplorable lack of unanimity regarding the connotations of the word progressive. (1930, p. 192, in Pecore, 2015, pp, 53-54)

What *was* clear from participants is that to whatever degree they had some partial confidence in the term's meaning, that it was rooted in broadly aligned *pedagogical* understandings and practices, and usually in the context of independent schools serving predominantly white students, consistent with Algava's (2016) confirmation of this pattern especially in recent decades: “Nearly a century later, progressive schools typically . . . continue to focus their

attention on child-centered pedagogies and continue to serve children and families whose economic, social, and cultural capital already serves them well” (p. 47). Notably, the rampant inconsistencies between declared values and observed practices noted in all of the previous thematic categories were situated primarily in the territories of social and cultural dynamics, especially as evidenced by the institutions’ apparent failures adequately or effectively to engage with matters of racial or social justice. It remains true to this day, as Counts declared in 1932, that “the great weakness of progressive education lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare” (Counts, 1932, p. 259). Insinuations were made to participants about the school’s investment in racial equity by school leaders; the term “progressive” was consistently *assumed* to be aligned with racial justice because of its known preoccupation with education in a democracy; and various rituals were enacted on campuses and in conference halls seemingly to celebrate or demonstrate an investment in racial equity—but, per Algava (2016), it remains true that “our task is to make a culturally sustaining stance explicit” (p. 55).

As concerns this ambiguity of associations between “progressive” and “racial justice,” Louis was most pointed in his assessment of the underlying problem:

It has to start with the definition of progressive. The definition of progressive education, I think—I mean, a lot of people have taken some good cracks at it. . . . But without a, I guess, a common set of throughlines, or characteristics of progressive education it still ends up reifying the very thing that we seek to disrupt.

That the hegemony of white norms is “the very thing that we seek to disrupt” should not go without mention. This points to the fact that the ambiguity of the term “progressive” is inextricably intertwined with broader, metahistorical issues to which all of the participants made

reference and with which most readers would identify. One of these issues is that the predominant conceptualization of “progressive education” consistently harkens back to its founding in the early 20th century and seldom invokes thoughts about its evolution since. A related issue is that a small group of exclusively white educators and scholars—Dewey, Montessori, Parker, et al.—are universally considered to be progressive education’s founders and/or luminaries, and are sanctified for their contributions to progressive pedagogy despite unmentioned and highly problematic complexities of their racialized world views. Furthermore, the contributions of Black scholars—David, for example, cited W. E. B. Du Bois; Anne referenced the pedagogy of the Freedom Schools—have never been conspicuously integrated into the progressive canon. All of these dynamics are further complicated by the prevalence of racism in American society since progressive education’s founding, the more common visibility of progressive models in predominantly white (and usually independent) schools, and the reification in broader society of neoliberal education ideology which positions progressive education as its flaky, nutty, and presumably inadequately excellent alternative.

Daring us to imagine how to redefine “progressive education” and how to reconceive its history, the participants cited three related dynamics for consideration. The first dynamic they cited was the reductive understanding that we have of progressive education’s early luminaries, which should be amended by a critical interrogation of the racialized assumptions underlying their theoretical and practical contributions. As Goodenow (1975) noted, “Few historians have analyzed the attitudes of major white progressive educators on race and ethnicity” (p. 365). Thankfully this work has been advanced more recently by important contributions from scholars such as Thomas Fallace (2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2018), but much work remains to be done.

The second dynamic participants cited was the erasure or dismissal of theoretical and pedagogical contributions by Black educators, scholars, and researchers, in the 19th and 20th centuries in particular, that resonate with progressive pedagogy as it's typically understood, but aren't considered to be part of the "progressive tradition." General (2000), for example, argued that Booker T. Washington's progressive experiments at Tuskegee not only predated but also informed John Dewey's early models. Further, he asserted that although William Kirkpatrick was credited with founding the project method, a similar dynamic was at play: "[T]hirty years prior to this development in progressive educational theory, Booker T. Washington built an entire curriculum that was structured around the projects of daily life at Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute" (General, 2000, p. 175). Similarly, Carter G. Woodson has been hailed by scholars including Jarvis Givens (2016) as integrating pedagogical practices that align with progressive education's commitment to "the whole child," but "knowingly built upon a counter-ideology for Black education that challenged the cultural politics of white supremacy" (Givens, 2016, p. 5). As work extending from this study continues, the field will have to come to terms with the probability that some extant models of progressive Black pedagogy—such as Woodson's, as well as certain educational approaches of the Black Panthers—were rejected from the progressive canon *because* they frequently embraced "an explicit rejection of white supremacy, and . . . [had] Black liberation as its central goal and metric of success" (Givens, 2016, p. 34).

The third dynamic participants cited was the quasi-dogmatic relationship that predominantly white progressive educators have with its historical origins: "It lives," as Anne put it, "in old books and records." As a result, there has been little space provided for plausible,

contemporary challenges or contributions that could inform its evolution. As an example, Anne shared with me the story of a conversation with a progressive professional development facilitator who'd asked her whether she'd read Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916). Her response was to invoke the work of bell hooks (1994) as a counterpoint:

But have *you* read, you know, the third chapter from *Teaching to Transgress*, where bell hooks talks about what love looks like in the classroom and how love can transform educational spaces into democratic spaces, and it becomes a practice of freedom?

If more advocates of progressive education found ways to complicate the prevailing narratives about progressive education's founders, recognized the resonant and enhancing contributions of Black scholars and practitioners, and engaged more meaningfully with contemporary thought and learning, we might be able to reinscribe "progressive education" not only with more fully textured understandings of effective pedagogy, but also and more importantly with a more authentic and compelling investment in racial justice.

Further Correlations to Participants' Narratives

Anne centered her own role and contributions as a Black woman and progressive leader in a thought experiment that helped me to understand the scope of these dynamics:

I think about, you know, the legacy of progressive education that includes someone like me, you know—who maybe, you know, understands . . . progressive education is about bringing the inside out and the outside in—and what does that look like in the hands of someone like me? And is that something that, you know, Francis Parker or Flora Cooke [prominent early 20th-century progressive educators] or, you know, John Dewey

himself—like, could they have ever imagined it? And my guess is the answer is “no.” But you know, that sort of like a crazy, like, meta-historical interruption.

Later, Anne ventured that contemporary progressive practitioners should be transparent about the complicated past of the tradition and its founders:

Labeling one’s school as “progressive,” without labeling the problematic history of progressive education, is an element of white supremacy and racism, right? Like any progressive school that neglects naming the history is problematic, first of all—but as you know, deeply connected to whatever present work or temporary moment it exists in is an erasure. And I think white supremacy is really good at erasing truth. And perpetuating untruth.

Anne also referenced Alice Walker’s short story, “Everyday Use” (Walker, 1973), and its intrinsic distinction of “high art” and “folk art” as she drew an important analogy:

There’s a similar parallel to, like, progressive education and freedom schools. You know—I think if we could—it’s not really a reconception or a reformulation, but I think if we could sort of, like, expand our understanding of the fact that progressive education happened both within and without of the philosophical bounds that John Dewey placed around it . . . we could expand it—and it could become so much more culturally democratic. You know, like the problem lies with the label.

Towards the conclusion of our second dialogue, Anne summed up her sentiments about this matter:

It can’t just all be historical; it has to be contemporary and dynamic. . . . I mean, how worth it is it to hang on to a label like “progressive education,” if it doesn’t evolve over

time, you know? . . . It feels to me like there has to be a dynamism somewhere in the way that we talk about progressive education, if it really is going to achieve whatever it is to achieve in the service of democracy.

Louis established his thoughts about the ambiguity of the definition of “progressive” early on:

I think there’s a false equivalence between any number of these terms—progressive, liberal—and how right and/or true are these things really? So it’s worth throwing the caution flag out there whenever these terms get thrown out there, without some form of thoughtfulness behind who’s saying these things, in addition to what’s being said.

He also noted the commonplace association of progressive education with whiteness by virtue of the role in which its founders are most often positioned:

The people who are often pillars for progressive education are still white. So, thereby, their values are still being proffered over those who also have progressive means, but also have been hidden in our history. Like, in my view, for example, the Black voters across the south during Reconstruction were way more progressive than John Dewey was, but he gets the bust and they don’t.

Louis also provided a contemporary example of the erasures of contributions of highly relevant Black scholars:

Robert Moses: he’s a very—that’s a very easy example of what progressive education ought to look like. Inquiry based, experiential, active listening on the part of the adults involved, and ensuring that the answers come from the people with the knowledge. And

so when you look at the work of Bob Moses, you think about how he doesn't get elevated, because of the population he was trying to elevate, right?

Aziza also emphasized the urgency of harkening back to progressive education's ostensible origins in order to critically interrogate both its history and its definition:

It's necessary to go back to the core, you know, when we were making these decisions about these philosophical tenets. Who was made—the John Deweys: okay, so we know who is at the table. None of this; none of these philosophical tenets—they didn't exist in a vacuum. What really is the unspoken history of how these philosophical tenets were designed and developed? What's the benefit of keeping them all white? You know, keeping, like, the kind of white mythology around all of these quote/unquote “progressive education people.” Where were they in contradiction from the start? Because they were. There was a price to pay to form those philosophies. I'm interested in what price was paid then. And it's real simple, you know, the price that's being paid now.

Later, Aziza summarized her sense of the collective imperative: “We've got to tell a more complete story about both the origins, and why we keep doing some of these things over and over and over and over and over again.”

David spoke to analogous dynamics as well, and framed a fundamental distinction that offers a sense of radical hope for moving forward:

And one of my contentions is rooted in a statement that essentially recognizes that progressive schools and organizations are certainly rooted in white supremacy and racism, but not necessarily restricted by. . . . I recognize that they exist, in part, because of racism and because of white supremacy—or many of them in their origins were

created as that being a part of the backdrop—but that the possibility of the progressive school experience and the ideals that come with that—philosophically and otherwise—actually give you the opportunity to not be restricted by those earliest formations and roots in the white supremacy and racism.

Reflection on and Feedback From Group Meetings

Subsequent to individual interviews with the research participants, group meetings were scheduled to provide the opportunity (1) for me to ask clarifying and extending questions about themes that initially emerged from the interviews, (2) for participants to provide feedback or pushback on these themes and my developing ideas, and (3) for all of us to debrief and reflect on the ways that our racialized positionalities—specifically, a white progressive researcher interviewing Black progressive educators and activists—may have affected the research process itself. Scheduling challenges required two group meetings to be set on separate days. David attended the first meeting, but Anne was called into a crisis at her school; Aziza and Louis attended the second meeting. Whereas discoveries from items 1 and 2, above, were integrated into the previous discussion of themes and appended recommendations, the following section is meant to isolate and summarize high-level feedback from participants on racialized dynamics in the research process, especially in those cases that participants offered insights whose value may extend beyond the scope of this study.

Known Concerns From the Outset

Well before the first interviews, I had a number of related concerns about the racialized implications of my chosen method and research design. I was hyper-conscious about the implications of my interviewing Black educators and activists whose names would be

pseudonymized, and leveraging their lived experiences, insights, time, and intellectual labor to inform a white researcher's findings. Yet at the same time, I couldn't imagine another way to unveil dimensions of their experience engaging with whiteness from their positionalities, given that I haven't shared and can't fully fathom the subtler contours of those experiences. I wondered if the dynamics of the interviews themselves—white progressive educator interviewing Black progressive educators—itsself might reenact any problematic dynamics the participants had experienced over time. Further, I was somewhat concerned that asking the participants to recount challenging encounters with whiteness in progressive education spaces for the purpose of this study would itself require revisiting and thus reenacting traumatic or quasi-traumatic experiences in the pursuit of academic insights.

At the same time, I identified participants through purposive sampling—approaching Black progressive educators and activists with whom I'd developed personal and professional relationships through the years—explicitly with the hope that this might mitigate some of these potentially problematic dynamics. The thought was that because relational trust had already been cultivated between us in a myriad of contexts, that these dynamics might be minimized or mitigated, at least in comparison to how persons *unknown* to me might theoretically experience them. Furthermore, I knew from past experience that these participants would provide unvarnished feedback in the event that I unduly evoked discomfort, caused harm, or otherwise violated the integrity of our relational dynamics. I made a point to reference potentially difficult experiences of the interview process in my initial communications and consent form, and to account for them as transparently as possible while assuring participants they had the right to pause or terminate interviews, and/or withdraw from engagement in the research process itself,

should any such challenges cross a threshold of acceptable discomfort. In addition, these and related concerns influenced the design of interview questions: for example, subsequent to an interview question inviting participants to share stories of problematic encounters with whiteness, I added an interview question inviting participants to share stories of successful interruptions or acts of resistance they'd experienced: I didn't want to dwell on discomfort, even as much as it needed to be explored, without also asking about successful strategies of resistance that could be leveraged as models for others. Furthermore, I described these concerns at length during initial conversation preceding each formal interview, and implored participants to share with me any related concerns, at any point they wished. Finally, I did everything in my power to be fully present as an active listener during the interviews—often but not always pausing before I spoke to consider my language and its potentially inadvertent impacts, and frequently shared my understanding of participants' contributions back with them—"I hear you saying _____"—in an effort explicitly to check for thorough understanding. Subsequent to our interviews, I also shared copies of corrected transcripts with all participants and invited them to share any concerns.

In each of the two group meetings, I once again reiterated the nature of these concerns about racialized positionality and power in the research process, and asked the participants to share with me their expectations for ways I could help to ensure the accuracy of the information they presented, to preserve the integrity of their actual experiences, and to protect the relational trust we had cultivated over time. The following sections summarize feedback that I received in response to this request, which I have tried to honor in the representation of data and findings, and which may be valuable for other related purposes in the future.

Comfort and Compartmentalization

Although Anne was unable to attend a group meeting, we had the opportunity to discuss some of these dynamics in our first interview. After I explained my concerns about the research design's potential to revisit and reenact traumatic racial encounters, Anne provided assurance that our friendship was the context in which she received the request to participate and understood my motivations. She went on to offer the following insights:

I think that the naming that you just did is really powerful and important. You know I—I am a person for whom I guess I've always believed, but I think I've come to understand in a different way, the power of maybe even compartmentalizing a little bit, like I just think—you're my friend. And so I'll talk to you about anything. And I know what your purpose is, and I know where this work could potentially go. So of course I was going to help you out. Um, but I mean, like, I'm not the one who's—I'm not going to be, like, re-traumatized by anything that we talk about. I'm not. Because I think I'm old enough, and I've been in, you know, I've been in predominantly white education spaces for my whole entire life—from the time I was in kindergarten to right now. And so, it's a fact of my life that just is—and I think I'm pretty sanguine about that, you know. . . . So, all this is to say, like, when you and I are talking, you know I'll let you know if something doesn't feel right.

I was reassured by these sentiments to some degree, and it occurred to me that in my concern about causing damage, I might have been underestimating the strength and resilience of Anne and other participants. Other participants offered analogous reassurances in my interviews with them, though in every other case this conversation preceded the initiation of recording and

transcription. In every interview, my felt experience was that the *naming* of these dynamics, the invitation to discuss them, and my request to share any related concerns at any point during our interactions were themselves measures that evinced the participants' trust and transparency, as well as helped free me to be fully present and engaged.

Articulate and Establish Permissions

In the group meeting with Aziza and Louis, shortly after explaining my concerns about the potential impacts of racialized dynamics on the research and the participants, I asked them both:

What would you *expect*, as I present the information that you've shared? In order to maintain the integrity of your experiences? In order to maintain the integrity of your contributions? In order to maintain the integrity of our relational trust? What would you expect to see—or, perhaps, *not* to see—as the final version of this study takes shape?

Aziza was quick to venture her response:

My expectation is you tell the whole story. That even—what *was* the trepidation that you had? You know, I think I spoke directly to this in our interview: the different kinds of exchanges I had with myself. There have been times where I've been very selective. I've been given advice by other Black leaders: "Listen: don't talk too much to that white person, because they're coming for all your IP; all your intellectual property; all your ideas. Don't say too much."

Aziza then spoke about the "muting" with which she's seen many "genius Black educators" struggle in the face of white people exploiting Black intellectual labor for their own gain. Aziza made it clear to me that from her perspective, our interview was an exception to that dynamic:

Nobody has time to—to be kind of managing what to say, what not to say. . . . Louis said: there's more work than there's people, *and* there are people with capacity to get at it. . . . So, you know, all of that to say that's a thing to consider—and Chris, you know, I said it to you directly: you know, I trust in something greater. I trust in the relationship you and I have. *And*, you know, if something comes up—something that I feel some sort of chafing or tension—I know I can pick up the phone and get on a Zoom call and be like, “Alright, Chris. It looked like *this*; it's coming out of your computer like *this*. I don't know about that.”

Aziza thus confirmed that she herself had wrestled with the question about just how much to disclose, but elected to participate wholly because of our relational trust and the importance of the work—reserving the right to speak to any concerns with me should they arise.

Louis affirmed these sentiments, then also extended them with further suggestions:

Going back to what Aziza said, like, I would love to see not just the words on the paper, but also, what were the intonations? Why do I feel I can get this level of candor? You know, what—what permissions were set? What—and yes to that—and what *trust*? What vibes were there? Because what—you know, you can say one thing, and people are just like, “Well, it's on an academic paper. So it was said, directly, this way.” And because you and I, Chris, know each other—and because I know Aziza—then all three of us understand the way that I talk and why I'm talking this way when I'm talking *here*.

Louis's reference to “what permissions were set” led to my discussing these dynamics in these sections in order to contextualize the contributions that were ventured throughout the interviews and group meetings. To the degree that participants graced our interviews with profound candor,

I believe it was the result not only of our past relationships, but also of the explicit dialogue we fostered about these issues in our time together.

Active Listening

As I mentioned previously, I entered the interviews aware that I would need to be fully present and actively listening, but I wasn't prepared for the nervousness I felt in light of the high stakes I perceived. I didn't want to offend; I didn't want to exploit; I didn't want to trigger—and, despite my having no such active intentions, I knew I was exploring very provocative and controversial issues that would inevitably evoke strong emotions, and asking participants to immerse themselves in this experience alongside me with presumably far less eventual benefit to them than for me. Furthermore, I knew that I am susceptible to enacting racialized microaggressions, as any white person should know of themselves—and though I am practiced at participating in and/or facilitating interracial dialogue, I am course not immune to transgressing, on the fly, even deeply held aspirational principles of humility, honesty, and transparency. In short, I was terrified of upsetting my friends and colleagues and/or violating the integrity of their contributions, precisely because we were taking a deep dive into interracial dialogue about white supremacy. The more terrified I got, the more difficult and effortful it became for me to *be* fully present, and to listen with full attention, so that I could truly hear what they were telling me.

On the subject of active listening, Aziza offered sound guidance to me that I share at some length in her own words, rather than trying to paraphrase. In the midst of dialogue with Louis and me about ways to preserve the integrity of participants' contributions, Aziza said:

One of the things that came up, that I've just been sitting with, is where is the courage in saying, "You know what? As a white person, I'm going to actually have to listen

differently.” Listening to people of color, it’s a different listening process, I suspect. And, you know, I’ll hold that. And, you know, learning to listen for some of—you know, whether it be some kind of coded language, or the kind of subtle invitation that says, “Yes, you have been granted permission,” because there’s a lot of those kind of, like, shadow communications. . . . It’s not even nonverbal: there are these other cues that are running parallel to the mainstream conversation.

This made me think of all the times that Anne’s sigh, or Louis’s knowing smirk, or David’s quiet processing, or Aziza’s enthusiastic “Mm-hmm” signaled to me that there was something further to examine: a follow-up question to ask them directly, or a question I needed to remember to ask myself when reviewing their contributions to ensure I examined them for multivalent possibilities. It also reminded me of several times—sometimes because I was concerned about keeping the participants too long; sometimes because I was so consumed with neurotic fears about my own performance as white person—that I missed certain opportunities to follow up a question, to explore a new and unfamiliar idea, or simply to give a participant time to fully process one question before moving on to the next one. Aziza continued:

You know—yeah, yeah, listening differently. I don’t know how many white people know that that is—that is absolutely *necessary*. I have sat in many spaces where I’m like, “Man, they’re not hearing *anything* that we’re saying.” So, yeah, Chris, I appreciate the active listening; what felt like a listening with humility. I’ve been in places where, like, the listener was very aggressive. You know, like, they were just like hunting: they were like, you know, like, missile jet locking in, you know, and I’m just like, “Man, I gotta get up out of here”—you know—“Eject button. Out of here.” . . . So yeah: all of that, Chris—

that's important for me to . . . to ask you to add in there, somehow, is that there is a particular kind of listening that engenders trust.

In our separate “group” meeting, David offered some particularly acute advice on two dimensions of active listening I sometimes served less well. One was the reminder to be present for new learning, as distinct from merely seeking the confirmation of prior assumptions:

I think I'm saying that because our modes of inquiry, more often than not—maybe now I'm going even real simplistic to say it this way—are so rooted in confirming the things we already believe, that we miss the opportunity to actually engage with, and hear the things, and create the space to hear the things that we really need to engage with.

On a few occasions, I had been so relieved to have a provisional understanding affirmed, that I didn't think to create or sustain a space to explore that provisional understanding further, which made David and me both wonder “if we may have missed anything.” The second piece of David's related advice was to understand the importance of various processing styles:

Maybe I'll offer this one other last piece: the recognition that we all are different kinds of process communicators. And some of us are very much process and communication introverts, and some of us are extroverts, and some of us are these combinations of both. And, so, recognizing that even if, you know, you sit in the seat of being a processing extrovert, recognizing there are times that you got to just go into silence mode—even if the other person is not saying a thing. Because it may be in that silence that—after that has, you know, gone a time—that that silent reflection then allows you, in that last 15 seconds, when they finally decide to say something—it allows you to hear the most

brilliant thing you ever could have imagined you could hear because you created space for that.

Leveraging This Research as a Model

When, in our one-on-one “group” meeting, I asked David whether any of the racialized dynamics of the research design negatively affected his sense of comfort or safety, or if he had any particular expectations of me in the eventual representation of his contributions, his response was overwhelmingly contextualized in the trust that had been cultivated by our past interactions, as well as the explicit permissions I sought early on and throughout our exchange:

In my interactions with you, there are a couple of things that I know are always going to be there. One, that I’m talking to someone who is deeply competent, and knowing in so many ways that there’s a value that I get out of being in conversation with that competence. At the same time, there’s this recognition that there’s a level of authenticity that’s going to be laid on the table, in a way that wants to and always attempts to honor positionality, frankly—and name it and create space to say, “I want and I need you to be your full self with me. And I want you to—if something is getting in the way of that, I hope you’ll let me know,” kind of dynamic that just—it frees you up, right? And with that, I think it just comes that there’s just a genuine sense of caring. I care about who you are, I care about what you think, and I know that if I deeply listen to you, I’m going to be able to take that yet to even deeper levels.

I was relieved and, frankly, grateful that this was David’s experience. He continued:

And so I think when all of that is present, there’s very little in me that would even allow critique to come up—as opposed to a—again, a deep and abiding trust that says the

questions that need to be asked are going to be asked, and they're going to be asked and presented in such a way that, you know, if I have a problem with it, it's going to get said and it's going to get named. And I'm indicating to you, I didn't name any of those things, and that should let you know that just didn't come up for me here in any way, shape, or form.

It was not lost on me that we had managed, previous to this portion of our discussion, to have a direct exchange about my use of the word “dissociate” that I feared had offended him; for me to make amends; and for him to explicate once again the intentionality (versus pathology) of his leadership strategy and stance (as referenced in Chapter 4). It was also not lost on me that he *did* provide critical feedback on the ways I'd asked a series of rapid-fire questions earlier in our group meeting, ostensibly for me to check for understanding but actually proceeding at such a pace that it gave him very little time to speak. In other words, we had experienced temporary dissonance, discomfort, or conflict in the context of ongoing dialogue, but had managed explicitly to engage with each other in the interest of mutual understanding, rather than to conceal our feelings or dissemble our beliefs. It *was*, in fact, possible for us fully to explore the vexing subject matters of this study, across the boundaries of our racialized identities and experiences, without damaging our relationship or our perceptions of each other.

After the first half of this dialogue in our “group” meeting—after I'd summarized many of his insights from our original interview, and checked for the validity of my emerging interpretations—David offered the following comment. It was overwhelming to me to hear these words, even as much as I fully identified with them:

I'm blown—I'm blown away, again, that we squeezed all of that conversation into that time. What I want you to hear from me clearly is probably the only reason we did that was because of the clarity of your sense of what you're investigating, the frame from which you're operating, *because* of the relationship that we have I think plays into that. I can say so much more. But I just think there's something about—that we were able to do that together because of our relational context. If that makes sense. That to me is a particular *model* for what others have to choose to do.

Provisos for the Interpretation of Predominant Themes and Reception of Recommendations

Consistent with a conceptual framework informed by critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and critical pedagogy (Darder, 2012; Freire, 1988, 2000), the predominant themes of this study—as well as the recommendations that follow this section—center the voices, experience, and knowledge of people of color to demonstrate ways that race, racism, and racialization are central to social dynamics and knowledge construction in progressive education spaces; to introduce strategies to challenge hegemonic white norms; to demonstrate the ways that white supremacy in progressive education has been historically constructed; and to propose theoretical and practical commitments to transformative practice to dismantle the hegemony of white norms. This study, therefore, enacted the potential of critical research to act in counter-hegemony not only to critique and to resist, but also to reframe and to reform ideas in active resistance to the hegemony of white norms in progressive education spaces.

Individual and Interpersonal Racism as Evidence of Institutional and Systemic Racism

Nevertheless, the research methodology and design of this study intentionally privileged the individual experiences of individual Black educators and activists, often but not always illustrating the manifestation of white hegemonic norms through stories that feature interpersonal interactions. Similarly, some of the recommendations in the following section offer strategies and tactics for individual educators, school leaders, and/or personnel in universities or advocacy organizations to reorient their personal and professional practice. In the aggregate, this may inadvertently suggest to some readers that white supremacy in progressive education spaces is a manifestation exclusively of individual or interpersonal racism, or that its subversion depends exclusively on adjustment to individual attitudes, behaviors, or dispositions.

To the degree that interpersonal interactions often revealed these participants' experience of whiteness in progressive education spaces, it is crucial to remember that the individual attitudes, behaviors, or dispositions they unveiled are not the *cause* of institutional or systemic racism so much as the *result*:

Because white supremacy culture is the water we swim in, we inevitably internalize the messages about what this culture believes, values, and considers normal. We absorb these messages as individuals and as a collective. As a result, white supremacy culture shapes how we think, and act, how we make decisions and behave. (Okun, 2022, para. 22)

Thus, revelations from participants' stories that emphasized racially oppressive acts of individual colleagues, or recommendations for educators or school leaders to adopt more explicit anti-racist stances, should be understood in the context of unveiling and reframing broader institutional and systemic dynamics:

Individual bias and interactional racism, together bring into view the inbuilt nature of systemic racism. . . . At the individual level, “inbuilt” refers to the common psychological processes that represent race in the minds of individuals. This evidence reveals systemic race bias. . . . Individual humans are the creators and consumers of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, but also the policies and practices that lie at the heart of systemic racism.

(Banaji et al., 2021, p. 2)

I offer this proviso in particular to white readers, in alignment with Darder’s (2012) assertion of a fundamental challenge in discussing, let alone dismantling, racism and white supremacy:

Much of the difficulty is related to a pervasive and commonsensical ideology of race couple with a modernist worldview that effectively truncates the ability of most Euroamericans to move from an individual perception of bias and prejudice to an understanding of racism as a structural phenomenon associated with institutional power and control. (Darder, 2012, p. 37)

Predominance of Experience in Private Progressive Schools

In addition, it is important at this juncture to reiterate that although all four participants had considerable experience teaching in traditional public schools, their predominant experience of progressive schools was in private progressive school settings. This skew towards the experience of progressive education in nonsectarian independent schools inevitably introduced dynamics that were not only relevant to the dynamics of progressive education spaces, but also salient to private school structures, systems, and cultures—including their profoundly limited ethnoracial diversity, inflated socioeconomic privilege, and limited public accountability as compared to public schools.

Furthermore, the history of private schools in general—whether guided by progressive pedagogy, or rooted in more traditional models—is steeped in white supremacy. Though a more detailed interrogation of private schooling in the United States was well beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note, for example, that the extraordinary growth in private school enrollment in the final decades of the 20th century, and the grossly disproportionate enrollment of white students in them, is inextricably intertwined with public school desegregation mandates following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the *Civil Rights Act* (1964) (Ford et al., 2017). Further, resurgent neoliberal activism in the “choice” movement promoting the award of vouchers to attend private schools is rooted in mid-20th century white racialized reactions to desegregation efforts, threatens disproportionately to remove white students from public schools and thereby enhance the resegregation of public schools, and promises to diminish funds available to support public schooling (Ford et al., 2017). Already, private schools are twice as likely as public schools “to be virtually all-white, defined as a school where 90 percent or more of students are white” (Brown, 2016, para. 7). Thus, it is important to concede that the racialized history, dynamics, and structures of private schooling undoubtedly influence their contemporary cultures, racialized norms, and the experience of racially minoritized subjects (such as this study’s research participants) in them—and suggest that further research must be conducted with Black educators and activists employed in public progressive schools in order to extend and/or refine the findings of this study.

Recommendations

A series of explicit questions were posed in the second part of interviews with each participant offering recommendations aligned with Research Question 2: “What reformulations

of progressive educational philosophy, practice, and/or policy would be required to realize the socially transformative potential of progressive education, and to move progressive education from colorblindness to cultural democracy?” The following recommendations emerged from participants’ responses to those interview questions, as well as from proposals offered by participants spontaneously while sharing their experiences in the first part of their interviews. These recommendations are presented in three categories: “Recommended Stances for Black and White Progressive Educators/Activists,” “Recommendations for Progressive Schools and Organizations,” and “Recommendations for Progressive Advocacy Organizations and Universities.”

Recommended Stances for Black and White Progressive Educators/Activists

In the second part of each individual interview, each participant was invited to propose actions or stances that should be adopted by Black progressive educators or activists, and by white progressive educators or activists, in order to disrupt white supremacy, address racial injustice, or build solidarity in progressive education spaces. These recommendations are intended as suggestions of broad stances, postures, or dispositions rather than precise goals for program or policy change *per se*.

Recommended Stances for Black Progressive Educators/Activists

Participants unanimously spoke to recommendations that would advance their own self-understanding, self-care, and self-preservation in light of the persistence and toxicity of white norms in progressive education spaces.

Say “no” unapologetically. Given consistent experiences of isolation, marginalization, scrutiny, and overreaching expectations for professional performance—including but not limited

to constant and overwhelming expectations to accept responsibility for advancing DEI goals in their institutions and attending to topical racialized conflicts in the community—Anne expressed the spirit of all participants’ recommendations when she said Black educators and activists need to say “yes with enthusiasm, and no without apology.” Participants discouraged Black educators/activists from feeling pressure to comply with unreasonable expectations because of their racial identity and the expectations grafted onto them. Additionally, as Anne also expressed, Black educators/activists should know that the “self-preserving act of compartmentalizing is sometimes a real act of self care,” which includes the right “to not get into the conversation about race at school.” Furthermore, participants urged Black educators to resist the many “tentacled seductions,” as Aziza put it, of white school leaders leaning on Black educators singularly to dismantle racialized dynamics well outside their locus of control.

Build curricular content. Participants recommended that Black educators/activists continue to design and integrate curricular and pedagogical frameworks, for use in their own classrooms and/or as models for others, that provide them opportunities to leverage their own expertise and to engage in joy. Alternatively, participants recommended that Black educators/activists identify areas of passionate interest outside their current fields in which they might cultivate their expertise and their joy.

Know the history. Participants urged Black educators/activists to learn and understand the history of progressive education and their historical role in it and/or erasure from it. This includes learning about the complex racialized dynamics central to progressive education’s founding, the marginalization or erasure of Black scholars and practitioners’ potential but

unrecognized contributions to that tradition, and developing an understanding of the potential power of their own presence in and contributions to the tradition.

Develop coalitions. Participants recommended that Black educators/activists seek and form coalitions and alliances with other Black and/or BIPOC colleagues as a source of support and sustenance, especially in such environments as they might find themselves one of the few or “The Only.” They also encouraged Black educators/activists to ally themselves with conscientized white colleagues who may have access to “the code” of whiteness, as David put it, but who are willing to decenter themselves and to share what they’ve learned and act in solidarity.

Choose your battles. Recognizing the immense pressures disproportionately imposed on Black educators/activists in progressive education spaces, participants recommended that Black educators/activists should choose their battles carefully, mindful that the perceived pressure of “push out” is real. Each cited strategically subversive ways they’ve found, or needed, to position themselves to navigate a balancing act well framed by David: “Being strategic, intentional, and cunning enough to know how to exist in this space successfully, while at the same time figuring out the ways to truly present yourself in deeply authentic yet challenging ways.” The aforementioned recommendations were offered with an emphasis that these strategies are crucial for Black educators/activists not only to know themselves, but to protect and care for themselves. Louis spoke to the immense and pervasive pressure of pushout; David to the predominant pattern of Black teacher turnover; Anne to the limited prospects of Black advancement; and Aziza to the exploitation of Black educators’ labor. Aziza accentuated the urgency of these stances when she

said, “If Black educators do not get aligned with themselves, they will be dead in the water. They will be lost.”

Recommendations for White Progressive Educators/Activists

All of the participants spoke to stances or postures that white progressive educators could adopt in order to decenter themselves and their comfort, and both assume more responsibility and exercise more agency in advancing racial justice in their school or organizational spaces.

Decenter yourself. Recognizing the profound and continuous privilege that has been seized and/or afforded to white people in this history of progressive education, participants recommended that white progressive educators decenter themselves by ceding power in any available ways. At times this can be as subtle as ceding time in a faculty meeting to ensure that Black voices are heard, and/or amplifying Black contributions in subsequent dialogue. However, white progressive educators/activists should be mindful not to position themselves as heroes or saviors for doing so: the participants looked to conscientized white colleagues for solidarity, and not salvation.

Activate knowledge and skills. Participants consistently expressed expectations that white educators should assume responsibility for educating themselves in areas pertaining to racial equity, both in terms of knowledge and in terms of skills. David, for example, articulated this stance as follows:

My expectation, in relationship with whiteness, is that those who identify as white don't rely on me to educate them about their whiteness . . . they have to show up at the table having already interrogated that whiteness, to go into deeper relationship with me.

Educating themselves, however, should not be limited to conceptual understandings, but to the operationalization of those conceptual understandings. Anne elaborated on this imperative:

Like, what do the terms actually mean? Now, can you speak to them articulately? . . .

Addressing racial justice means you have to know what racial justice is—and then you have to . . . learn and adapt some pretty simple strategies for calling it out.

Louis was clear about this as well: while he recognized that many people of color offer advice to white people to *listen* to people of color, he emphasized that “you need to do something about the listening” by *acting* within your progressive educational space. In resonance with other participants’ thinking, he added, “Enough with the resource lists, too . . . there’s only so many books that you get to read before you gotta do something about it.” Participants were also clear that meaningful action to mitigate racial inequity should be distinguished from virtuously signaling one’s beliefs or values: as Anne affirmed, “It’s not, ‘I’ve got the sticker on my computer, and you can see it when I flip up my laptop.’ . . . You know, stop exercising your wokeness and just, like, show me that you’re not asleep.”

White anti-racist groups and intercultural exchange. In order to advance this learning about conceptual understandings and active strategies to disrupt white supremacy, participants urged white progressive educators/activists to participate in white anti-racist affinity groups, whether they are school-based or hosted by external organizations. Participants believed that these were optimal spaces to learn and to practice key concepts and skills pertaining to identity development, intercultural competency, and anti-racist action, but that time should also be spent in cross-cultural or intercultural encounters in order to “learn how to work in solidarity with other folks,” as Louis said. The goal of all this work should be what David called a “reflexive

response” to racial inequity and aggression “so that reflex kicks in and they know that ‘I have a response to this thing. And I have a voice to lend to this thing.’” Learning and practice in white anti-racist affinity groups and intercultural exchange forums can help white progressive educators/activists to “take their private commitments, and give them a public presence” as well to fulfill the need for “more white role models for other white folk.”

Hold other white people accountable. Participants encouraged white progressive educators/activists to assume responsibility for supporting and encouraging each other to develop their DEI-related understandings and skills, to insist that other white people assume responsibility for the work instead of deferring to Black and other BIPOC colleagues, and especially to take responsibility for holding each other accountable as white people. Aziza put it plainly:

I wish these white people would clean up their fellow white people. . . . And that’s all there is to it. . . . I’ve watched them watch each other destroy everything. And not say a word. So if the white people could get some practice and some courage, and go and rein in their own white people, that is the single most important thing.

Recommendations for Progressive Schools and Organizations

Participants offered a broad array of recommendations that have been broadly categorized below under “Employee Hiring and Student Recruitment Practices,” “Professional Development Imperatives,” and “Institutional Leadership Priorities.”

Employee Hiring and Student Recruitment Practices

Participants shared a variety of recommendations to mitigate current practices that perpetuate the hegemony of white norms in progressive education spaces, that apply throughout

the trajectory of the employee hiring process. In some cases, analogous recommendations were offered that may apply to student and family recruitment, especially but not only in independent progressive school contexts.

Initial contact and recruitment. Recognizing the misleading associations frequently made between “progressive education” and “racial justice,” and the ways these associations are leveraged to imply institutional investment in racial justice, personnel responsible for engaging with prospective recruits should be more transparent about the complex history and racialized dynamics of the progressive education movement, including but not limited to racialized dynamics that inform its pedagogies and the racialized identities and beliefs of its founders. An awareness should be demonstrated of the various ways that Black and other BIPOC people have been excluded from the movement, and a commitment should be demonstrated to strategies for mitigating these historical inequities with contemporary efforts. This is also applicable to school officials’ efforts to inform families and students about progressive education during events and in communications in which progressive education is promoted as a model.

Interview and screening protocols. When interviewing candidates for employment, explicit efforts must be made to assess candidates’ cultural competency and commitments to racial equity. In the case of Black and other BIPOC employees, this would mitigate the common assumption that because a candidate is racially minoritized, that the candidate has a practiced understanding and investment in these areas. In the case of white employees, this would provide information essential to developing a critical mass of conscientized white educators in

progressive schools. In addition, data would emerge that might help to guide onboarding and professional development as they pertain to racial equity and justice initiatives.

Onboarding. During the successful candidates' onboarding, they should be provided with rich and transparent information about the racialized dynamics of progressive education's history so they're well informed with a more complex narrative about the tradition in which their school's practices are situated. In addition, thorough orientations should be provided to the school's DEI vision and practices, as well as the expectations for all employees to practice and/or advance this work. Access to and frequent communication with school leaders should be provided as employees enculturate to the organization, and affinity group participation should be strongly recommended or required.

Role descriptions and responsibilities. Explicit and specific expectations for employees' performance in areas related to DEI should be integrated into all position descriptions and/or employment agreements. In part this would offset so many vexing, unspoken and unwritten assumptions that Black and other BIPOC employees are responsible for this work by virtue of their ethnoracial identities; in part this would improve white educators' understanding that this work is mandatory for them and not optional because they're white. The goal would be to interrupt or to minimize the phenomenon Aziza referred to as the "outsourcing" of this work to herself and other Black colleagues at Weston.

Critical masses of difference. On a number of occasions throughout our interview, David referred to the "critical masses of difference" that are required to support and advance authentic racial equity. Hiring practices meant vaguely to illustrate the school's commitments to diversity by enabling school leaders to point to a minimal number of Black employees are

disingenuous and damaging. Although adequately representational diversity alone is insufficient to catalyze authentic equity in a school community alone, authentic equity cannot take root without it.

Professional Development Imperatives

A variety of specific practices were recommended as points of focus for continuing or new professional development in progressive education spaces.

Affinity groups and the 50/50 rule. All participants affirmed the value of racial affinity groups, recognizing the distinct purposes of affinity groups for white employees and for Black and other BIPOC employees. However, most participants worried that *too* much segregated time tends to be spent in affinity grouping, while not enough time is spent in interracial dialogue. David referred to his own “50/50 Rule,” alluding to the fact that he expects all employees to spend at least as much time in each space as the other. Recognizing the value, for example, of white affinity groups to help people explore their racial identity development and practice anti-racist strategies, he said nevertheless that “You can’t get so stuck in that, that you fail to figure out what it means to truly interact with the world.” More broadly speaking, progressive institutions should seek out deeper and more authentic relational models for intercultural exchange and ongoing professional development to provide a space to practice the “real” work of racial equity and belonging. These activities should be devoted as much to personal as to professional transformation.

Develop internal capacity. Participants recommended that leaders in progressive educational spaces should prioritize the development of internal capacity to advance DEI growth and goals. Most participants noted, instead, that school leaders tended to rely on external

consultants and trainers, as well as what Aziza called the “singular outward event” featuring prominent speakers on a “one-off” basis. Instead, the expertise of invested educators on-campus should be identified, cultivated, promoted, and materially compensated to advance racial equity goals in the school program and culture. Aziza invested great amounts of effort in this work at Weston, but it was ultimately repudiated in favor of traditionally reactive, topical, and/or superficial professional development activities at the behest of the administration.

Train and support conscientized white educators. In those cases that progressive schools or organizations actively support white educators seeking identity development, cultural competency, or anti-racist training, they should continue to do so—and if they don’t, they should start. A critical mass of knowledgeable and skilled white educators is essential to promote a more culturally democratic environment, inside and outside the classroom.

Complicate idols and interrogate narratives. During professional development activities that orient or train educators with reference to progressive pedagogy or the progressive tradition, proactive efforts should be made to share, explore, and attempt to reconcile what we know about the fraught racialized dynamics of progressive education’s founding and historical inheritances. In addition, participants recommended that racialized power dynamics in the classroom should be the subject of explicit attention.

Institutional Leadership Priorities

Participants offered a variety of recommendations to inform the practices of progressive institutional leaders in the months and years to come.

Improve your DEI fluency. Particularly though not exclusively for white school or organizational leaders, a priority must be made of developing fluency in the concepts and skills

pertaining to DEI. Participants consistently noted that leaders were silent on matters of racial equity, displaced responsibility for advancing DEI goals and mitigating racialized conflict to Black and other BIPOC employees, and thereby abdicated their own responsibility to lead this work. This educative imperative might mitigate excuses for such “outsourcing,” as Aziza called it. Frequently, senior leaders promote employees’ participation in DEI-related training but do not participate themselves.

Feedback loops and protocols. Institutional leaders should seek to develop and provide more complex and inclusive feedback loops and communication protocols for employees. Participants spoke to a variety of failures in communication, including but not limited to silence on emerging or pressing issues, as well as a number of uncommunicated expectations and attendant pressures to absorb responsibilities outside the bounds of the positions for which they understood themselves to have been hired.

DEI strategic planning. An explicit DEI mission and vision should be designed through an inclusive process that also establishes goals, timelines, and structures of accountability. Across all interviews, participants indicated that DEI matters were frequently and conspicuously addressed in reactive contexts: when a crisis emerged, a lawsuit was threatened, or a complaint was filed. Purposeful DEI strategic planning would help make the advancement of racial equity a proactive and deliberate, rather than reactive or reactionary, endeavor.

Expand indicators of success and achievement. A variety of participants spoke to the limiting and often damaging impacts of assessing student success and achievement through the lens of meritocracy, which is always and already intertwined with norms of white supremacy. Authentic belonging and equity rest on understanding that there are multiple permutations of

“success” that may emerge from different cultural experiences, and should be recognized as equally valid and reliable indicators of success—and not only, as David framed it, “contributive to this . . . industrial, economic, political, [and] social machine that whiteness built.”

Deeper relational models. In all activities that invite or promote engagement and/or collaboration—whether among and between employees, or with the broader community—deeper relational models should be cultivated. As David suggested, the goal of such activities is to ensure that “there is authentic engagement with the other—as opposed to the Other having engagement with whiteness.” This could include, as Louis suggested, more expansive efforts to partner and build relationships with community members who interact with but are not officially part of the institution or organization.

Partner with public progressive schools. Independent progressive school leaders should seek out and cultivate authentic, sustained, collaborative, and reciprocally beneficial partnerships with public progressive schools. Typically, independent progressive schools support predominantly white populations; often public progressive schools serve as isolated but available examples of progressive education leveraged in the service of Black and Brown students. Independent progressive schools have much to learn from public progressive schools about how to support Black and Brown students in culturally responsive and sustaining ways.

Transparency in stewardship. Progressive school and organization leaders are most often responsible for the stewardship of the organization, which often includes orienting internal and external audiences to the historical and philosophical context of progressive education in which the institution situates itself. Leaders in these situations should be transparent about the problematic racialized dynamics in progressive education’s history, and humble about the degree

to which the school or organization is a “work in progress” on the DEI continuum in this light. Leaders should not simply proclaim their solidarity with racial justice movements or aspirations to becoming more equitable institutions, but also be concrete in representing action steps towards those goals. Finally, the school’s racial equity or justice commitments should be understood as benefiting all members of the community, and not only racially minoritized students or employees: educational excellence emerges from collaboration and learning across difference.

Recommendations for Progressive Advocacy Organizations and Universities

Participants offered a number of recommendations for interrogating and reframing philosophical principles, historical dynamics, and predominant beliefs intrinsic to progressive education. These should be considered by progressive education advocacy organizations to support, inform, and guide their membership as well as to enhance public understanding, and by universities to inspire further academic research on these subjects, and to improve and inform teacher training programs.

Historical Research and Reframing

According to participants, further research and advocacy is required to interrogate the problematic racialized dynamics intrinsic to progressive education’s history and its most celebrated proponents, and to augment predominant narratives about progressive education, both in progressive education institutions and in public culture.

Complicate idols and ideologues. From John Dewey’s reticence to engage directly with racial matters in his early career, to our collective inheritance of the racist assumptions embedded in recapitulation theory, the prevailing hagiographies about progressive education’s founders and luminaries need to be challenged, complicated, and reframed. Through more

authentic examination of the founders' roots and an effort to supplement the tradition's originary myths, contemporary practitioners will be able more capably and authentically to navigate contemporary challenges.

Embrace contributions of Black progressives. All participants referred to examples of Black scholarship or practice that resonate with progressive pedagogy but have been excluded from formal consideration as part of the progressive tradition. Examples abound, including but not limited to W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter Woodson, and (as cited by Louis) Robert Moses. Participants speculated that either because of their service to primarily Black populations, or because of their commitments not only to pedagogy but also to racial justice, that they were excluded from the progressive canon. Further research should be conducted, and these Black scholars' contributions should be promoted in the context of teaching about progressive education and redefining the progressive tradition.

Clarifying the Definition of “Progressive”

All participants referenced the ambiguity of the definition of “progressive education” and the way the term “progressive” is either received as a shorthand or deployed as a badge that disingenuously implies progressive educational institutions' explicit and fully realized commitments to racial equity and justice. Universities as well as progressive education advocacy organizations have roles to play in clarifying and promoting a reformulated vision of progressive education that bridges core tenets of progressive pedagogy with culturally responsive and sustaining practices (Algava, 2016).

Principles of progressive education. The Progressive Education Network has made progress in recent years inscribing racial justice goals into the principles of progressive education

it promotes through its website, communications, and events. However, more of this work needs to be done by this and other advocacy organizations, helping to shepherd over time a new understanding of the core tenets and preoccupations of contemporary progressive education. Universities, as well, can help cultivate a renewed definition and understanding through further research and teaching, especially but not only in teacher training programs.

The myths of individualism and meritocracy. Some participants spoke to the ways that individualization and personalization are frequently trumpeted as the distinguishing benefits of progressive education. Yet they also noted ways that a focus on individualism clashes with ideological imperatives of racially minoritized communities and undermines the cultivation of collective welfare in schools and organizations. Furthermore, participants addressed the myths of meritocracy, which are inextricably intertwined with and determined by white norms and limit Black and other BIPOC students' viable pathways of success and achievement. While educating "the whole child" and developing learning experiences that are responsive to children's needs, goals, and interests are hallmarks of progressive education, we need to come to terms with the fact that the very idea of "the child" or "the whole child" was racialized in alignment with white norms from the inception of these commitments. These tensions must be interrogated and addressed in the aforementioned re-crafting of progressive education's core principles.

Conclusion:

Reinvoking the Transformative Promise of Progressive Education

The primary purpose of this study was to learn from the lived experience of prominent Black educators and activists in progressive education spaces, and to amplify their voices, in order to make "whiteness" visible and to move from a politics of colorblindness to cultural

democracy within progressive education. This signaled the need to critically interrogate potential strategies to transform normalized beliefs, practices, structures, and relationships tied to pedagogy, curriculum, research, activism, policy formation, and organizational leadership devoted to the advancement of a renewed and revitalized vision of progressive education. Thus, this study also sought to contribute to an ideological critique that identifies elements that may be necessary to build a culturally inclusive and sustaining progressive education movement, to cultivate solidarity across ethnoracial differences within the progressive education movement, and thereby to redeem progressive education's socially transformative potential with specific regard to racial equity and justice. Closely related to this pursuit was my effort to examine how white progressive educators, beginning first and foremost with myself, might position ourselves more effectively in solidarity with racially minoritized progressive educators to advance a culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy and to mitigate racialized inequities in our schools, our organizations, and our field.

It is important, in conclusion, to reiterate emphatically what the purpose of this study was *not*. First, a deconstruction of "white supremacy" enacted or perpetuated in the progressive education movement was not experienced as or directed towards an attack on white people, either in general or within the progressive education movement, either by alleging that there are extremists in the movement driven by racial animus or by implying that educators employing a "child-centered" pedagogy intentionally marginalize, oppress, or otherwise dehumanize people of color. Instead, I positioned myself in concert with Ansley (1997):

I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas

of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (p. 491, cited in Gillborn, 2005, p. 592)

Similarly, the purpose of this study was not to disparage progressive pedagogy, progressive schools, or the progressive education movement *per se*, so much as to redeem, to reclaim, and to redefine its transformative potential.

To the extent that this study critically questioned progressive education's principles, pedagogy, practices, and personages far more than it celebrated or affirmed them, I must insist that this study was borne of the belief I have in progressive education's potential and the radical hope I harbor that it can become a better version of itself. If progressive pedagogy could be synthesized with authentic structural and systemic commitments to racial equity and justice, it could become the viable alternative to the racialized violence of neoliberal education policy we desperately want and sometimes allege it to be. Reflecting on that possibility, I think of David, once again, describing the enrollment of Aiken's first Black student many decades ago:

And one of my contentions is rooted in a statement that essentially recognizes that progressive schools and organizations are certainly *rooted* in white supremacy and racism, but not necessarily *restricted* by. And I'm really intentional by saying it that way. Because, again: I recognize that they exist, in part, because of racism and because of white supremacy—or many of them in their origins were created as that being a part of the backdrop—but that the possibility of the progressive school experience and the ideals that come with that—philosophically and otherwise—actually give you the *opportunity* to not be restricted by those earliest formations and roots in the white supremacy and the

racism. So in my particular school context, it is not by chance that it spent its first, you know, almost 50 years without having a single student of color in the school. That is not by chance; that is actually by design. It was designed for that to be the case. . . . So, I guess I'm saying it all that way just to recognize that when the roots are there, I think a lot of the reason that the integration, or what I would call the desegregation, was actually able to happen was because the progressive ideals did not restrict them from making that important choice.

In some ways, therefore, the core question for me is not what sweeping policies might need to be introduced or imposed in order to transform the movement, but why—given the freedom progressive education already claims for itself to innovate and evolve in service to democracy—it hasn't yet been more effectively transformed from within. On this notion, I'm left with Aziza's response to an interview question inviting her to propose new policies that might catalyze white progressive educators' commitments to racial equity and justice:

How did we get here that you needed this policy? It's been 500 years plus? Oh, come on now. How can I trust you to do more, but *you* don't trust you to do more? How did we get here?

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