IT'S TIME TO ACT: EMPLOYING CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH TO CREATE SUBSTANTIVELY INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, It's Time to Act: Employing Critical Participatory Action Research to Create Substantively Integrated Schools, has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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"The acorn. It doesn't have to be told to become an oak tree. It simply needs to exist as itself inside of conditions fertile for oak trees."
-Adrienne Marie Brown

For those reading this dissertation, I hope that during this challenging time, you find the conditions you need for flourishing. This dissertation is largely a project of imagination of what those fertile conditions could look like within a schooling system aimed at creating greater flourishing and a thriving pluralistic democracy. Specifically, I envision how our world, like forests, could learn to thrive from the duality of diversity and unity.

When pondering the conditions that brought me to this place, it is impossible to name every influence. Like an Oscar speech (and out of laziness to avoid relabeling page numbers in the table of contents), I'll keep these acknowledgements short and sweet.

First, I would like to express gratitude for my ancestors, who exhibited the physical and mental resilience, paving the way for me. Next, I would like to thank members of my family, who supported me in all elements of my development. One particular element that I'm grateful for is my family's emphasis on intellectual, spiritual, and moral development. With their support, I aim to embody a freeing love to those around me and continue the intergenerational tradition of spreading knowledge as an educator.

Next, I want to thank all the friends who have helped shape me throughout each era of my life. For those in high school and college who brought laughter, joy, and understanding to my life as well as helped lift my confidence, thank you! For those who stood beside me throughout some taxing years teaching in D.C., you helped me find a new level of critical awareness and access to deeper levels of myself as well as the world. Finally, for all those I have met at UVA, I am grateful for the community we have built. I have grown within interconnected collectives with a shared goal, and I appreciate all of those who have been a part of that becoming.

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I leave you with trust in the upheaval and revival. Together, we are capable of transformation within our own internal and external worlds!

In solidarity,

Liz

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Helpful Definitions to Orient Your Reading

Subject-Specific Terminology:

1. **Desegregation**: the removal of legal, social, and institutional barriers that enforce the separation of groups; within this context, desegregation will mostly refer to the restructuring of public schools to address *de jure* segregation and diversify ethno-racial enrollment, following *Brown v. Board I* (1964) and *II* (1965).

2. **Diversification/Diversity**: a term that will be used to describe desegregation in more modern contexts; school diversity refers to student demographics that are representative of the greater community. Such diversity could still mean segregation within classrooms, inequitable distribution of power, lack of inclusive practices, etc.

3. **Global Majority:** a term referring to the fact the majority of people in the world are non-White people. While nondescript like other umbrella terms like "BIPOC," this umbrella term is used in the school integration space, instead of non-White, as to not center whiteness and to allude to the world's greater ethno-racial/cultural diversity (Integrated Schools, 2024).

4. **Latine**: a gender-neutral term for Latino/a that most nearly mirrors the Spanish language. Hispanic and other terms are also used in this paper, when quoting from an initial source such as a paper or researcher collected identification survey.

5. **Segregation**: the separation of people along different facets of their identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, language, etc.).

    a. ***De Jure* Segregation**: segregation by law, most frequently referring to ethno-racial (ethnic + racial) segregation.

    b. ***De Facto* Segregation**: segregation by fact. In the U.S. context, while ethno-racial and socioeconomic segregation is illegal in schools, housing, etc., *de facto* segregation is still promoted through public policy choices like redlining, restrictive housing covenants, geographic zoning, transportation options, school secession, etc.

6. **Substantive Integration:** "The conditions, policies, practices, and beliefs that support a diverse student body, meaning schools are building culturally responsive, restorative, antiracist, and inclusive educational spaces" (Du & New York Appleseed, n.d., p. 4) This dissertation uses the 5R + 1 framework to consider the following aspirational factors that serve as the goal posts for truly integrated schools: (*The Policy Platform for School Integration*, 2020):

1. ***Race and Intersectional Enrollment:*** school enrollment is ethno-racially, socioeconomically, culturally, linguistically, etc., representative of the greater community. In addition to having such diversity, intersectional identities are celebrated, and there is such diversity represented across in- and after-school learning environments.
2. ***Restorative and Transformative Justice:*** pluralism does not come without the potential of harm, but truly integrated schools do not rely on punishment as a response to harm. Broadly, restorative justice is "a set of principles and practices that repairs the harm caused by conflict in a way that is centered around understanding and responding to the needs of each involved party and the broader community. With roots tracing back to Indigenous societies, restorative justice can be applied both reactively in response to conflict and proactively to strengthen community by fostering communication and empathy" (Du & New York Appleseed, n.d., p. 4). This pillar of school integration has even been extended to transformative justice, where harm is addressed in a restorative way, as well as addressing systemic issues that contributed to the harm.
3. ***Equitable Resource Distribution:*** segregation is associated with underfunding of high-poverty students and schools of Color (Baker et al., 2022), but integrated schools strive for an equitable distribution of the inputs (e.g., needed ESL/IEP services, up-to-date books, reading/math specialists/tutors, course offerings, etc.) that lead to gaps in outputs.
4. ***Representation:*** to create a more power-balanced environment, there should be a representative staff (teachers, principals, other employees, PTA members, etc.) across intersectional identities. Representation also extends to the curriculum (e.g., books, guest speakers, etc.) and student voice in school policy decisions.
5. ***Inclusive Relationships:*** to foster inclusion/belonging amongst all groups, schools must center relationships. These relationships are across interest holders of various identities and power dynamics (e.g., amongst student peers, teachers, families, and others connected to the school). This also does not negate the need for affinity spaces, especially for marginalized groups.
6. ***Civic Engagement Opportunities*****:** This component was added based on a large body of literature that describes civic (Anderson, 2013; Blum & Burkholder, 2021) outcomes as one of the key motivators for school integration and education more broadly.

7. **Whiteness**: in this case, whiteness refers to a set of "beliefs, assumptions, policies, etc. that fuel and uphold and uphold an institutionalized system of anti-Blackness, or white supremacy" (Integrated Schools, 2024).

Process-Specific Terminology:

1. **Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR)**: mirrors the participatory action research processes (see PAR definition below), but with a social justice aim and consideration of power dynamics and sociohistorical contextual factors (Fine & Torre, 2021).

2. **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**: "Combines participation and action to understand and address societal issues. Emphasizes democratic processes in participation *with* others rather than research for research's sake conducted on people/communities" (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

3. **Participatory Research (PR)**: an umbrella term for research processes that include intended on-the-ground interest holders in the research process, with origins grounded in social justice (Macaulay, 2016).

Introduction

The linking document connects the three papers of this dissertation, first by motivating and defining a common topic —substantive school integration—and next, by exploring this topic through a common epistemological approach, critical participatory action research (CPAR) and evaluation (CPAE). Specifically, this dissertation argues for a reformed policy problem definition—moving from school segregation or the lack of desegregated schools to the lack of substantive integration. I will define substantively integrated schools using a novel 5R +1 framework, which includes **r**acial and intersectional enrollment, **r**estorative/transformative justice, equitable **r**esource distribution, **r**epresentation, inclusive **r**elationships, and civic engagement opportunities. Next, given schools embodying all these principles may not exist, this paper argues for a CPAR approach to simultaneously promote and research school integration alongside community interest holders. Such a process accounts for the influence of power, socio-historic, as well as cultural factors, involves the co-construction of knowledge between individuals and groups, and culminates in action (Brown & Dueñas, 2020; Fine & Torre, 2021).

After providing background information, the linking document presents a granular view of what to expect within the three dissertation chapters. This document does so by describing each paper and reflecting upon the connections among them and the overall framework. The first two papers provide examples of CPAR/CPAE implementation within various domains of the 5R +1 framework. Next, this linking document highlights the challenges and considerations that emerged in the first two partnered empirical projects. The final paper takes these considerations into account when proposing and

justifying a revised definition of the problem —lack of substantive integration— and CPAR as grounding for the implementation process. Lastly, this document will discuss how paper three provides real examples of practitioners implementing various 5R+1 components and concludes with a hypothetical example encompassing all framework elements.

Motivation

70 years after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education II* decision, schools remain largely separate and unequal. Given historical injustices (Clotfelter, 2004), ethno-racial and socioeconomic[1] segregation's strong correlation to inequity[2] (Baker et al., 2022; Matheny et al., 2021; Reardon, 2016), and education's link to a functioning, pluralistic, and multi-racial/cultural democracy (Anderson, 2013; Blum & Burkholder, 2021; Dewey, 2011), school ethno-racial and socio-economic segregation continues to present a policy problem. While research has rigorously documented the harms of segregation, there has been relatively little national progress on solutions, with multiple measures indicating persistently high levels of ethno-racial and socio-economic segregation (Monarrez et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2022). In addition to high levels of segregation, there is evidence of rising rates, with ethno-racial and socioeconomic school segregation in the largest 100 districts increasing by 37% and 52%, respectively, since 1991 (Owens et al., 2022; Owens & Reardon, 2024).[3] While recognizing various challenges (e.g., legal, housing, political, etc.), this dissertation operates from a position

[1] While other forms of identity can be considered within conversations of school integration (e.g., ability status, language, gender identity, etc., this dissertation will focus primarily on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status)

[2] Such inequity spans inputs like school funding, neighborhood resources, social networks, etc., and outputs, like academic achievement, employment, etc.

[2] Ethno-racial segregation was measured using the White-Black exposure index and socioeconomic status was measured using the same index and the binary variable for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

of possibility and imagination. Part of this involves shifting the conversation away from the policy problem of segregation or the absence of desegregation to the lack of truly integrated schools and then envisioning collective ways to address this challenge more effectively than in the past several decades.

Specifically, this dissertation reimagines past school segregation, desegregation, and diversity research on two dimensions. First, the framing of the policy problem. Previously, scholars have framed segregation as the problem and desegregation or diverse schools as the solution but this fails to center justice, reduce harm, balance power, and empower all students, particularly those from the global majority[4] (Horsford, 2019). Accordingly, this dissertation operates from an adjusted frame, which situates the lack of substantively integrated schools as the policy problem and the creation as well as continuation of such integrated schools as the solution. Integration broadly defined includes "the conditions, policies, practices, and beliefs that support a diverse student body, meaning schools are building culturally responsive, restorative, antiracist, and inclusive educational spaces" (Du & New York Appleseed, n.d., p. 4). To make this broad definition more concrete, I apply a reworked 5R +1 framework to define what these conditions, policies, practices, and beliefs may look like. This framework, which includes the inputs of representative **r**acial and intersectional enrollment, **r**estorative/transformative justice, equitable **r**esource distribution, **r**epresentation, inclusive **r**elationships, and civic engagement opportunities, is meant to serve as a guide for addressing this policy problem in a more holistic way.

[4] Global majority is an alternate way to describe those who are non-White, given the term non-White centers whiteness. This term refers to the fact the majority of people in the world are not White.

When using this framework as a guide, there are important considerations. First, while the framework is a starting point, it is not intended to be treated as an absolute. For example, this framework is meant to allow for flexibility in its implementation across policy contexts and political cultures. This could mean the work may look different in the Northeast versus the Southeast; however, those involved ideally would work toward the same overarching goals. What may differ could be the scaffolding of which components in the framework interest holders implement, the order of implementation, and/or the use of tailored strategies, best suited for the socio-historical, cultural, and political climate. Second, the framework alone may not translate to any on-the-ground change, without a more action-oriented research approach. Therefore, to ensure the framework has use outside academic spaces and leads to a direct change on the ground, I propose adopting critical participatory action research (CPAR) and evaluation processes. This addition to the framework seeks to link scholarship to democratic action.

Existing policy research, particularly in the segregation and desegregation space, often lacks translation into direct action within contexts of study, which CPAR, the second main contribution of this dissertation framework, seeks to address. For instance, CPAR has liberatory roots and operates from an underlying theory that research should yield reciprocal benefits, take into account power dynamics, value local knowledge, and result in some form of change (Cornish et al., 2023; Macaulay, 2016). The theory of action here is that policymakers create on-the-ground change not simply by reading social science evidence and reacting only in what scholars producing such evidence may consider rational/data-driven ways. Instead, considerations of power, politics, local contextual factors, and values influence policy production, translation, and transformation

(Stone, 2012; Hall, 1995). I will argue that a more effective way to shape this process is through organized, coalitions working in various spheres (e.g., legal appeals, housing policy, education policy, etc.) to create research-informed change from within and outside of institutional systems (e.g., assuming an elected school board position, pressuring elected school board members within an advocacy coalition) alongside community interest holders. CPAR can provide the tools to achieve such objectives and, given the current lack of substantively integrated schools, may be a preferred approach for researchers looking to study such contexts and have their work generate meaningful change beyond citations and tenure track promotions.

Theoretical Grounding

Tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) provide a baseline for understanding the power, politics, and histories of ethno-racial segregation and school desegregation within the United States. CRT emerged as a tool to analyze how racism is hegemonic or dominant within the culture and embedded within law, policy, and institutions (Crenshaw, 1988, 1989). Key tenants of CRT can be applied to education policies, like desegregation, and include 1) permanence/normalization of racism, 2) race as socially constructed, 3) intersectionality[5] 4) harms of liberalism,[6] 5) the need for counter-stories, [7] 6) interest convergence[8] to sustain anti-racist work, (Bell, 1980; K. Crenshaw, 1989; K. W. Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1989, 1995; Ladson-

[5] The notion that identity is multifaceted, therefore, containing various dimensions of privilege and/or oppression that can compound within society
[6] Liberalism here is used in the classical sense of a system of natural individual rights, often linked to economic systems and not applied equally across groups of people.
[7] The elevation of stories from historically marginalized communities, who are often under-represented in mainstream narratives.
[8] Equitable policy change, specifically concerning race, is the most possible when the policy also benefits those in power (e.g., white and Black interests on an issue align).

Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). Specifically, this dissertation argues systemic racism and a neoliberal economic order, which prioritizes choice, efficiency, and capital gain, over other competing priorities, obstruct healing, equity, and progress toward integrated schools. In education, specifically, systems drive ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic differences, not inherent differences between people within these constructed categories. Many scholars have framed such differences in terms of achievement gaps (differences in outcomes), opportunity gaps (differences in inputs), acknowledgement gaps (lack of acknowledging past harms) and degrees of educational debt and harm (what damages were incurred and as a result, what educational opportunities are owed from lineages of subjugation) (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2023; Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016). Through a critical lens, this work attempts to build on these frames by first, acknowledging past historical, social, cultural, and economic legacies that contribute to intersectional inequities and then move toward addressing them (Tollefson & Magdaleno, 2016).

Addressing such inequities requires considering the latter tenants, counter-stories, and interest convergence, as well as a consideration of critical whiteness studies (CWS). First, counter-stories involve listening to those closest to marginalization historically, with stories outside of dominant narratives (Delgado, 1989). Next, interest convergence argues that creating and sustaining equitable change will require that those with more power also benefit from the policy reform (Bell, 1980). Interest convergence implies a degree of skepticism about policy reform upon which CWS builds. Specifically, CWS argues that white supremacy continues to transform to prevent equitable policy change (Matias & Boucher, 2023). In other words, those looking to enact *de jure* or by-law

changes to address something like segregation should be wary of how white supremacy may transform policy and its translation throughout implementation, thus leading to the same *de facto* or a matter-of-fact outcome that perpetuates the problem (Frankenberg & Taylor, 2015). In conclusion, this dissertation applies these tenets and critiques of whiteness to understand the past and present desegregation policy, which this linking document will briefly outline.

The U.S.'s history is one that exemplifies the permanence of racism and racialized violence. Such violence includes physical violence, linked to colonialism, and more invisible forms, like educational harm. The violent realities that we see today originate from the genocide of and land theft from Indigenous peoples by European settlers and the enslavement of Black Africans. At the root of these events, is racialized hierarchy and white supremacy, which helped create the racial as well as economic castes we see today (Wilkerson, 2020). Furthermore, education has and continues to play a role in the perpetuation of caste. For example, formal schooling at various times in history has not been accessible to all, with schooling for Indigenous and Black students within the U.S. serving as a form of indoctrination to reinforce inequities (Ewing, 2025). In other words, being taught white superiority in schools has served as another form of violence, which the schooling proposed in this dissertation hopes to address.

Finally, while the purpose of education and schooling has differed for various groups throughout history (e.g., Black, Indigenous, women, etc.) (Ewing, 2025), this study asserts that education is vital for collective and civic flourishing (Dewey, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2020). First, education policy debates within the modern context often boil down to differing goals of what should be maximized. Labaree's (1997) foundational

work reflects three predominant arguments for the purpose of education including democratic equality (schools as places of preparation for citizens, for the collective good), social efficiency (schools as places to train workers, for the collective good), and social mobility (schools as places for individual, not collective advancement). While the latter focuses on the individual consumption of education as a good, this work asserts that education should be a public good with more collective aims. Furthermore, I assert these aims should not simply be to ensure a strong workforce, but an informed civic body that can participate in democratic processes and have what they need to flourish more broadly as a human. These arguments are also furthered in the legal sphere. For instance, in *Brown v. Board of Education* and more recent segregation cases, like *Cook v. Raimondo* and *IntegrateNYC, Inc. v. State of New York* they cite the well-being of youth and democracy as linked to why we need public education (McGuire et al., 2020). Given that the U.S. is a highly diverse democracy, this paper will argue diverse and even integrated school settings will be at the heart of achieving this goal for civic preparation and furthermore, greater flourishing linked to healing some of the past harms outlined (Blum & Burkholder, 2021).

Historical Desegregation Context

The legacies of such ethno-racial hierarchies persist and can be observed within the context of past desegregation policy efforts as well as modern school diversity and integration movements (see Table 1). For instance, education was illegal for enslaved Black Americans and was later used as a tool of assimilation and to create compliant workers within historically marginalized populations (Ewing, 2025; Freire, 2000). While their oppression has historically been met with resistance, oppressive formal laws

remained for years following the freeing of enslaved peoples. For instance, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) doctrine of separate but equal public facilities, like schools, remained law until *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka I* (1954). This ruling acknowledged that separation within the landscape of the U.S. would be inherently unequal. This was apparent in the school setting, where Black and white children experienced grossly different resources (e.g., facilities, funding, curricular materials, etc.) (Clotfelter, 2004).

The Court's ruling unsurprisingly did not magically transform these inequities on the ground. Given a lack of coordinated enforcement, there was no substantial implementation of the *Brown* decision from 1954 to 1968. Desegregation mainly occurred in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. This was partially in response to shifting political and cultural values with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and continued reflection on racism abroad following the Holocaust, which prompted the enforcement of desegregation by threatening the withholding of federal funding for non-compliance (Liu, 2006). Social movement bodies, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), were pivotal to the efforts amidst white resistance. These groups strategically selected families looking to desegregate schools (e.g., Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges, etc.) and expanded legal pathways for future families. One of the lawsuits that expanded civil rights after *Brown* was *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968), which put forth desegregation factors of desegregated schools, including racial balance, faculty, staff, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022). Additionally, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), later allowed for the systematic use of busing as a tool for desegregation (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 1971).

Despite progress at this time, desegregation efforts were far from perfect. Oversights of desegregation that demonstrate the permanence of white supremacy include the lack of faculty and staff representation as well as largely one-way desegregation of Black students. For instance, Black teachers and administrators experienced mass layoffs, which had negative impacts on Black students (Burkholder, 2024; Siddle Walker, 2019). Specifically, Black students experienced significant increases in exclusionary discipline and higher rates of special education classifications (likely indicating overclassification) (Chin, 2021). Furthermore, within the short-lived time of busing, Black students, for the most part, were the ones who experienced the tolls of longer commutes, school closures, and entering spaces where they were not welcome/in the minority (Delmont, 2016). Given these layers of harm to Black students, future integration efforts must look to create more supportive and justice-oriented environments.

Finally, the past and today demonstrate the constant tug of war between competing values and white supremacy's continued opposition to and transformation of equitable policy. For instance, white supremacy and a desire to maintain hierarchy led to backlash to busing (Delmont, 2016) and retreat within inter-district desegregation plans. For instance, *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) established that policymakers were not *required* to work across districts as a remedy, even if they proved explicit racial discrimination (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022). Additionally, exclusionary housing policy, in the forms of white flight, redlining, restrictive covenants, and urban renewal (Rothstein, 2017), keep districts segregated with 60% of segregation in the 100 largest metro areas remaining between districts (Owens et al., 2022). In addition to resistance within the legal and housing spaces, schools were impacted through closures (Titus, 2011) and vouchers to

private schools offered to only white families to ensure continued segregation (Ford et al., 2017). These stories highlight the constant push and pull between shifting formal *de jure* (by law) policies, only to see *de facto* (by fact) consequences, which undermine the initial intention and replicate previous realities in new ways.

These occurrences are not relics of the past as white supremacy culture, racialized hierarchies, and *de facto* segregation persist (Wilkerson, 2020). For instance, recent legal rulings limit the work possible for district leaders, given all policies will be tried under strict scrutiny standards. Additionally, there are modern forms of resistance to equitable integration such as like within-school tracking/varied course access (Conger, 2005; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2021), district secession (Taylor et al., 2019), unfettered school choice plans perpetuating segregation (Alcaino & Jennings, 2020; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Houston & Henig, 2021; Schneider & Buckley, 2002) inequitable PTA funding (Murray, 2019), and backlash to teaching history that spotlights the experience of historically marginalized groups (Neal-Stanley et al., 2024). Finally, more recent executive orders and Dear Colleague letters, represent explicit backlash to past diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Overall, this history represents a push and pull between competing values, such as equity, choice, efficiency, liberty, welfare, security, accountability, etc. (Stone, 2012). While these values are in tension, certain values can be more prominent in the policy landscape at given times. Table 1, discussed in more depth in paper three, demonstrates the ebb and flow of dominant values and actions within the education policy landscape. My interpretation of the history outlined here, is that battle over such values and overarching goals of education will likely be ongoing and will likely not shift merely

through *de jure* policy change, but through shifting hearts and minds in addition to policy, which I argue later in this work, critical participatory action research can assist in.

Table 1: Timeline of K-12 and Higher Education Desegregation Efforts

Timeline	Themes	Cases and Events
Prior to 1950	*De jure* segregation Strict racial caste system, enforced by law. As we see throughout, oppressive realities exist alongside organizing for justice.	*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)
1950-1960s	Early desegregation shifts from *de jure* to *de facto* segregation, in other words, although segregation may not be legal, ever transforming resistance efforts keep segregation a reality. In this time, see a theoretical emphasis on tangible (e.g., classroom resources) and intangible factors (e.g., prestige, social networks, moral obligation). In terms of resistance, Milton Friedman proposes vouchers as a resistance tactic in the mid-1950s and white flight from the city to the suburbs increases.	*Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) (higher education) *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950) (higher education) *Brown v. Board of Education I & II* (1954, 1955) (K-12) White flight facilitated by public policy decisions, highlighting the important intersection of housing policy School closings and vouchers emerge as a way to resist school desegregation (K-12)
Mid-1960s-early 1970s	With litigation and additional pressures from grassroots organizing and foreign policy, start to see implementation creating way for mostly one-way busing. See a greater focus on tangible factors that can be measured and less on intangibles (e.g., experiences of	*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) (K-12) *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1970) (K-12)

	belonging/inclusion). This is the time with the most notable impact on desegregation, but as highlighted there are devastating reductions to Black teachers and administrators, who are pushed out of the profession.	Court-ordered desegregation enforcement, emphasis on busing
Mid/Late 1970s-1990s	This enforcement of desegregation court orders leads to more prominent resistance. Also see shifts to the Court composition and ultimately a retreat from past desegregation policy. Choice-oriented policies rise in prominence, in the battle of values with equity taking a back seat. See approaches like magnet schools as the new preferred tool for desegregation, instead of inter-district plans. In admissions and educational access, tangible factors become more complicated. In action, see intangible factors become more of a focus with more school-level resistance.	*Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) (K-12), now under the more conservative Burger Court *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) (higher education), can consider race in college admissions, but limit the use (e.g., no strict quotas) Busing restricted across districts as a remedy, emphasis on voluntary magnet options Ethnic studies movement De-tracking movements Rise of neoliberal ideologies with focus on market orientation and individual choice in the education policy space
Mid-1990s-2020	Expansion of other school choice models (e.g., charter and vouchers) in K-12 and policies preventing diversity continue to undermine the equity-desegregation efforts of previous eras. There is an emphasis on quality and punishment of	*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District. No. 1* (2003) (K-12) *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) (higher education)

	"low-performing schools," but less emphasis on desegregation litigation. Higher education, in contrast, has growing litigation and research on affirmative action, valuing diversity, and preparing students for globalized world. Overall, neoliberal values continue to prevail, with additional emphasis on quality and accountability.	*Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016) (higher education) Accountably era Covid-19 pandemic Racial reckoning and influx of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives
2021-Present	Backlash to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts in higher education and K-12. In higher education see weakening of affirmative action policy and in K-12 continued push for parents' rights, educational choice, and other neoliberal principles. Most recently, the presidential administration through executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, and other rhetoric have attacked education from the Department of Education, to individual districts, and higher education institutions.	*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023) (higher education) *Coalition for TJ v. Fairfax County School Board* (2023) (K-12 with similar cases in NYC, Boston, and Montgomery County) Moms for Liberty (2021) Classroom censorship initiatives The re-election of Donald Trump and threats of educational disinvestment (e.g., abolishing the Department of Education, anti-DEI executive orders, Dear Colleague letter) Monitoring of DEI in public data and scholarship.

(Adapted from Stuart Wells et al., 2016)

What Past Desegregation and Diversity Research Suggests

Research addressing the impacts of court-ordered desegregation, modern school segregation, and school diversity movements demonstrate the equitable academic, social, well-being, economic, and civic consequences of addressing segregation. For example, there is a robust causal literature that employs quasi-experimental methods by exploiting the randomness of court desegregation orders. Such studies show that desegregation, within court-ordered contexts, improved Black and Mexican students' educational attainment (Anstreicher et al., 2022; Antman & Cortes, 2021). Furthermore, there is evidence of improved earnings and health for Black Americans, with even intergenerational impacts, without any harm to white Americans (Anstreicher et al., 2022; Johnson, 2011). One of the main mechanisms driving such positive change appeared to be more equitable funding and smaller class sizes (Johnson, 2011). With this in mind, the U.S. context has shifted in many ways since desegregation court orders in the 1960s through the early 1980s, which may impact generalizability of such findings. For instance, one key consideration is demographic shifts within the U.S. public school population, which has become less white and includes more races/ethnicities than at the time of desegregation. With this in mind, more recent evidence shows that segregation, particularly at the intersection of race and socioeconomic status contributes to inequities (Reardon et al., 2024), which past desegregation efforts reduced (Matheny et al., 2021).

As aforementioned, segregation across lines of both race and socioeconomic status is prominent today and strongly correlated with educational inequity. For example, a recent study analyzed data from third graders in roughly 7,850 school districts from 2008-09 to 2018-19 and found that racial segregation alone was strongly associated with

achievement disparities and the rate at which those gaps grow between 3rd and 8th grade (Reardon et al., 2024). Similar to past work, the most predictive measure of differential achievement was a combination of race and school poverty levels; therefore, concentrating Black and Hispanic students in high-poverty schools will likely perpetuate achievement gaps and their growth (Reardon, 2016; Reardon et al., 2024). Furthermore, in addition to outcome gaps, segregation is correlated with differentials in important inputs like experienced teachers (James & Wyckoff, 2022), school funding (Baker et al., 2022), access to social networks (Chetty et al., 2022b), etc. One way to address such barriers to opportunity is by addressing segregation and mitigating the chance for such resources to be easily hoarded by those in power.

Additionally, there is a more recent and largely correlational literature focusing on diversity's academic, social, and civic benefits. For instance, starting at a young age in pre-K, lower-socioeconomic status (SES) students' academic skills benefit from exposure to more diverse learning environments (Reid, 2019). Additionally, in K-12 (Cardona & Rodríguez, 2023; Orfield et al., 2008) and college (Gurin et al., 2009), students from historically marginalized ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds also appear to benefit academically from diversity. A highly cited meta-analysis of over 500 and 700 samples on contact theory or people from different identities coming together can reduce prejudice, demonstrates that diversity reduces prejudice, under the conditions groups interact across relatively equal lines of power and work cooperatively, within a supportive environment, toward common goals (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In another study of elementary students, diverse school environments appear to increase interracial friendship, especially in earlier years, which could serve as a potential mechanism for

such bias reduction (Aboud et al., 2003). Another meta-analysis demonstrated that diversity is correlated with increased civic engagement for college students (Bowman, 2011), and another large-scale analysis of over 10,000 adult teams showed that diversity led to more creativity and satisfaction (Stahl et al., 2010).

Important Considerations

Overall, these findings signal important considerations. First, intergroup contact must be done with care and intention (Xu et al., 2020). For instance, the efficacy of contact theory hinges upon the conditions of power balance and cooperation toward common goals. Without such conditions, there can be negative side effects, like task conflict, a lack of social cohesion, and more challenges building community (Stahl et al., 2010; Tatum, 2017; Welton, 2013). Furthermore, those with less power will likely need additional support, such as affinity spaces, which can promote psychological safety and opportunities for historically marginalized students to recharge before reentering more diverse spaces (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017). Historically, global-majority students have been the ones moved into diverse spaces, where they are the minority, and in these instances, affinity spaces are likely extra important. Such past efforts like one-way busing (e.g., Black students into white schools) and one-way teacher placement (e.g., white teachers into Black schools) illustrate further constraints related to power and the need for future work to consider two-way integration strategies (Clotfelter, 2004).

At the root of why desegregation and integration present persistent challenges are considerations of power, hierarchy, and racial capitalism (Melamed, 2015). Again, CRT and CWS provide a framework for understanding these intersectional forces. For instance, the CRT tenant of interest convergence—privileged communities supporting an

equitable policy, given they also benefit—can help explain the relative failure of past desegregation efforts (Bell, 1980). Given that academic benefits are mostly concentrated among historically marginalized communities, if families focus narrowly on academic outcomes and possess zero-sum mindsets—one person's gain is another's loss—then arguments for equitable academic outcomes may be less compelling to those in power. Alternative arguments could frame diversity as beneficial to those with power. For instance, one survey study on diversity rationales found that white participants preferred arguments rooted in such instrumental benefit and were significantly less likely than Black participants to cite justice as a justification for diversity. Unfortunately, instrumental arguments were also correlated with larger Black-white college graduation gaps (Starck et al., 2021), thus indicating that scholars should be cognizant of narrowly framing arguments for diversity around benefits to privileged communities (Diem et al., 2019). Creating arguments that address zero-sum mindsets and emphasize how creating more just worlds can serve us all may provide a path forward (McGhee, 2021).

Furthermore, other scholars would argue that differentials in opportunity are by design under systems of racial capitalism that reinforce hierarchy (Ewing, 2025; Melamed, 2015). For instance, current systems disproportionately benefit those with racial, ethnic, linguistic, and/or other intersectional privileges (Carter & Welner, 2013; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). These systems preserve opportunity for certain classes of people within hierarchal and unequal systems of racial capitalism, with origins of oppression based on race since the times of colonialism and enslavement (Melamed, 2015). Preventing access to education by the global majority, women, poor people, etc., has historically been a tactic to uphold hierarchy, which has important implications given

education's connection to economic earnings (Heckman et al., 2018). Resolving this educational harm will likely involve creating more equitable educational opportunities, a more equitable economic arrangement outside of school, and a shift in mindsets to center collective over individual thriving (Love, 2023). Creating these outcomes appears unlikely within policy frames that promote separate but equal systems and trends of opportunity hoarding (Hanselman & Fiel, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Integrated schools at this moment present an opportunity to pave the way to these more equitable realities without harming historically marginalized communities.

Reimagining School Integration Policy

Problem definition can dictate which solutions are within the collective imagination and if such solutions perpetuate issues related to white supremacy and broader systems of oppression (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993; Stone, 2012) and sometimes existing solutions anchored in traditional whiteness create problem definitions. As collectives pursue change at this moment, redefining the policy problem as a lack of substantive integration is powerful, given the unique potential to maximize diversity benefits and create just school conditions. Substantive integration is defined here through a framework that I call the 5R + 1. A variation of this framework, with origins in factors used in the *Green* ruling, was initially developed by the student activist group IntegrateNYC's. The group theorized that real integration included 5Rs: representative **r**acial enrollment, equitable **r**esource distribution, inclusive **r**elationships, **r**epresentation in the labor force, curriculum and policy, and **r**estorative justice (*The History of the Movement for School Integration*, 2020), with the addition of civic engagement opportunities. While this framework originated within the NYC context, the applications

can likely extend beyond this context. Furthermore, this framework is meant to guide researchers looking to create conditions supportive for all students thriving, but not a rigid list of metrics that require uniform implementation across contexts (Rubinstein, 1986).

The NYC context can provide important lessons for those looking to work locally within and outside the system. For example, in the aftermath of the Park Slope diversity plan's approval in 2012, IntegrateNYC emerged in 2014 in the South Bronx of New York City (NYC) (Territorial Empathy, 2022). NYU documents how this group helped push the social movement toward more integrated schools in the NYC context. For instance, the policy conversation began to shift toward school integration with the 2017 NYC Department of Education Diversity Plan and the formation of an advisory group, as well as the 2018 middle school diversity plan. In 2021, an NYC educational panel rejected a gifted and talented testing contract, which was followed by a change of administration in 2022 and subsequent expansion of gifted and talented programming (Territorial Empathy, 2022). Moreover, progress in NYC, like removing barriers for historically marginalized students to access selective high schools, has been followed by other litigation, by Asian Americans and other privileged families, who see shifts as anti-meritocratic but fail to consider how histories of white supremacy and anti-Blackness shape definitions of meritocracy (Walsh, 2024). These examples show the power as well as well as backlash to local advocacy efforts in the city. Furthermore, this organizing group also pursued legal channels. In 2024, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case *IntegrateNYC, Inc. v. State of New York*, where the organization used litigation channels to prompt change around segregation and seek a constitutional right to a sound basic education, but putting

forth this legal argument still serves as a contribution (Comesanas, 2024). In conclusion, this dissertation will largely focus on how social science literature supports the revised 5R framework and how this framework holds the power to address past weaknesses of desegregation policy.

The third paper will document social science literature supporting the 5R + 1 framework. As a quick introduction, diverse enrollment (Johnson, 2011), equitable resource distribution (Jackson et al., 2016), and representative teaching forces (Rasheed et al., 2020) have positive academic impacts on historically marginalized students, which can lead to long-term societal benefits, given increases in human capital. In addition to educational and economic benefits, schools can also facilitate social benefits within a representative student body by ensuring students interact across relatively similar power differentials (e.g., through equitable resource distribution, a representative teaching force/curriculum, etc.) and by encouraging cooperation toward various common learning goals (e.g., through exploring representative curriculum, practicing restorative justice, and engaging civically, etc.). This can reduce prejudice, as well as increase cooperation, social cohesion, and cultural competency (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Furthermore, a representative curriculum promotes the sharing of histories of past harms and resistance against systems of oppression to ensure a more just world (Au et al., 2016; Bazini, 2022). Next, restorative practices can help to mend harm within the current school context to promote healing (Lodi et al., 2021). Furthermore, relationships can serve as a protective factor for global majority students (Daly et al., 2010) and help facilitate connections that result in economic mobility (Chetty et al., 2022a). Finally, the input of civic engagement

opportunities can prepare students for involvement in a pluralistic democracy (Anderson, 2013).

Additionally, this novel problem redefinition helps those implementing policy change avoid past harms of court-ordered desegregation. Specifically, historically marginalized students created the initial 5R framework to ensure that substantive school integration did not harm students like them (*The History of the Movement for School Integration*, 2020). This occurred during past school desegregation implementation, where schools notably lacked components of the 5R + 1 model beyond representative enrollment. For instance, desegregated schools lacked a representative teaching force and curriculum, as well as non-punitive, restorative ways to mend racialized harm (Chin, 2021; Lodi et al., 2021; Siddle Walker, 2019). Furthermore, following the retreat from equity-oriented (but still one-way) busing and enforcement of court desegregation orders, choice-oriented systems became a substitute. While magnet schools, for example, had equitable aims, they only provided desegregated schools to a small portion of the population (Harris, 2022). Now, the expansion of choice systems through charter schools, without substantive equity guardrails, has resulted in increased segregation and inequities (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Monarrez et al., 2022). White supremacy-oriented and neoliberal movements of choice and accountability, in the form of parents' rights, vouchers, homeschooling, curricular control, etc., dominate the conversation with the upcoming administration. In contrast, truly integrated schools, learn from these past shortcomings and provide imaginative paths forward.

In addition to arguing for this framework as a guide for policy problem redefinition, this linking document also argues for researchers to consider employing

critical participatory action research and evaluation (CPAR and CPAE) approaches to promote such direct social justice action from the bottom-up. Specifically, this document provides a theoretical framework combining the components of school integration with CPAR/CPAE approaches. Next, this document outlines how the three dissertation chapters (two empirical papers and one theoretical paper) connect to this combined framework. Finally, the final section documents the contributions of this dissertation to the larger literature, researchers, and other interest holders working towards truly integrated schools.

Methods

Positionality and Course to This Study

My journey to this work is intergenerational. I come from a line of educators. As a white, cisgender, female from a middle-class background born in 1994, I think about how I've been allotted the privilege to attend graduate school and explore an area of passion, an opportunity not available to previous members of my female lineage. For instance, my grandmother grew up in an Irish Catholic immigrant family in New York City. Despite living in poverty, they valued education and my grandmother worked as a librarian to support her brothers' college attendance. Through her work as a librarian, she met my grandfather, who was a professor. After having three children, she decided to return to school at night to get her college degree to become a special education teacher. She taught in New York City Public Schools as a special educator in a specialized classroom for students labeled "emotionally disturbed." She passed early in life—I can't help but think the accumulation of stress may have contributed—and was unable to see me become a special education teacher in Washington, D.C.

I worked for four years in Washington, D.C., as a general and special educator. My teacher residency program assigned me to my initial placement, at a public charter elementary school with a CEO and neoliberal institutional practices, as well as a no-excuses discipline model. The school had no windows, poor access to public transportation, as well as high concentrations of Black students living in poverty and novice teachers. Within the schools' walls were students, teachers, and families full of resilience, but the discipline model's parallel to the prison industrial complex (PIC) did not feel in alignment. With both my parents working as professors and a lack of student debt due to receiving a tuition exchange scholarship, I had the financial privilege to feel able to pivot to another school environment. I finished my teaching career at a school across the river, only fifteen minutes away by car. This school had lost its Title I status, with more white and wealthy families moving into the neighborhood, and was recently in the news for a potential merger to promote diversity (Lumpkin, 2024). As a special education teacher, my caseload included higher concentrations of global majority students as well as students living in poverty than the average school population. In addition to intersecting privileges relating to race, ethnicity, linguistics, socioeconomic status, etc., this school also has grossly more resources, with the PTA raising enough money to afford aids, smaller special education caseloads, etc. Experiencing such racial and socio-economic segregation as well as differences in opportunity drove me to apply to graduate school.

Since middle school, I had an awareness that segregation was largely a white person problem, which informs the lens through which I view this work. Through my Catholic, project-based middle school, I participated in a social justice-oriented club,

where we met with a neighboring Catholic school down the road with highly subsidized tuition. Despite this school sharing a Catholic identity and similar location within Providence, Rhode Island, I learned that my schooling and neighborhood experience were vastly different than my peers. Due to racial and economic isolation, I hadn't fully grasped this reality. A few years later, my brothers attended a diverse-by-design charter school, and my family began to grapple with the realities of segregation. In college, I was curious to learn more and completed an education policy minor, which culminated in a participatory project with community partners in the Richmond region. All these experiences and many more ignited my passion for researching truly integrated schools as well as acting in community with others to make these transformative ideas a reality.

Why Critical Participatory Action Research and Evaluation Approaches

CPAR/CPAE approaches evolved from a critical and participatory paradigm with several underlying assumptions (Denzin et al., 2024). For instance, those operating from a positivist frame assert there is an observable, objective truth. In contrast, post-positivists believe in this one objective reality, which can be observed imperfectly. Interpretivists acknowledge the existence of multiple realities, as do critical theorists, who instead emphasize how power impacts such realities (Denzin et al., 2024). Furthermore, critical and participatory paradigms acknowledge that knowledge can be formed not only at the individual but also at the group level. The importance of the collective is centered, but in some critical and participatory approaches, the focus ends at knowledge generation or critique. The selection of critical participatory action research is intentional, given an additional desire for acknowledging systemic racism and

encouraging direct action within the policy space to address the root causes of educational inequity.

Since *Brown*, traditional approaches to research, policy, and change have failed to bring about desired changes in substantive integration and equity, but collective mindset shifts, and activism provide an alternative. As previously mentioned, Bell predicted the failure of desegregation efforts, given a lack of interest convergence (Bell, 1980). Privileged folks did not perceive the benefits of desegregation and continue to possess zero-sum mindsets that create the perception of progress for historically marginalized communities as a detriment to them, instead of a way to expand the pot for everyone's shared benefit (McGhee, 2021). This indicates the need for a collective mindset shift from operating in narrowly defined self-interest to recognizing the power of collective flourishing, given that "nobody is free until everyone is free" (Brooks & Houck, 2010, p. 134)

In addition to this mindset shift, integrated schools require mobilizing coalitions (e.g., the Civil Rights Movements, IntegrateNYC, Integrated Schools, etc.). Such activist approaches are effective tools for achieving political and policy change, even if such change results in periods of backlash (Clotfelter, 2004; Delmont, 2016; Warren & Mapp, 2011). For instance, Oprah Winfrey spotlighted such action at the Democratic National Convention (DNC), crediting civil rights activists for busing programs, like one in California that allowed the prior Democratic Presidential nominee, Kamala Harris, to attend a desegregated school (Han, 2024). Such narratives of activists and social movements pushing for political and policy change are prominent within the Civil Rights Movement. This is one of many inflection points in history where there was a burst of

enduring legislative change followed by a long period of equilibrium, now experiencing disruptions with a conservative court (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). In order to prompt wide-scale policy change, this dissertation looks to apply lessons learned from past effective collective mobilization and social movements working to pressure policymakers and shape hearts and minds in order to sustain the work, so that *de jure* policies do not transform into continued *de facto* issues (Anyon, 2014; Staggenborg, 2021).

School integration researchers, with the goal of effective action, can learn from such movements and adjust their current practices as "objective" third-party observers toward working in partnership with activist, collective movements toward change. For instance, school segregation, diversity, and integration scholars have struggled with the problem of research translation or converting high-quality evidence into meaningful policy change. As previously mentioned, there is a rigorous research base (Orfield et al., 2008) documenting the academic harms of schools segregated by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (SES) (Reardon, 2011, 2016, 2019) and the long-term benefits of past desegregation efforts for global majority students without harming White students (Anstreicher et al., 2022; Antman & Cortes, 2021; Johnson, 2011). While there is less empirical literature on substantively integrated schools, given the lack of such contexts, there are examples of each component and theoretical support (Blum & Burkholder, 2021; Chetty et al., 2022a; Hannah-Jones, 2019; McGhee, 2021; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The gap between research and creating such schools appears to be politics, values, and traditional paradigms of research, which have separated knowledge from political action.

In addition to the need for more evidence of the benefits of and considerations relating to integrated schools, there is also a need for direct connection to action. CPAR and CPAE provide both and present an opportunity for researchers to pivot their approach from simply knowledge generation to one that includes collective mobilization and data-driven action. In the case of knowledge generation, CPAR/CPAE allows for the valuing of both local and traditional scholarly knowledge (Cornish et al., 2023), but combining these forms of knowledge is also insufficient. For instance, there is a need for collective mobilization and some type of action linked to such knowledge. Examples of the potential impact of such community organizing are the case studies across the country highlighted in Warren and Map's book *A Match on Dry Grass* (2011). These studies, discussed more in paper three, highlight the importance of relationship-building to collectively challenge power and promote more just systems.

Various forms of participatory research (PR) have emerged to work *with*, not *on*, those impacted by an issue, democratically empower collectives towards change, and address such translational gaps of traditional research. PR emerged from traditions like Kurt Lewin's action research with workers, Paulo Freire's emancipatory research with oppressed individuals, Orlando Fals Borda's work with social justice movements, as well as Laura Thompson's and Sol Tax's anthropological action research with communities (Cornish et al., 2023; Duke, 2020; Macaulay, 2016; Smith, 2015). PR can be initiated by the community impacted by a policy problem, the community alongside a researcher, or by a researcher (Cornish et al., 2023). Levels of participation from interest holders (e.g., students, families, teachers, policymakers, etc.) and reciprocity can similarly vary. Furthermore, when engaging in the research process, PR approaches employ various

research methodologies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, etc.) (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

Not all forms of participatory research require action, so this dissertation focuses on participatory action research (PAR), specifically, PAR at the intersection of critical paradigms, or critical participatory action research (CPAR), as well as evaluation (CPAE) (Denzin et al., 2024). CPAR/CPAE embeds democratic action within the practice and acknowledges how systems of power and socio-historic factors influence present realities (Fine & Torre, 2021). This translates to considering how intersectionality, power, politics, systems, history, etc., impact the research process from question formation to action and reflection (Denzin et al., 2024). CPAR approaches may be particularly helpful to school integration researchers given that this approach emphasizes translating findings into applicable action, an area in which past research in this field has previously struggled and failed. Furthermore, the involvement of interest holders can help ensure the sustainability of such action, an area where top-down policy can fall short. Finally, school integration researchers likely will benefit from more critical approaches that consider socio-historic legacies and how power operates. For instance, the political culture of a school, district, state, nation, etc. influences how policy will be constructed and/or translated (Marshall et al., 1989), especially in instances of desegregation policy (Heinecke, 1997). They argue that political culture emphasizes certain predominant values over others in the national policy context at various time periods. They argue that equity, choice, efficiency, and quality are primary national values that shift over time in educational policy and have a significant impact on policy definitions, which can be

found within shifts of desegregation discourse from equity to choice, efficiency, accountability, and quality.

Proposed Frameworks

In this dissertation, I employ a combined theoretical framework, which draws from theories previously outlined, including CRT, CWS, policy cultures, and critiques of policy translation. This dissertation adapts and combines two key frameworks, the first covering the redefinition of the policy problem of substantive school integration, with the 5R + 1 framework, based on IntegrateNYC's work, with the addition of a civic engagement component (see Figure 1). The second outlines the critical participatory action research and evaluation approach (see Figure 2). Next, I overlay these two frameworks and added potential interest holders that could be involved in the CPAR process, within the context of school integration research, mostly thinking at a school and district level. Finally, around the combined framework, I add an external layer of socio-historic/cultural context to account for important contextual factors. This combined framework guides this three-paper dissertation as outlined in the next section.

Figure 1: 5R + 1 of Substantive Integration Framework

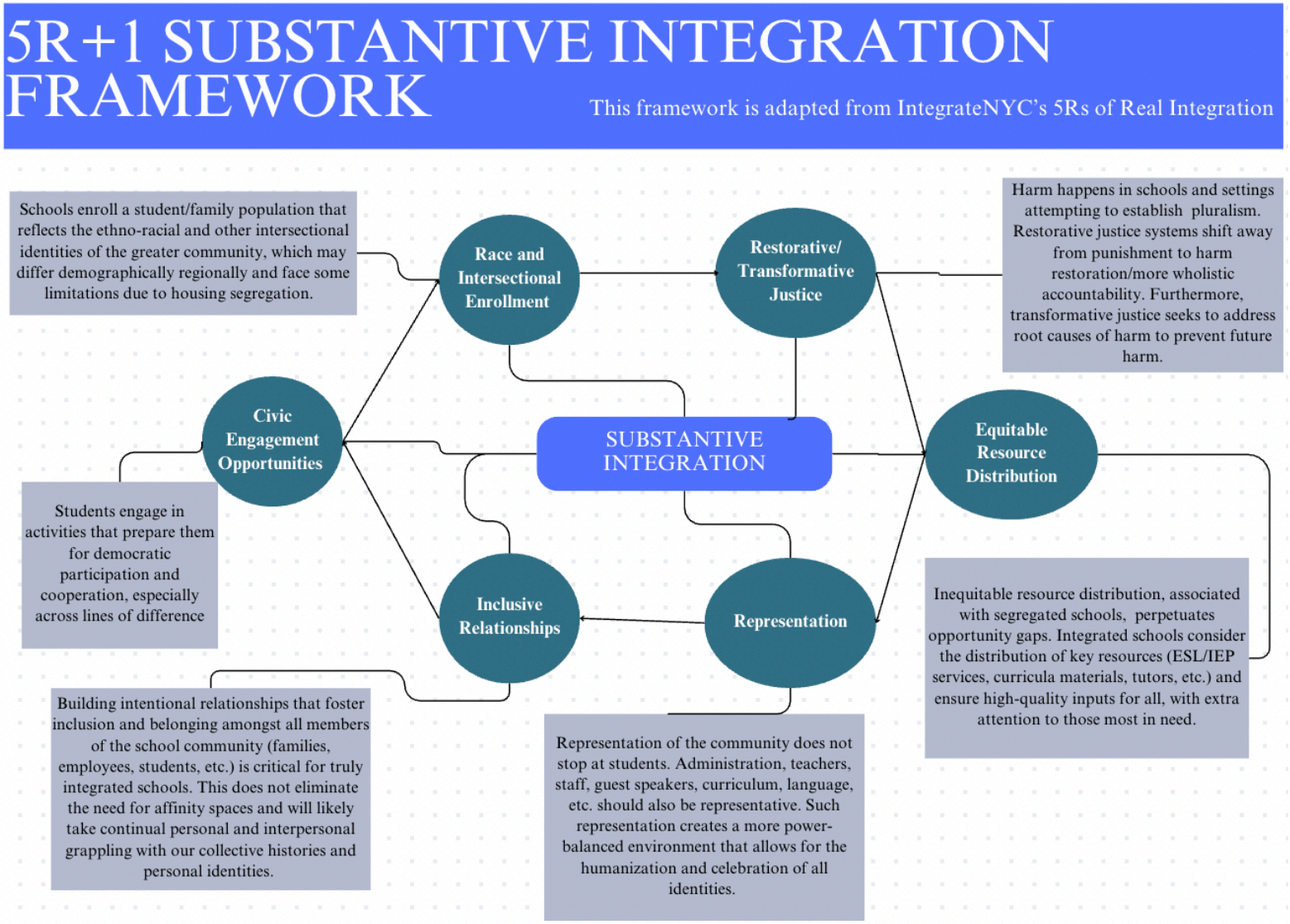
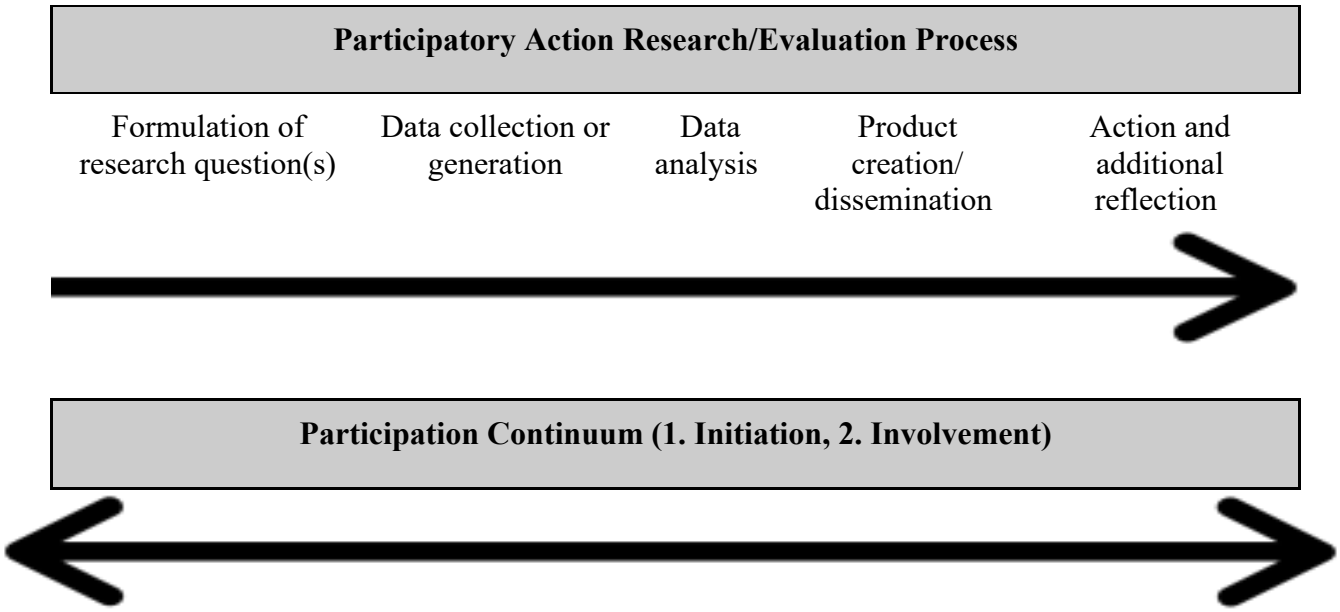
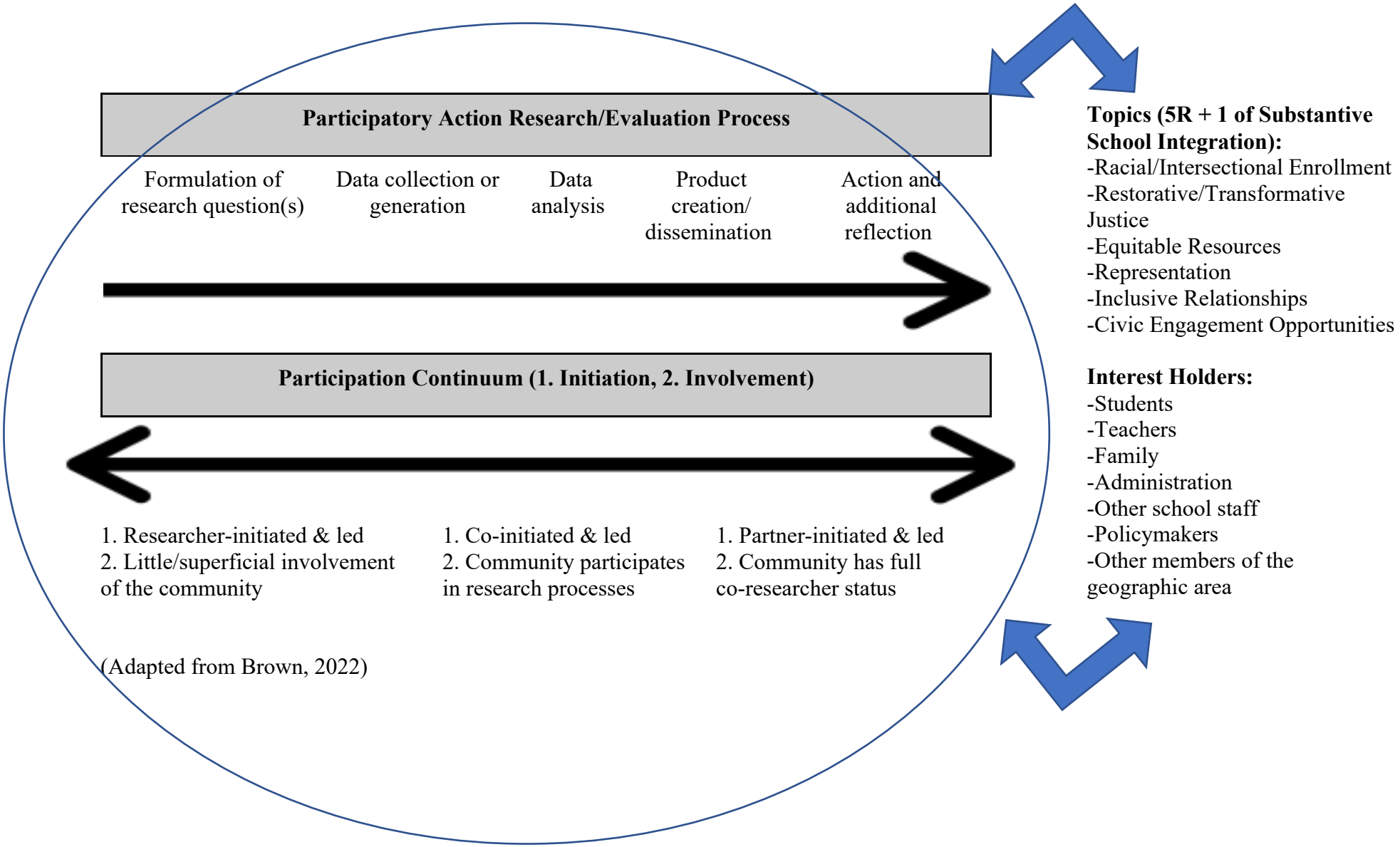


Figure 2: Participatory Research Process and Participation Continuum Framework



(Adapted from Brown, 2022)

Figure 3: Combined Critical Participatory Action Research and Substantive Integration Framework



Overview of Three Papers and Framework Connections

This dissertation includes an example of CPAR and CPAE that involves an external interest holder and researcher. Specifically, paper one is a CPAR project with a state department of education and local district representative, addressing the following elements of school integration: relationships, resources, and representation. Next, the second paper, a partner with a non-profit youth theater company located in New York City, explores the following of the 5R + 1 components: representation, relationships, and civic engagement. Specifically, representation in the form of voice and power shines through in both papers. Finally, after reflecting on these action-oriented research processes and considering future directions, I drafted the third theoretical chapter. This chapter explores the definition of substantive school integration through the 5R + 1 framework, using social science and theoretical justification. Next, that paper explores why democratically oriented, CPAR/CPAE approaches may be more effective than traditional research at generating policy change, given past effective policy-change strategies involve organized coalitions pushing for action across various levels (e.g., local, state, and federal) of policy arenas/sectors (e.g., legal, housing, schools, transportation, etc.). I hope that this paper makes a timely contribution, given that currently, despite rigorous evidence surrounding school segregation, there have been relatively few shifts in *de facto* segregation. This section provides additional details of each paper's topic, connection to the combined framework, interest holders involved, participation levels, actions, and reflection.

Paper One

Paper one investigates what historically marginalized families in an understudied rural community want from their ideal ECE environment and how policymakers can facilitate such imaginative realities. This project was done in partnership with a state department of education and local district to investigate the views of family interest holders. The CPAR process revealed findings relating to how ECE environments within the district and beyond could embody the 5R+1 components of relationships (e.g., teacher-child, teacher-family, and family-family relationships), representation (specifically, within the curriculum), and equitable resource distribution.

This research project was co-initiated through an existing partnership and had a limited action component. State and local representatives were involved in question formation, data collection, edits to analysis/products, and project dissemination. Researchers led data collection and worked alone during data analysis. Caregiver participants, who participated in the culturally responsive focus groups and shared their counter-stories, were involved in member-checking findings but were not listed as technical research partners. The focus groups themselves helped facilitate relationships among the families, who were provided with family advocacy resources alongside a summary of findings. Furthermore, the state used these formative findings to inform their expansion of regional family policy coalitions, which foster family relationships and representation in policy on a wider scale. District-level representatives used the findings to build a case for an ECE coordinator and to inform planning for the next school year, but it remains unclear if there were actionable shifts to the 5Rs identified.

What I learned from this initial partnered project informs how I approach papers two and three. For instance, I would have centered actionable outcomes from the

beginning of the research process, instead of simply knowledge generation. This could have looked like getting a commitment from the district to include more representative curricula or to create a kindergarten tour day before school begins to start building family, student, and teacher relationships early. Additionally, I would have included families more actively in all phases of the research project to ensure that this action was community-driven to meet their needs. This would have likely enhanced their voice and power, which if I could go back, I would have also done in paper two and tried to incorporate youth in the process. Furthermore, working with a state and local district in this paper did come with additional political restraints. Unlike projects with grassroots movements, community members, and non-profits, there was less flexibility, and given the scale of the organization, more challenges to understanding how to implement change. For paper two, I chose to work with a non-profit, that was highly mission-aligned, with the hope of creating more direct action.

Paper Two

This paper employs critical participatory action evaluation to understand the impact of a CPAR product (a social justice play/dialogue on K-12 classroom censorship) on critical consciousness. This work was done in partnership with a non-profit, mostly one adult cofounder, and collected data from a university-affiliated audience (which holds various identities like student, parent, family of students, etc.), following a student-written and performed show/dialogue on classroom censorship. Given the topic of classroom censorship, this project primarily involved representation in terms of curricula and the representation of youth voices within the CPAR process under evaluation. Additionally, this project highlights relationships within classrooms and civic

engagement of both the youth and the audience members, who received a resource guide of ways to get involved on the issue of classroom censorship.

The research process was co-initiated after the researcher reached out about bringing Epic Theatre Ensemble, a NYC-based non-profit, to a university. Four students performed the play/dialogue on K-12 public school classroom censorship. A non-profit co-founder participated in question formation, data collection, edits to analysis/products, and project dissemination. Again, due to mostly time limitations, youth and other adults were not included within the evaluation process itself. More adult members of the organization did participate in a reflection and training session aimed at sustaining internal evaluation and improving future practice to encourage action more effectively. In terms of action, bringing the performance to the University community was a form of action by the researcher that promoted the representation of student voice in some capacity. Some audience members reported taking small civic actions, because of the performance. As a result of the evaluation process, the organization was able to use formative findings to inform their practice. Specifically, they are continuing to evaluate their plays through surveys and continuing to create localized resource guides, both actions that developed from the research partnership. Finally, they are adjusting how they encourage action to not only focus on individual actions but also more collective forms of action (e.g., protesting, joining an advocacy organization, boycotting, etc.).

Mainly, what I learned from this paper that informed paper three was the need for those coming to this work to ensure they have time to engage a variety of interest holders and strategize throughout what actions may be possible. In this instance, I wish that I could have worked with the team from the beginning of the CPAR process through the

evaluation to ensure that action was central to the entire process. This lack of time as a graduate student presents a challenge to those looking to do this work. This challenge likely persists for university faculty, who face systemic barriers to doing this work, given their incentive structure. With these critiques, in comparison to working with a state department of education and district as a graduate student researcher, this partnership felt more focused on action. I speculate that this is due in part to strong goal alignment and willingness to change, the organization's relatively smaller size, and reduced external political pressures. These insights inform my hypothetical example selection in paper three.

Paper Three

Paper three serves as the grounding theoretical paper, which hopes to inform more effective CPAR/CPAE work around substantive integration in the future. Specifically, this paper documents a historical view of desegregation and considerations relating to power, values, and levels of policy implementation. Next, the paper looks at the present empirical and theoretical evidence in support of the 5R + 1 framework, which reimagines the problem and corresponding solutions. Next, the paper shifts into actual implementation, considering how various interest holders could be involved in such work across mostly school and district contexts (e.g., is the process initiated by an interest holder group or the researcher, and are interest holders involved in all steps fully, only some steps fully, and in other steps serving a more advisory role, etc.). Finally, this paper will provide a hypothetical example of what this could look like in practice to tease out the nuances of this process. For this example, I select a grassroots organization in a district undergoing rezoning and looking for the help of researchers to ensure more

substantive integration. I chose this example given my historical exploration of change making processes as well as to work around past issues I experienced with previous partners involving political constraints or lack of a wide representation of voices within the project team. In essence, this chapter serves as a guide to justify the redefinition of the problem and how to shift school integration research to more action and community advocacy-oriented efforts.

Scholarly Contribution

Studies on school segregation, desegregation, and diversity often focus on documenting the problem and/or analyzing policy impacts (specifically on short- to medium-term academic outcomes and, in some cases, more significant long-term outcomes) rather than focusing on actionable solutions and change. Additionally, many studies misattribute school integration as bringing students of different ethno-racial backgrounds together physically and fail to incorporate all components of substantive integration, including race and enrollment, restorative justice, resources, representation, relationships, and civic engagement. The future of school integration research will have to seriously grapple with the definition of integration itself and how to promote direct action for meaningful change. To do so will likely require looking at specific forces driving (in)efficacy in the study context, unpacking community dynamics, and considering politics/power. This dissertation documents how CPAR and CPAE approaches— where researchers work with on-the-ground interest holders toward democratic policy action within the school integration space—hold the potential to address such concerns.

Given these considerations, this dissertation contributes to multiple dimensions of the existing literature. First, this dissertation expands upon an existing framework for substantive integration (adding civic engagement to IntegrateNYC's existing 5R framework) to serve as a guide for more holistic justice-oriented efforts. Next, this dissertation combines this substantive integration framework with a critical participatory action research (CPAR) and evaluation (CPAE) framework. The first two dissertation chapters serve as examples of CPAR and CPAE approaches that engage various interest holders with varying levels of participation at each phase of the research process. The third paper builds out this framework with evidentiary support and hypothetical examples to guide those looking to engage in such work.

Lessons from the first two chapters informed the final chapter or development of the combined framework and selection of a hypothetical example. In this chapter, I theoretically justify the 5R + 1 and why to combine this framework with CPAR approaches. Finally, I argue scholars could do more in the process of translating evidence on school segregation/integration to communities, building understanding/capacity for addressing the issue, especially during a period of legal/political retrenchment, and ultimately, working together with local coalitions toward critical action. Each paper highlights localized action and/or ideas for action, useful for both researchers and other interest holders. These actions progress the literature, provide concrete benefits in the real world, and can also illuminate lessons learned from engaging in this type of work.

Conclusion

This dissertation combines two frameworks to illustrate a different approach to substantive school integration research for change, focused on social justice action

alongside impacted interest holders. The portion of the combined framework includes the policy area of interest, the 5Rs of real integration, which I expand to include civic engagement. Next, the CPAR portion of the combined framework highlights which interest holders can participate, how they may participate, and the research process, which includes an action component. Furthermore, this is all embedded within the greater socio-historic context, which shapes the overall research approach. The final combined frameworks link my three dissertation papers. Specifically, the first two papers serve as applications of the framework, containing research related to the 5R + 1 of substantive integration, participation from an interest holder throughout the research process, contextualization of power, social, and historical context, and some form of action as a result of the research. The third paper will justify the combined framework, introduced in this linking document, by providing historical context, empirical and theoretical evidence, as well as practical tips for application. The third paper was developed upon reflection by the author on how to expand the definition of school integration and create and sustain meaningful change. In conclusion, the first two application papers and the third theoretical paper are helpful for scholars looking to generate democratic and sustained action toward integrated schools.

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Reimagining Early Childhood and School Readiness through the Perspectives of Rural, Marginalized Families

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Abstract

Given opportunities for early childhood education (ECE) expansion in the US, we seek to explore and elevate the perspectives of historically marginalized families from an understudied rural community to inform future local and state action involving public pre-kindergarten (pre-K) and kindergarten (K) provision. In partnership with a state Department of Education (DOE) and local district, we conducted two culturally responsive focus groups to investigate how such caregivers conceptualize ECE and school readiness, identify barriers with the current system, and pinpoint potential solutions to improve public pre-K and K. Participants included eight female caregivers, three of whom identified as Black, two as Hispanic, and three as White. All families met the DOE's eligibility requirements to attend public preschool. Through two 90-minute focus groups, we found that families conceptualized ECE as a time for humanizing and hands-on classroom practices. They questioned the concept of school readiness, instead advocating for ways that schools can be ready for their children. Furthermore, families identified accountability culture (testing, standardization of curricula, narrow focus on core academic content, etc.), as a problem, particularly upon kindergarten entry. Solutions to improve pre-K and K included representative curricula, more equitable funding, and opportunities for collaboration across education interest-holders (e.g., teachers, families, administration, etc.) at school, district, and state levels.

Keywords: School readiness, early childhood education, rural education, critical, culturally responsive focus group

Motivation

In the United States (US), the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing educational opportunity gaps (Fahle et al., 2023) and illuminated issues within the decentralized early childhood education (ECE) infrastructure that serves children before kindergarten entry (Barnett et al., 2021). These fragmented sectors, before kindergarten, include public pre-kindergarten (pre-K), (Early) Head Start, independently operated childcare centers, family day homes,[9] and other care (nannies, au pairs, family members, friends, etc.). Within these sectors, free care, funded by federal, state, and local governments, is typically targeted toward the most vulnerable families, who meet income and other requirements. There is a need to understand such families' perspectives on current ECE provision, especially as state and local policymakers continue to expand public access, specifically in pre-K, where there is bi-partisan support by governors (Lovejoy, 2023) and voters (DiGregorio & Kashen, 2023).

In addition to the policy timeliness, ECE[10] is an important area of scholarship given the potential for high-quality provision to address educational equity concerns. For instance, high-quality ECE promotes important long-term outcomes, like improved health and earnings as well as reduced incarceration and public assistance (McCoy et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2017), which scholars largely attribute to the development of non-cognitive skills like executive function and emotional regulation (Heckman & Karapakula, 2019). Furthermore, there is some evidence of differential benefits of pre-K for Black and Hispanic students (Bassok, 2010). With this in mind, not all ECE is high-quality and

[9] Licensure/accreditation for childcare centers and family days homes vary by state, but the latter usually cares for a smaller number of children, given the provision of care in a home setting.
[10] While many consider ECE settings to include children zero to eight, within the context of this study, we focus narrowly on the public pre-K and kindergarten levels.

supportive of such skill development, making the logistics of potential public expansion and provision, especially in the public pre-K sector, critical.

Accountability policy and neoliberal goals for education will likely impact ECE expansion and provision. For example, in K-12, accountability culture testing has resulted in academization (Linn, 2000) or the redirection from holistic education practices to a rigid set of content standards. Furthermore, arguments for public expansion often center neoliberal goals and practices. For instance, such goals and practices include boosting short-term "school readiness," maternal employment, and long-term economic production (Brown, 2023). This centering of academic competition and monetary production, although likely well-intentioned and common within the post-Nation at Risk Report and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability landscape (DeBray-Pelot & McGuinn, 2009; Roberts-Holmes, 2021), often assumes "high-quality" education is important to promote individual and collective economic advancement, not civic development (Labaree, 2000), or more holistic flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020).

Given this context, the discourse surrounding school readiness, specifically, has evolved over time. For instance, the concept of readiness emerged in the early 1900s, with maturationist theory describing when cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and language skills emerge along the developmental life cycle (*Gesell Theory*, 2024). Understanding different developmental trajectories resulted in initiatives to hold back younger students, particularly boys, who did not demonstrate specific skills within these four broad categories (Shepard & Smith, 1986). The framing of school readiness as a policy problem often enforces deficit narratives of students and families (Brown, 2023) and fails to acknowledge the ways that schools/larger systems should be ready to serve

families of various cultural backgrounds and developmental trajectories (Kagan & Landsberg, 2019; Nemeth, n.d.).

Furthermore, there is debate over whether public provision under accountability policy and school readiness initiatives will drive academic pressures and standardization of classroom practice, particularly in kindergarten. For example, scholars argue public ECE provision and readiness initiatives risk increased assessment and curricula standardization, which shift power away from on-the-ground interest-holders (Fuller, 2007). These practices may also come at the expense of unstructured play, art, physical activity, and other programming important for social-emotional development (Russo, 2012). While in ECE there is arguably more emphasis on social and emotional skills than in later years of schooling (Denham, 2003, 2006), in kindergarten, academization pressures appear to have intensified assessment and standardization (Mashburn et al., 2009; Pianta et al., 2007). For example, one nationally representative study showed significant shifts from 1998 to 2010 in kindergarten teachers' readiness views (increased academic, self-regulation, and social skills expectations), time spent on academic content (increased in math, decreased in the arts), classroom organization (reduced spaces for play/exploration), pedagogical approach (reduced child-choice and increased teacher-led instruction), and standardized testing (increased comparison to others) (Bassok et al., 2016).

Ironically, such shifts may not result in the desired neoliberal goals of economic production. For instance, there is causal evidence that centering social-emotional (i.e., non-cognitive, soft-skill) development drives long-term economic success (Chetty et al., 2010; Heckman & Karapakula, 2019). Moreover, centering social-emotional wellbeing in

educator practice is developmentally appropriate (Pianta et al., 2007) and according to a meta-analysis associated with academic success and psychological well-being (Cipriano et al., 2023).

Within debates around ECE provision and ensuring readiness, some scholars have focused specifically on historically marginalized families' perspectives. For example, some argue that culture (Lareau, 2011), toxic stress, trauma, lack of time or resources, and discrimination, among other factors (McEwen & McEwen, 2017), lead historically marginalized families to take a more passive role than higher-income families in cultivating their child's early learning experiences, thus resulting in the replication of inequities. This logic may underestimate the capacities of historically marginalized families to actively be a part of dispelling such educational disparities through their voice and power (Gonzales & Naranjo, 2024). In contrast, standpoint theory and funds-of-knowledge scholars would argue that those closest to systemic marginalization should have the most active role in designing early learning spaces for their children, given that their proximity to injustice leads to the richest understanding (Harding, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, educational liberation scholars would argue that beyond historically marginalized families having a voice, educational systems should result in empowerment, through practices like questioning and collective learning, specifically about systemic injustice (Freire, 2000).

This leads to questions surrounding how the voices of historically marginalized families should impact policy. Exclusion of historically marginalized perspectives in establishing school expectations and state policies, as early as school entry, is common and perpetuates educational injustice (Omodan, 2023). For instance, in the case of ECE,

current expectations for programming and school readiness are often developed without the input of such families, who are directly impacted and serve as children's first educators and advocates (Brown, 2023). Furthermore, political scientists argue that policy decisions often reflect the interests of the most powerful, specifically, economically (Gilens & Page, 2014); however, there are moments of collective action in history (e.g., the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Moviemento Poder, the Black Lives Matter movement) in which street-level bureaucrats (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009), specifically communities of Color, mobilized collective action towards policy change (Anyon, 2014; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Finally, past critical scholarship on ECE and school readiness largely features the voices of non-White mothers in city spaces, without addressing viewpoints from rural areas or within the post-pandemic timeline. Existing research with Indigenous communities (Huber et al., 2018), Mexican immigrant mothers (Civil & Andrade, 2003), and Black mothers with children in Head Start (McAllister et al., 2005)suggested a common theme of deficit framing. Such framing around deficient school readiness damages trusting relationships and contributes to the exclusion of non-white communities "by the 'white stream' education system" (Ritchie, 2014: 87). The current scholarship has yet to investigate historically marginalized families' view of ECE and school readiness in rural spaces, at this post-pandemic moment with the language of panic around "learning loss" and lack "school readiness" (Fahle et al., 2023; Igielnik, 2021).

In response to these gaps, we designed this study to highlight counternarratives (Miller et al., 2020) and draw on cultural wealth/multiple forms of knowledge from oppressed communities that often go overlooked in academia and policy (Yosso, 2005).

Given the exclusion of rural communities from larger conversations around ECE, we looked to investigate the following questions through two culturally responsive focus groups (Hall, 2020).

Research Questions

1. How do rural families with historically marginalized identities conceptualize early childhood education and school readiness?
2. How may school, district, and state actors provide public preschool and kindergarten environments that better reflect what families desire from ECE?

Positionality

Both authors are graduate students and former early childhood educators, with expertise in the everyday functioning of rural and city schools, with one author growing up and teaching in both rural and city contexts and the other author teaching in city contexts. They bring together interdisciplinary perspectives from educational psychology and education policy, respectively. This lived experience and content knowledge positioned the researchers as instruments attuned to nuances of school readiness in the current accountability era and enhanced credibility with families (Milner, 2007).

This research grew from a partnership between the authors and the Department of Education (DOE) from a shared commitment to improving ECE. The entirely female partnership team consisted of the two researchers/ authors, who identify as White, two representatives from the DOE who identify as White and Black respectively, as well as a district representative, who identifies as Black. Given intersectional differences in identity between the research team and participants, researchers aimed to mitigate

barriers and power dynamics through humanization, rapport building, and reciprocity efforts (Rodriguez et al., 2011), described in more depth in the methods.

Methods

We approached our research questions through a critical paradigm, aiming to uplift the voices of historically marginalized people (racial, ethnic, geographic, socioeconomic intersections) (Lincoln, 2015), counter deficit narratives (Graue, 2006), and encourage social justice-oriented action from policymaker partners (Vierra et al., 2023). We operated out of a critical paradigm because while ecological scholars acknowledge the interactions of inputs at a micro- or meso-level, they fail to question the macro-historical, institutional, and cultural forces, or how power shapes the discourse (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This lack of acknowledgment can lead to the perpetuation of white supremacy in the work, given macro-systems that interact with and drive micro- and meso-level realities (Rogers et al., 2021). Methodologically, we sought to contextualize present realities, acknowledge how power has produced scholarship and policy, and generate work that leads to socially just actions/policy.

Sample

The study included a total of eight participants over two sessions in line with culturally responsive focus group recommendations (Hall, 2020). To prioritize historically marginalized people's voices, focus groups were conducted in a rural school district in the mid-Atlantic/Appalachia region. This locality has blue collar roots and currently serves predominantly low-income students, roughly 50% of whom are global majority or non-white. Furthermore, we focused on families that met the state's at-risk

classification[11] to attend public pre-K 4 and especially prioritized the representation of Black and Hispanic families. We invited participants based on meeting one of the following inclusion criteria: caregivers of non-White children, families who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL), or caregivers whose highest level of education was less than college. Given difficulties with simultaneous translational services, mono-lingual Spanish families were excluded from this project. The sample was intentionally balanced between caregivers of students in pre-K and kindergarten from one public elementary school in the rural Appalachia region offering public pre-K programming to qualifying four-year-olds.

Our district partner compiled all caregivers who met inclusion criteria and managed communication given her pre-existing relationships. Out of the roughly 20 families in pre-K, four were randomly selected and received an email describing the study's aim to better understand families' experiences of ECE and school readiness initiatives. One family did not reply and one declined due to travel. Caregivers of kindergarten students were invited based on existing relationships and to maximize diversity within the sample. Two of the initial four selected declined due to scheduling. Confirmed participants included eight female caregivers (e.g., mothers, grandmothers) who self-identified as Black (n =3), Hispanic (n=2), and white with multi-racial children (n=2, with one undisclosed stepchild race). No participants were directly related to one another to increase the diversity of the sample. In the following sections, we refer to

[11] At-risk qualification criteria include one of the following: families must be at/below 200% of the federal poverty line, homeless, have a high school level of education or less, have a student with disabilities, etc., but up to an additional 15% of families can be covered by "local criteria," and attend public pre-K, capacity permitting.

participants as families, caregivers, or by the assigned pseudonym (Table 1) to mask identity.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Sample (N = 8)

Pseudonym	Relationship to Child	Participant's Race	Child's Grade	Child's Race
Vera	Mother	Black/Non-Hispanic	Pre-K	Black/Non-Hispanic
Leah	Mother	Hispanic	Pre-K	Hispanic
Naomi	Mother	White/Non-Hispanic	Kindergarten	Bi-Racial/White and Black
Moriah	Mother	White/Non-Hispanic	Kindergarten	Bi-Racial/White and Southeast Asian
Talia	Stepmother	White/Non-Hispanic	Pre-K	undisclosed
Maya	Grandmother	Black/Non-Hispanic	Pre-K	Black/Non-Hispanic
Eva	Mother	Black/Non-Hispanic	Kindergarten	Black/Non-Hispanic
Lela	Mother	Hispanic	Kindergarten	Hispanic

Data Collection

Focus groups serve as an appropriate method to gain information about a specific topic through dialogue (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 2019; Patton, 2014). Culturally responsive focus groups, specifically, acknowledge/connect to participants' intersectional identities, center social justice, question common assumptions, and facilitate the co-creation of knowledge (Hall, 2020, p. 202; Lahman et al., 2011). Advantages of such focus groups include shifting power to the participants and allowing cross-participant interaction that can deepen collective understanding and relationships. We practiced this

in our focus group by explicitly stating that we view families as the experts and that we as graduate students hoped to elevate their voice. This helped minimize power imbalances, which participants expressed felt more salient with state actors. Furthermore, participants shared their gratitude for in-person connection to other families and for being a part of this co-creation of knowledge. This allowed for the focus groups to serve as an empowering intervention in addition to providing data to inform the outlined research questions (Hall, 2020). For instance, we expressed how we learned from families, facilitated the exchange of contact information, asked for resources to bring to the next session, etc. While we did engage in collective learning, one drawback of data collection via focus groups was that some voices dominated the conversation while others had less time to be heard.

In addition to prioritizing rapport-building, culturally responsive focus groups allowed for questioning social norms/deficit framing in an approachable way (Hall, 2020, p. 202; Rodriguez et al., 2011). The PIs collaboratively developed the original focus group protocol goals and questions with DOE partners with this in mind (Appendix A). We asked questions that engaged participants from an asset-based perspective, which were brief, digestible, open-ended, logically sequenced, and prompted story-sharing/concern-voicing (Hall, 2020). For example, caregivers responded to questions such as, “How does your idea of early childhood education and school readiness differ from the Department of Education’s?” In their responses, caregivers were comfortable questioning common narratives and sharing their stories.

Our focus group data collection consisted of two 90-minute semi-structured focus groups over two weeks and an optional virtual 60-minute tour of online state readiness

resources for families, in between sessions. Researchers obtained University IRB approval, participant informed consent, and demographic survey data. The first focus group occurred in April 2023, in the local National History Museum, with seven of the eight invited participants present. The second focus group occurred in May 2023, in a local arts center, with all eight participants present. Chairs were arranged in a circle to promote equal contribution and dialogue. Lunch was provided by a local minority and woman-owned restaurant, and participants were compensated $50 for their time at each focus group session.

During the first focus group session, participants were invited to participate in a virtual resource tour and if there were any additional resources we could provide during the second focus group, to emphasize reciprocity. Based on participant engagement and feedback in the first focus group, we adjusted the protocol for the second focus group to accommodate caregivers' interest in the formal state definitions of school readiness and better answer the existing research questions. In the first focus group session, no members of the state DOE nor district partners were in the room so participants might feel freer to share their honest thoughts and critique. However, participants advocated that they would like to have state DOE and district partners in the conversation for the second focus group session. During the second session, data reached saturation, with similar themes re-emerging.

Analysis

Focus groups were audio-recorded via Zoom (no video) for automated transcription, which authors manually checked and analyzed with an abductive coding process in Dedoose, version 9. This flexible process (Deterding & Waters, 2021) allows

for theory to inform coding schemes while remaining open to emergent themes that could contradict or extend existing theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). After memoing, researchers created a codebook and coded individually, then compared coding schemes. Thematic findings were then summarized in a one-pager (front and back) shared with the DOE, district partners, and participants (Appendix B). Sharing findings with the participants was particularly important for member-checking the themes to ensure that we accurately reflected caregivers' perceptions. The member-checking process led to feedback that informed a revision to the final report. To ensure mutual benefit and empowerment, the report also included resources for family advocacy and working toward collective liberation.

Beyond sharing the findings with participants and the DOE partners, we also hosted a collaborative discussion session via Zoom with the district and DOE partners to brainstorm next steps and implications for the research. During the collaborative discussion session, themes from the analysis were presented with representative quotes. We used a brainstorming approach to the presentation in which all research team members and partners were given the opportunity to reflect on the meaning and implications of each theme. Along with district and DOE partners, we created a table of action steps for each interest-holder based on study findings (Appendix C).

Results

Throughout the focus groups, we attempted to minimize our voices and let the caregivers co-lead the conversation. At times, this required redirecting the conversation back to the protocol. We tell a storified account of the focus groups and broadly find that (1) families conceptualized early childhood ideally as a humanizing, hands-on, play-

based space. (2) Caregivers questioned school readiness and shifted conversations on whether schools can meet families' needs, particularly around the kindergarten transition. Families suggested (3) shifts away from cultures of accountability and academization and (4) instituting collaborative policies at a school, local, and state level (e.g., more equitable funding, more representative curriculum, more relationship-building opportunities). Despite our initial research aims of understanding families' perspectives specifically in pre-K and the transition to kindergarten, families organically and repeatedly emphasized concerns for their children's transition to continued formal schooling at this time and beyond.

Desire for Humanizing and Play-based Approaches to ECE

Focus group one began with the rapport-building question, "What are your hopes and dreams for your children?" Families responded with hopes such as, "I hope she, well, she loves school …I want her to excel in school" (Vera) and "She's super smart … I hope that she continues to grow on that aspect, of course, academically, but also on the other side that's not in school, you know, everything else" (Leah). Another parent added, "Just be a decent well-rounded benefit to society, and family member, that is my goal for all my kids" (Moriah). When the conversation pivoted to what families desired from pre-K and K, caregivers expressed a desire for more humanizing education that allows for play-based, hands-on learning.

> "[Pre-K teachers] believe in learning through play all over, and that's beautiful." (Moriah)
>
> "I feel like pre-K it's more like hands-on, more social skills than anything else." (Vera)

> "I'm a hands-on person. You can explain it to me. I won't know a thing like if you talk me through it, I'm listening, I'm not retaining, I have to do it myself. And I think that's a problem too with our kids." (Noami)

Caregivers expressed a desire for hands-on, play-based learning designed to promote social skills, but noted that these practices were becoming less common given cultures of accountability and limits placed on teachers (discussed in more depth later).

Questioning School Readiness

As facilitators, we shifted the dialogue toward school readiness and the transition to kindergarten. Families questioned if it is possible to fully prepare their child for school. They flipped the concept of readiness on its head and suggested how schools could adjust to encourage social interactions as well as hands-on learning, which was more common in pre-K.

> "I don't really think there's anything that could really make them 100% ready. I feel like pre-K specifically, I guess where they're just kind of getting started is where it's really gonna start preparing them because it gets them into that set schedule, it gets them into the social interactions." (Naomi)

Families also noted how their children were not ready for the kindergarten transition but faulted the school system's approach–not that they "failed" to make their child "ready."

> "There is a disconnect between pre-K and literally the entire rest of the school … I'm gonna say it's very much 'come to your classroom, sit down, do your work, do what you're supposed to do, learn what you're

> supposed to learn, go home, and then do whatever, but you still got to do your homework.' I was a child of that same system. It was not beneficial to me … So, to see my child go from playing and learning and all this to coming home and she's like, 'I don't like kindergarten.' 'Why?' 'Because we don't play. There's toys but we don't get to play with them.' That bothers me personally." (Leah)
>
> "There is a big leap of learning through play, to here's your desk … I don't know who we're competing with. I don't care. The reality is these kids need to start off with play and slowly transition." (Moriah)

Families perceived kindergarten as overworking students through long hours at desks in school and through homework at home. Moreover, families expressed that they had limited time to offer support at home due to time constraints, mainly related to work. They questioned who their children are competing with within what they perceived as an anxiety-ridden world.

Accountability Culture and Academization

Families pinpointed much of the stress of kindergarten and higher grades to accountability culture and academization, which they did not desire to be as present within their child's learning environments. Given the late spring timing of the focus groups, these themes were very present given many families had recently experienced state standardized testing with older siblings. Without prompting, the discussion turned to anxieties related to the changing conditions in the larger world and in schools. Families appeared to agree that they and their children felt stressed.

> "It's so scary for our kids, and it terrifies me, and I want more. But then again, I don't want more because I don't even know what the world's coming to." (Naomi)
>
> "I am seeing things in the school system that not only terrify me but I'm ashamed of … The DOE does not listen to parents because I can guarantee you, even for the parents who don't care, none of us like the state tests. None of us see a use in them because we know the reality is that they are testing teachers, not our kids. My kids are learning what has been dictated to the teachers to teach. I guarantee you, my teachers haven't created very many other lessons. It's given to them. This is what you have to do. You stay this path, don't stray, stay this path. Whereas when I was in school, they [teachers] could stray a little and we learned a lot more because it was interesting. It made us want to learn it. We cared. We were curious, I really feel like if the school could include a little bit of unschooling versus traditional schooling, we get a lot better benefits of these kids." (Moriah)

This segment exemplified caregivers' shared anxiety and perceptions of testing as a practice that took time away from students' learning, while perhaps not meeting families' needs. For instance, standardized testing was perceived as part of a system of holding schools and teachers accountable at the expense of personalized learning and curiosity. Caregivers expressed concern about the emphasis on tests starting right before kindergarten entry and continuing into future grades, including annual standardized testing and recurring formative assessments throughout the year, as one parent describes.

> "I don't know if y'all had, did the end of the school year test. Have you already done it? We went over it with the teacher, the pre-K language and literacy screener, and the state math assessment. Yeah. And we decided that it's not developmentally appropriate for those age groups. It's a whole different than when my nine-year-old took hers. It's a lot different and the stuff that they asked for pre-K they should be asking of a second or third grader." (Maya)

At a different portion of the conversation, parents expressed that they understood the importance of formative assessment for measuring their child's academic strengths and areas of improvement, but their experience of state-level testing did not align with this vision. Instead, they and their teachers questioned the developmental appropriateness and usefulness of state tests for pre-K students.

Furthermore, families were aware of the connections between assessment-oriented schooling and capitalist structures based on competition and production. One mother introduced the idea that educational systems are intended to make their children compliant workers.

> "Because it all boils down to the industrial times where they wanted to overwork people and of course people came up and were like, "We don't wanna work seven days a week" and they're like, "OK, we'll give you five, we'll give you five." The school obviously has become that training program for the worker… They [systems] are designed to keep people down … and I feel like instead of making kids better people, they want kids to be better workers." (Leah)

> "[responding to Leah's previous comment] Or preparing our kids for the "real world," when you're not even teaching real-world concepts." (Naomi)

School, District, and State Solutions

Given these concerns families offered district and state partners suggestions for how to improve ECE, which largely included opportunities to share information, foster connection, and approach the work more equitably (e.g., representative curricula, funding reform, etc.).

School and District-Level

When thinking about ECE and the kindergarten transition at the school level, families expressed a desire for information and collaboration. For instance, they discussed how the schools/the district may do launch parties, provide expectations to families at the start of the year, and encourage relationship-building.

> "They had … a kindergarten, like, launch party … and they all went to school. They all got to walk the classrooms, got to walk to school, got to see everything, meet the teachers." (Vera)
>
> "Like in higher grades who give syllabus for the year—to do that for kindergarten. That would be great because I feel like my kid could have been more prepared if I had known what they were getting into and vice versa. Like what you guys said about getting to know the teacher. 'What are your expectations? Here are mine.'" (Leah)
>
> "You can build that relationship with who your child is gonna be with for that entire year. I would love to be able to sit down with my teachers. And

> I say, what are your expectations of me? Because here are my expectations of you for this upcoming school year … I think new teachers need to pair up with older teachers. And mentor. I personally think there needs to be a parent-to-parent mentor too. You mentioned being a brand-new parent. I've been a parent for 30-some years, right? Granted the times have changed, but I guarantee you the basics haven't, and she would have never met me to know that she could ask a question until this happened because I've never seen them." (Moriah)
>
> "I enjoy talking to the [other] parents because a lot of things have changed." (Maya)

At a school level, such launch parties could provide an opportunity to introduce information like readiness goals for pre-K and K. Furthermore, they would allow for relationship-building between teachers and families. Additionally, families advocated for families and teachers learning from peers through mentorship opportunities. These ideas around collaboration led to helpful insights around leveraging connection/knowledge building through virtual spaces.

> "That Facebook group has been awesome … That Facebook group put me in touch with parents." (Moriah)
>
> "I'm seeing it now, like in terms of what's going on in Florida [referring to book bans] … But we know, I know the truth. And where did I learn that? … I got it on TikTok … Like the real truth of what happened when the English came and literally killed off all the Native Americans. You

know, we didn't know that in school, and so I'm teaching my fifth grader." (Leah)

Many families agreed the family Facebook group and other social media platforms had served as powerful tools for connection and information, which schools and districts could leverage to foster connection. Facebook was described as useful for building camaraderie and sharing questions or concerns about school or child-rearing in general which helps caregivers feel seen and not alone. TikTok was given as an example of short, engaging, and informational videos that many caregivers appreciated for gaining information, which districts could also leverage. There is potential concern of the quality of information and potential for misinformation within these platforms that can also provide families with valuable resources.

State-level

At the state level, families advocated for similar types of improved communication, funding shifts to support ECE learning environments that mirrored their higher-income peers, as well as more representative curricula, starting at a young age.

"I think what would be cool is a representative from each school meet at convention week, some kind of travel, something and see how each school district compares." (Moriah)

In this quote, the parent expresses a desire for school representatives around the state to have more opportunities to exchange ideas around best practices. Furthermore, they noted the state could support professional development at this "convention." These discussions of state action led to a conversation around funding.

> "Money is not divided equally in my view … [wealthier region in the state] has it made … It is also my understanding that the county gets more funding than the city across the way." (Moriah)

This illustrates the desire for more equal funding to provide children the opportunity for high-quality education in ECE and beyond (e.g., curricular materials, more staffing support, paying for interest-holders to meet each other outside of the school day, etc.). Two quieter participants expressed learning from this comment, not realizing school funding's tie to property taxes, demonstrating how past education systems had failed to teach them about inequities and the power of connecting with knowledgeable peers.

The conversation next addressed state-wide curricular debates, in which families expressed a desire for more representative curricula in pre-K and kindergarten as well as school more broadly.

> "And I'm sorry, but Black history is not touched enough around here. No, it is not. I have a biracial son and I've had to learn a lot from his family. I never learned anything about Black history in school, ever. Martin Luther King Jr.—learned about him like, yeah, he made a famous speech. Oh, that was it. Bye." (Naomi)

> "You need cultural aspects everywhere because the reality is our kids are gonna run into so many different cultures." (Moriah)

Families argued for non-white-washed history, which may have been expected given the sample's ethno-racial diversity, but also could surprise those who associate rurality with policies like book bans or classroom censorship. While the caregivers did

acknowledge, “Yeah, there’s always gonna be backlash” (Leah), they agreed on the importance of representative curricula.

Finally, during the second focus group participants were asked to respond to their experience in the online virtual resource tour provided by the state. Caregivers noted they did not find the current local and state websites particularly user-friendly, when searching for information.

> “That’s one thing that needs to be fixed and fixed quick. This does not cater to any parent I’m not saying give us a little parent’s corner because I wanna be able to access and understand it in its entirety. I don’t like parents’ corners because we don’t get half the information we need. I was able to look through [the website], but I had to get through all this corporate stuff to get to what pertained to me and mine. That’s not cool. If you’re putting this out there for me, I should not have to deep dive and dig and dig.” (Moriah)

Moriah’s comment highlighted the “huge lack of communication between the state and us,” families, with which other participants agreed.

Discussion

These findings build upon past scholarly work and provide powerful counternarratives, which give voice to historically marginalized families from this rural community. First, caregivers expressed their ideal ECE would include play and experiential learning. Unfortunately, greater emphasis on academics, especially in kindergarten, has reduced play and hands-on learning (Bassok et al., 2016; Russo, 2012), which are not only popular in ECE but also developmentally appropriate (Denham, 2003;

2006) and effective strategies (Cipriano et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2017). In addition to increased academic expectations in kindergarten, caregivers expressed the strain of standardization on teachers (Fuller, 2007).

Families within systemic marginalization possessed a critical perspective that they leveraged to provide recommendations on how to improve state administered ECE environments. For instance, caregivers brought up schooling's purpose being to train the worker, which aligns with past work rejecting factory models of education (Freire, 2000), for an approach that empowers historically marginalized families. They acknowledged that they could not access their ideal ECE. Furthermore, given the rurality of the sample, others may be surprised by the desire for culturally affirming curricula, affirmed loudly by two white and one Hispanic caregiver within the sample, at a moment of book bans and other forms of classroom censorship. This finding provides a strong counternarrative to the awareness of historically marginalized communities about their own oppression.

Other policy recommendations largely involved increased family engagement, collaboration, and information distribution. The desire for increased involvement is counter to some deficit-based narratives of caregivers not wanting to be involved in school or not showing up to parent nights (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2007; Johnson, 2015). These caregivers wanted more school-based opportunities to connect with teachers and other families. Additionally, they advocated for teacher–teacher relationships by setting up a mentor system, which aligns with research-based best practices (Jones, 2013). Interestingly, while many connections required meeting in person, caregivers also saw value in virtual spaces for connection and knowledge-building. Finally, they broadened their lens to how change could happen through

collaboration on a district and state level. Bringing together various interest-holders to facilitate more equitable change is another research-backed organizing tactic to achieve policy change (Anyon, 2014), which some work suggests only requires committed support from 3.5% of the population (Chenoweth, 2021).

Limitations

Though we intentionally sought a small and ethno-racially diverse sample, we recognize a limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size (N=8), drawing from one school. The smaller number of participants in focus groups did allow us more time to hear details from each participant, like their individual experiences with the school system, testing, and visions from the future, but findings may not generalize to other spaces like less diverse rural localities or cities within the state, for example. Additionally, caregivers had to opt into the group after selection (with four families opting out), showing a degree of initial interest, motivation, and time flexibility which could impact how findings transfer to other demographics.

Furthermore, as noted in the challenges of conducting focus groups, certain caregivers were very eager to share, which risked minimizing others' voices. For instance, although there were many nonverbal gestures indicating group agreement, the three most vocal participants were non-Black women, who spoke English as a first language. Given the historic elevation of privileged people's perspectives (i.e., white people), this is perhaps unsurprising. We attempted to counter this drawback by asking participants explicitly during the focus group to allow space for voices that had yet to share, encouraging those who had yet to speak to answer first, and trying to highlight a

variety of voices within our findings. Overall, this does show a tension in spaces of who has voice and corresponding power.

Implications and Next Steps

Through the partnership, the team intended to connect interest-holders, provide tangible support for families, and gather historically marginalized families' perspectives on ECE to inform policy conversations/change at a local level as well as set a framework for future conversations with additional families. Notably, this research partnership was not funded by the DOE and it's hard to say yet whether the intended goals were fully met. An initial action was a collaborative brainstorming session where the local district and DOE representatives demonstrated responsivity for the overarching themes. Specifically, the district and DOE representatives seemed open to more localized action steps, like creating more in-person and virtual opportunities to connect families and teachers, setting up informal mentoring opportunities, website redesign, potentially raising funds for an ECE coordinator, and so on. With this in mind, the state was hesitant to act given that they represent many localities and may not want to show preference to one and given generalizability concerns for applying these lessons in other contacts. State policy change is longer in nature, and at the time of publication, the action steps by the DOE included planning to continue family focus groups with family councils in regions across the state. Further research is needed to systematically gather feedback from families surrounding ECE, to track the implementation of research findings within various levels of education policy.

Conclusion

Through critical qualitative analysis, we synthesized the perspectives of eight rural caregivers on the state of ECE following the pandemic. Preliminary findings build on past work (Brown, 2009, 2023; Wesley & Buysse, 2003), suggesting the need to align school policies with more asset-based, humanizing education, to ensure schools are ready for families, instead of families being ready for school. Specifically, we found that accountability culture appeared to have entered younger grades, particularly kindergarten, a theme also supported by past work (Bassok et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2007). To achieve hands-on, play-based learning environments, families advocated for change across various education policy levels. These findings contribute to the broader literature by providing the perspectives of an understudied group: historically marginalized caregivers in a rural community. Finally, counternarratives relating to a desire for increased collaboration in policy change, more representative curricula, and equalized funding could help inform more equitable ECE policies at this pivotal moment of potential expansion.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Session 1 Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Session 1 [90 min]			
#	**Focus Group Question**	**Follow-up Question/Probes**	**Time**
Introductions			
1	What are your hopes and dreams for your child entering school and beyond?		10 min
RQ1. How would rural families from marginalized backgrounds (Black, Hispanic, low-income, etc.) define school readiness?			
2	In your opinion, what are the important ways to make sure your child is ready for school?		30 min
3	How does your idea of early childhood education and school readiness differ from the Department of Education's?		20 min
4	Are there ways that the school could be better prepared to serve your child?		20 min
Closing			

5	Next time we meet, we want to provide you with some resources for your child? What would be helpful to you?	For example, would you use a website with videos or books read aloud? Would you prefer books you can take home? programs at a library or other community location? an app? physical games (opposed to online games)?	5 min

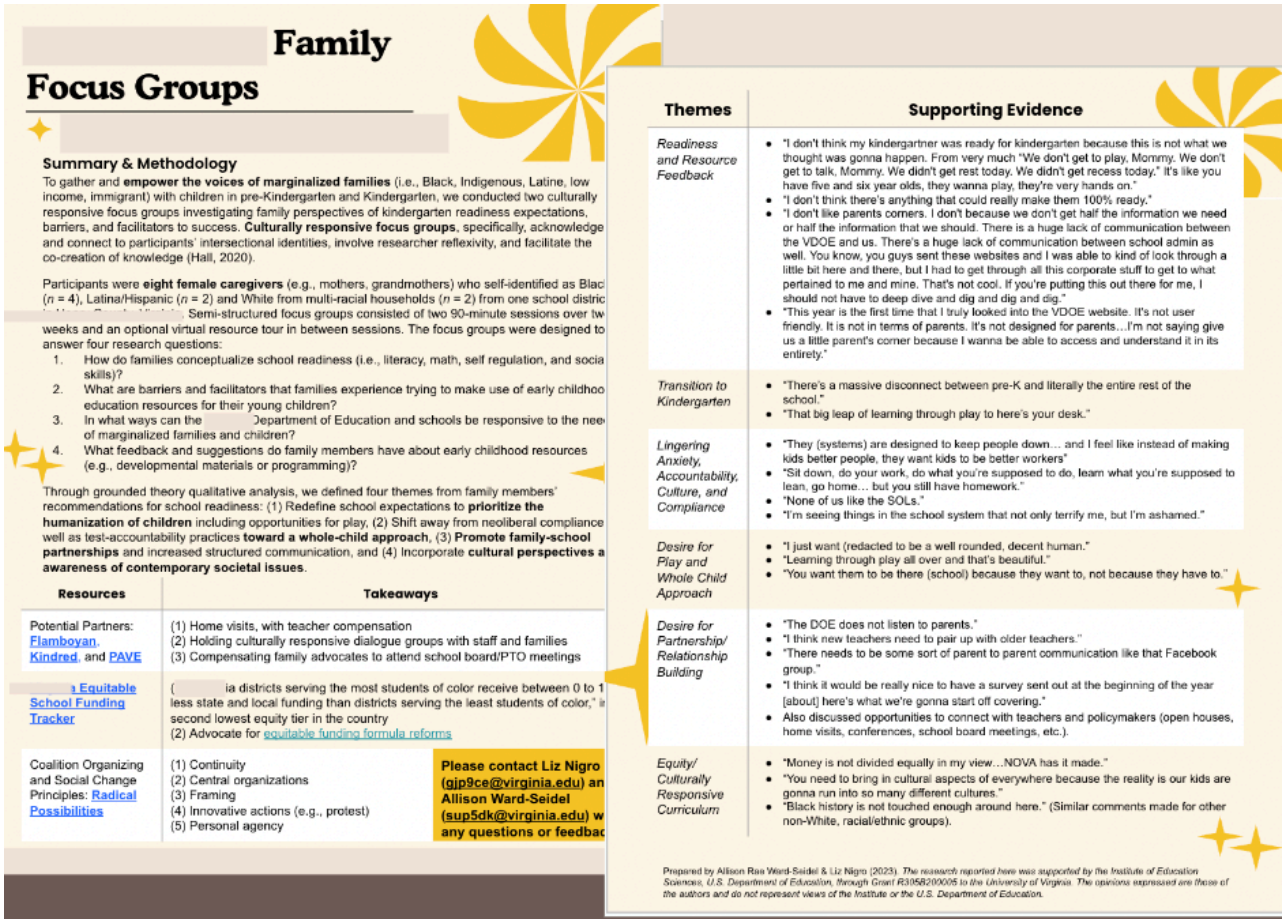
Appendix B: Session Two Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Session 2 [90 min]			
RQ2a &b. How do such families interpret the State's Kindergarten Initiative's current school readiness definitions? How may they adjust existent definitions to better serve families?			
1	(Take time to distribute resources requested if possible) Thanks so much for coming back! In your honest opinion, what did you think of the resources that we gave you? What did you like/dislike about the resources? What do you think about the definitions of readiness?	Provide handout/visual of kindergarten readiness standards. Link to online library from ECE resource hub.	5 min

2	Can you share a story about when your child was interested in reading or books, letters, words? If you could have anything to support your child's these skills, what would it be? What are the challenges that get in the way of supporting your child?	Definition from State Kindergarten Readiness Initiative: Literacy skills (e.g., interacting with books and reading, identifying letters of the alphabet, learning new words to tell stories, recognizing and producing speech sounds like rhymes and beginning sounds, drawing and pretend writing):	10 min
3	Can you share a story about when your child was interested in math, counting, or numbers? If you could have anything to support your child's math skills, what would it be? What are the challenges that get in the way of supporting your child's math skills?	Definition from State Kindergarten Readiness Initiative: Math skills (e.g., counting, using numbers, recognizing and describing shapes, identifying patterns, making comparisons based on weight, length, size, time, and temperature):	10 min
4	Can you share a story about when your child was upset? How did they calm down? If you could have anything to support your child's calm down skills, what would it be? What are the challenges that get in the way of supporting your calming down?	Definition from State Kindergarten Readiness Initiative: Self-regulation skills (e.g., following directions, waiting patiently, remembering rules, controlling their body)	10 min

5	What does it look like when your child plays with another child? If you could have anything to support your child's friendship skills (relationship skills), what would it be? What are the challenges that get in the way of supporting your child's friendship skills (relationship skills)?	Definition from State Kindergarten Readiness Initiative: Social skills (e.g., feeling secure and valued in relationships, expressing emotions, recognizing consequences of actions, cooperating with others):	10 min
Closing			
6	What do you feel most proud of about your child (or about yourself as a parent)? What's your favorite part about being a parent to your child?		

Appendix C: Handout to DOE, Local Partners, and Families



Family

Focus Groups

Summary & Methodology

To gather and **empower the voices of marginalized families** (i.e., Black, Indigenous, Latine, low income, immigrant) with children in pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten, we conducted two culturally responsive focus groups investigating family perspectives of kindergarten readiness expectations, barriers, and facilitators to success. **Culturally responsive focus groups**, specifically, acknowledge and connect to participants' intersectional identities, involve researcher reflexivity, and facilitate the co-creation of knowledge (Hall, 2020).

Participants were **eight female caregivers** (e.g., mothers, grandmothers) who self-identified as Blac (n = 4), Latina/Hispanic (n = 2) and White from multi-racial households (n = 2) from one school distric . Semi-structured focus groups consisted of two 90-minute sessions over tw weeks and an optional virtual resource tour in between sessions. The focus groups were designed to answer four research questions:

1. How do families conceptualize school readiness (i.e., literacy, math, self regulation, and socia skills)?
2. What are barriers and facilitators that families experience trying to make use of early childhoo education resources for their young children?
3. In what ways can the Department of Education and schools be responsive to the nee of marginalized families and children?
4. What feedback and suggestions do family members have about early childhood resources (e.g., developmental materials or programming)?

Through grounded theory qualitative analysis, we defined four themes from family members' recommendations for school readiness: (1) Redefine school expectations to **prioritize the humanization of children** including opportunities for play, (2) Shift away from neoliberal compliance well as test-accountability practices **toward a whole-child approach**, (3) **Promote family-school partnerships** and increased structured communication, and (4) Incorporate **cultural perspectives a awareness of contemporary societal issues**.

Resources	Takeaways
Potential Partners: Flamboyan, Kindred, and PAVE	(1) Home visits, with teacher compensation (2) Holding culturally responsive dialogue groups with staff and families (3) Compensating family advocates to attend school board/PTO meetings
Equitable School Funding Tracker	(ia districts serving the most students of color receive between 0 to 1 less state and local funding than districts serving the least students of color," i second lowest equity tier in the country (2) Advocate for equitable funding formula reforms
Coalition Organizing and Social Change Principles: Radical Possibilities	(1) Continuity (2) Central organizations (3) Framing (4) Innovative actions (e.g., protest) (5) Personal agency

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Themes	Supporting Evidence
Readiness and Resource Feedback	• "I don't think my kindergartner was ready for kindergarten because this is not what we thought was gonna happen. From very much "We don't get to play, Mommy. We don't get to talk, Mommy. We didn't get rest today. We didn't get recess today." It's like you have five and six year olds, they wanna play, they're very hands on." • "I don't think there's anything that could really make them 100% ready." • "I don't like parents corners. I don't because we don't get half the information we need or half the information that we should. There is a huge lack of communication between the VDOE and us. There's a huge lack of communication between school admin as well. You know, you guys sent these websites and I was able to kind of look through a little bit here and there, but I had to get through all this corporate stuff to get to what pertained to me and mine. That's not cool. If you're putting this out there for me, I should not have to deep dive and dig and dig and dig." • "This year is the first time that I truly looked into the VDOE website. It's not user friendly. It is not in terms of parents. It's not designed for parents…I'm not saying give us a little parent's corner because I wanna be able to access and understand it in its entirety."
Transition to Kindergarten	• "There's a massive disconnect between pre-K and literally the entire rest of the school." • "That big leap of learning through play to here's your desk."
Lingering Anxiety, Accountability, Culture, and Compliance	• "They (systems) are designed to keep people down… and I feel like instead of making kids better people, they want kids to be better workers" • "Sit down, do your work, do what you're supposed to do, learn what you're supposed to lean, go home… but you still have homework." • "None of us like the SOLs." • "I'm seeing things in the school system that not only terrify me, but I'm ashamed."
Desire for Play and Whole Child Approach	• "I just want (redacted to be a well rounded, decent human." • "Learning through play all over and that's beautiful." • "You want them to be there (school) because they want to, not because they have to."
Desire for Partnership/ Relationship Building	• "The DOE does not listen to parents." • "I think new teachers need to pair up with older teachers." • "There needs to be some sort of parent to parent communication like that Facebook group." • "I think it would be really nice to have a survey sent out at the beginning of the year [about] here's what we're gonna start off covering." • Also discussed opportunities to connect with teachers and policymakers (open houses, home visits, conferences, school board meetings, etc.).
Equity/ Culturally Responsive Curriculum	• "Money is not divided equally in my view…NOVA has it made." • "You need to bring in cultural aspects of everywhere because the reality is our kids are gonna run into so many different cultures." • "Black history is not touched enough around here." (Similar comments made for other non-White, racial/ethnic groups).

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Appendix D: Action Steps from Collaborative Brainstorming Session

Organization	District Partner	DOE ECE Department	DOE-ECE Partner	Research Team
Guiding Question:	(Thank you!) What does this mean for families in X?	How does this fit into family councils and state-wide initiatives?	How does this influence continued focus groups/content development?	What are ways to disseminate this work and continue to support partners?

Notes:	Mail one-pager to family participants. Gather to debrief with families 1-pager & resources	Full-time positions to do parent engagement (& preschool coordinator)	Grant opportunities for parent engagement

Social Justice Theater Takes Center Stage: A Critical Participatory Action Evaluation of a Youth-Led Performance and Dialogue on Classroom Censorship

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Awaiting Review at *Education Action Research*

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Abstract

Given the increasing prevalence of classroom censorship initiatives, there is an urgent need to foster critical consciousness—defined here as awareness of injustice, motivation to act, and action against oppression. Interest holders developing such critical consciousness is a putative outcome of critical participatory action research (CPAR) and evaluation (CPAE). Following a CPAR project, a non-profit social justice theater company partnered with a researcher to evaluate the audience's perception of the performance's connection to their critical consciousness. Four youth presented the research product—a performance and dialogue on K -12 classroom censorship (e.g., prohibiting the teaching of so-called "critical race theory" (CRT) and LGBTQ+-related content)—to a southern university-affiliated audience. Ethnographic notes and data from a mixed-methods pilot survey indicated high levels of reported motivation to act on the issue of classroom censorship. Audience members credited the power of sharing true stories, theater as an emotional medium, and youth voice for increasing reported critical awareness and motivation (N=22). A month later, roughly 90% of a smaller sample (n=11), with identical average levels of initial motivation to non-respondents, reported taking at least one specific critical action; however, the most common actions were indirect and did not involve large-scale collective action.

Keywords: Critical participatory action research, critical consciousness, social justice theater

Introduction

There is an urgent need for collective mobilization to combat classroom censorship efforts in the US. For instance, there has been a rise in censorship of curricular content that highlights stories of People of Color, as well as those within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus (LGBTQ+) community. For instance, book bans on LGBTQ+ stories and what some deem 'critical race theory' (CRT) have become prominent points of debate within culture-war news cycles, with 44 states introducing classroom censorship legislation from 2021-2024 (Swann, 2024). Given such policies' harmful implications for historically marginalized students (Emeran, 2023), fostering critical consciousness, particularly action is crucial. For this paper, critical consciousness is defined as awareness of systems of oppression, motivation to challenge those systems, and individual or collective action aimed at combatting injustice (Diemer et al., 2021).

Critical participatory action research (CPAR) and evaluation (CPAE) can facilitate such critical consciousness to address social justice issues like classroom censorship (Diemer et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2021). These research and evaluation approaches can occur with or without the assistance of academic researchers. In the case of Epic Theatre Ensemble— a New York City (NYC) based organization founded by a group of local thespians looking to see their work in theater more connected to social justice impact—assisted youth in conducting research without an academic researcher's assistance during their summer programmatic offerings. At this time, students become researchers and a social justice issue of their choice, with the product taking the form of a touring play and dialogue. This process begins with topic selection, community mapping, and research question development. Then the organization trains youth to collect data

through secondary source analysis, interviews, focus groups, etc. Following data analysis, the students create a play and dialogue, most recently on classroom censorship in public kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) classrooms (Wallert, 2022). Then they disseminate this research product to mostly non-profit, university, and public school audiences. To evaluate the impact of this performance on all three components of the audience's critical consciousness and provide formative lessons for improvement, the organization partnered with me, a graduate student, to conduct a critical participatory action evaluation.

In this CPAE process, the organization, primarily a cofounder, was involved in question generation to product dissemination within a state subject to classroom censorship legislation. The project organically emerged out of a desire for reciprocity. I was looking to engage in a partnered research project, and Epic was looking for research expertise. Specifically, I got to experience the organization's work and form connections, and the organization benefited from the author's survey and evaluation expertise. Broadly, the CPAE process involved logic/context mapping, co-generating research questions, designing a way to test such questions, collecting and analyzing data, disseminating final products, and adjusting practice. I, the primary investigator, led data collection, analysis, and product creation, with feedback and support from the partner. Given the timing and logistical concerns with the IRB and Office of Youth Protections, this specific project focused on the understudied group of adults viewing youth social justice theater, instead of the youth themselves. In addition to this paper, the project culminated in a blog post profiling the organization's performance and dialogue, a collective brainstorming session around actionable next steps to apply findings, and a

survey design best practices training for members of the organization to promote sustainable practice. In addition to the utility of findings for the organization, lessons regarding both content and process are widely applicable for individuals and collectives looking to navigate this moment of backlash.

Literature Review

Educational theorist Paulo Freire pioneered the concept of critical consciousness as three components: 1) critical reflection/awareness of power dynamics, oppressive systems, and injustice, 2) motivation/political efficacy to address these issues, and 3) taking action to do so (Freire, 2021; Watts et al., 2011). Empirical evidence supports the theoretical claims that critical consciousness consists of these three elements. For example, a systematic review of empirical studies documented six key processes within critical consciousness development. They included "priming of critical reflection, information creating disequilibrium, introspection, revising frames of reference, developing agency for change, and acting against oppression" (Pillen et al., 2020, p. 1), with the first four processes representing critical awareness, and the last two representing critical motivation and action, respectively. Furthermore, survey validation work employing confirmatory and exploratory factor analysis suggests these three major components are distinct factors; however, there is not necessarily a linear causal relationship between the three components (e.g., awareness leads to motivation, then action) (Aldana et al., 2019; Diemer et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2016). Finally, within such validation studies, the psychological measures employed often center on individuals' experiences and less on collective forms of actions.

Within this empirical psychology-based literature, few studies draw connections between all three components. For example, a survey validation study with two diverse samples of youth demonstrated that critically reflecting on inequality and egalitarianism was positively associated with sociopolitical action (Diemer et al., 2017). Similar work suggests that civic and political awareness, specifically, are positively correlated with specific forms of social action, like voting (Diemer & Li, 2011) and career development/selection (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Rapa et al., 2018). These studies do not directly link motivation to awareness and action; additionally, they are largely limited to individual forms of action (e.g., signing a petition, boycotting a product, confronting an individual, voting, etc.). One study, including motivation, found positive associations between this construct and action for Latine youth (McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016). Overall, these factors appear to be positively correlated, but there is no clearly established causal link and considerations of self-report bias (Donaldson and Grant-Vallone 2002).

Given this broad understanding, theoretical and qualitative inquiry are useful in teasing out the various cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Diemer and Blustein 2006; Speer and Peterson 2000; Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011) driving critical consciousness development. For instance, one theoretical article maps out how critical consciousness development intersects with socio-political and ethnic-racial identity development, finding that the two inform and strengthen one another (Mathews et al. 2020). Another systematic review of qualitative studies, education incorporating questioning, dialogue, and liberatory processes resulted in youth critical consciousness, specifically, critical awareness and a felt sense of capacity to address oppression, but less attention was given to encouraging collective action outside of profiled educational

settings (Assante and Momanu 2020). The qualitative literature on critical consciousness focuses on the experiences of historically marginalized youth, specifically youth of Color. For example, one qualitative study documented the complexity of 36 Black students' critical reflection on socio-political conditions, finding that students attributed social problems to ideologies (e.g., systemic racism), macrosystems (e.g., educational funding structures), microsystems (e.g., schools), and individuals, with the degree of social responsibility assigned varying based on contextual factors (Hope and Bañales 2019). Overall, students provided complex analyses of community issues and felt a sense of personal and collective responsibility to address symptoms and root causes of social issues (Hope and Bañales 2019).

Overall, the literature reflects largely ecological frames, which critical qualitative scholars would argue fail to account for power, race, systematic oppression, and even social justice transformation. First, ecological scholars often look at identity elements like race on the micro-level but fail to account for how this is embedded within macro systems (Rogers et al., 2021). Furthermore, critical theorists would argue for looking at critical consciousness from an intersectional lens of power (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., with the latter currently being the most understudied) with the goal of creating "webs of resistance" that can help deconstruct oppressive systems (Rozas & Miller, 2009, p. 1). Critical scholarship is even criticized at times for the lack of this transformative impact and collective liberation as a result of their research (Jemal, 2017). There is a call for work to focus on and interrogate critical action, specifically (Diemer et al., 2021; Seider & Graves, 2020; Watts et al., 2011), including how action types and efficacy may vary (Aldana et al., 2019; Ginwright, 2003). For example, is the action of

study or the action embedded within the study, individual action or collective. Past work that focuses predominantly on the individual excludes popular organizing tactics of historically marginalized populations (J. Anyon, 2014; Christens & Speer, 2015). Furthermore, tracking action through narrow measures like voting likely excludes youth and the undocumented (Bennett et al., 2009). This brings up the question of how studies can embed such collective and transformative action into their research design, as seen in youth participatory action (YPAR) research, which empowered youth participants working as co-researchers studying critical consciousness (Aldana et al., 2019).

Within studies of youth voice and power, there is little known about the intersection of critical consciousness and youth theater. For instance, a systematic review of qualitative and quantitative critical consciousness studies, with adolescents, identifies only two studies investigating youth social justice theater (Heberle et al., 2020). Both qualitative studies focus on how theater impacts historically marginalized youth, specifically, Hmong (Ngo, 2017) and LGBTQ+ populations (Wernick et al., 2014). Broadly, these works indicated the importance of theater as a multimodal and community form of expression that increased participants' critical consciousness. For instance, in an ethnographic exploration of Hmong student thespians, theater provided them an outlet to name oppression, share true stories, confront injustice through art, and feel empowered (Ngo, 2017). Similarly, 16 LGBTQ+ youth, who participated in interviews and focus groups expressed theater as a transformative space that provided a safe community as well as similar individual and collective empowerment to create change through art (Wernick et al., 2014). These findings are supported empirically by a recent correlational study of over 2,500 high schoolers that demonstrated that greater arts participation

(theater, choir, band, dance, and visual arts) was correlated with higher growth in critical reflection and action as measured by participation in social justice-oriented clubs, with even stronger associations for youth of Color, (Ibrahim et al., 2022). In conclusion, these studies support scholars' theoretical conceptualization of theater as a sanctuary space for forging connections with peers and adults (Akiva et al., 2017) and healing (Ginwright, 2018), as well as an outlet for naming/critiquing oppressive forces, building agency, and taking action through collective, generative processes of creating and sharing theater (Ngo, 2017; Wernick et al., 2014).

Another body of work documents other types of theater experiences' impacts on various interest holders, beyond only youth performers. For example, students randomly assigned to see a one-time theater performance had increased critical awareness, which took the form of tolerance, social perspective-taking, and understanding of plot/vocabulary (Greene et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is additional causal evidence that integrating theater into history lessons increases facets of critical awareness like content knowledge, students' enthusiasm for learning, and historical empathy (Kisida et al., 2020). Finally, another body of work emphasizes the value of discussion theater as a democratic method for co-constructing knowledge and working through moral dilemmas to increase critical awareness and motivation (Lind, 2019). Notably, most critical consciousness and theater-related studies focus on the effect on youth as performers or audience members. Furthermore, there is a lack of information on how youth social justice theater impacts adult audience members. There is a need to understand this intersection, given some work suggesting the power of youth theater and when thinking about this as a tool to mobilize voting-age adults within intergenerational movements.

Overall, this study will help illuminate the potential of youth voices and social justice theater to influence voting-age adults' critical awareness, motivation, and/or action toward fighting systems of oppression. More specifically, this work looks to investigate all three components of critical consciousness for audience members and the issue of classroom censorship (specifically, related to race, ethnicity, and understudied LGBTQ+ communities), while embedding social justice action into the evaluation process itself. With these considerations, the research team collaboratively created the following questions.

Research Question

(1) What is the reported impact of youth social justice performance and dialogue on adult audience members' critical awareness and motivation?

(2) A month later, what critical actions did audience members report taking?

Researcher Positionality

This critical participatory action evaluation partnership involved Epic Theatre Ensemble and me, a graduate student. Throughout this process, I practiced reflexivity or reflecting on how power shapes partner dynamics on personal and institutional levels (Sandmann and Kliewer 2012). I worked to unpack how my identity as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, 30-year-old, female graduate student shaped my assumptions, worldview, biases, theoretical orientation, and relationship to the work (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). For example, in the process, I reflected upon the emotional charge of classroom censorship, given youth's intersectional identities and experiences. Additionally, I mostly engaged with a white adult male co-founder. This was largely due to time and other constraints related to the IRB and youth protections. Both of us

discussed doing this work with the youth going forward more informally, without any IRB needed. Throughout the project, I applied my training as a teacher and youth participatory action researcher to engage in openness, reflection, reciprocity, humility, and ceding power. Furthermore, I looked to center the organization's voice and continually questioned internalized biases throughout the research process (Merriam and Tisdell 2015; Milner 2007).

Methods

CPAR, CPAE, and YPAR's Connection to Epic

Like critical consciousness, one lineage of critical participatory action research and evaluation (CPAR and CPAE, respectively) methodologies is Paulo Freire's empancipatory research (1970). This approach looked to co-construct knowledge and prompt social justice action. Around the same time, sociologist Orlando Fals Borda engaged in a similar participatory research approach aimed at supporting social movements, specifically, rather than just individuals, toward engaging in collective political action (Reason & Bradbury, 2005). Centering collective, not individual, action became an important consideration, as discussed more in detail later.

Additionally, there is a branch of participatory work that engages youth, called youth participatory action research (YPAR). YPAR, similarly, is a critical approach, which often involves qualitative methodologies, and has youth serve as co-researchers (Y. Anyon et al., 2018). In practice, YPAR works to build trust, minimize power differentials, practice dialogical co-creation of knowledge, and create bi-directional benefits (Teixeira et al., 2021). For youth common benefits include agency, leadership, academics, social/interpersonal skills, and critical thinking (Y. Anyon et al., 2018). In

addition to these individual benefits, YPAR culminates in some form of action aimed at creating social change on a more collective level. With this action goal in mind, there is the risk of disempowerment if students feel powerless over creating change and do not see direct action from their efforts (Thompson & Crockett, 2022).

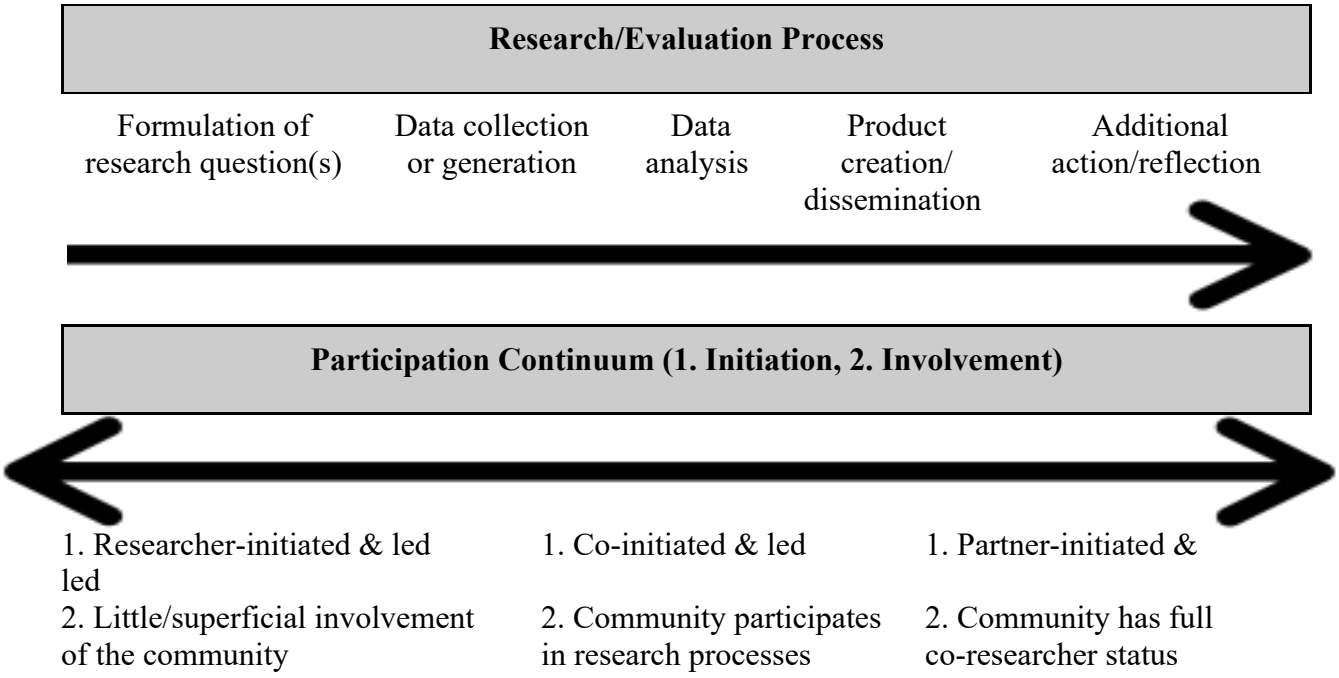
These traditions inform the action-oriented and youth-centered Epic's work. The New York-based non-profit, Epic Theatre Ensemble began their CPAR work with youth without the support of a university-affiliated academic. Epic aims to cultivate creative, connected, and critically conscious citizens through three main programmatic components including (1) the In-School program, (2) the Remix after-school program, and (3) the Epic Next touring ensemble. This paper will focus on the Epic Next touring ensemble, which hires students over the summer to engage in CPAR, specifically, co-selecting a topic, creating research question(s) as well as corresponding interview protocols, collecting qualitative data, using such data to workshop monologues, and writing a performance piece, which serves as the research product. For dissemination, the organization tours this piece across the country, mostly to university, school, and non-profit audiences. Past touring plays have tackled social justice issues like school segregation, why become a teacher, and classroom censorship/students' right to learn.

The evaluation project was co-initiated (see Figure 1's participation continuum level 1) following the creation of the performance and dialogue relating to classroom censorship. In the summer of 2023, I reached out to one of the co-founders of Epic Theatre Ensemble after hearing about their work on the Integrated Schools' podcast. I connected with a co-founder and applied for a grant to host four Epic student performers (all Black female students) and the co-founder (a white male). While co-planning this

experience, to bring together Epic and university-affiliated audience members, a critical participatory evaluation organically emerged, as the co-founder and I expressed mutual interest in investigating the impact of the CPAR product, a performance, and dialogue on classroom censorship.

Following project initiation, the co-founder and I engaged in a collaborative research process with varying levels of participation (see Figure 1). Within CPAR and CPAE, participation from the partner at each phase of the participatory process can vary at each phase of the research process (Brown, 2022). On this spectrum, the project leaned toward more researcher than partner-led, with the lowest levels of partner involvement during the data collection and analysis phase, as is common within similar participatory partner work (Hacker, 2013; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Before question generation, the co-founder and I began logic modeling the CPAR process and CPAE process mapping (see Appendix A). Using this information, the team iterated on research questions, a data collection tool, and a logistical plan, meeting roughly 15 times over Zoom before the performance.

Figure 1: Research Process and Participation Continuum



(Adapted from Brown, 2022)

During and following the performance, the researcher led data collection, analysis, and product creation with an Epic co-founder in an editor role. More recently, there has been a joint reflection on other next steps, the creation of a blog post and this academic paper, as well as summary slides. Finally, I facilitated a workshop for adult staff about creating effective surveys, with a hands-on component for them to work on survey questions for other works currently in progress. Overall, following the workshop, the adult members of the organization expressed an appreciation for centering reciprocity.

Context, Sample, and Data

This mixed-methods, IRB-approved study draws from ethnographic notes taken during the performance, secondary sources relating to the company's CPAR process (see Appendix B), and qualitative/quantitative survey responses from audience participants. Recruitment for survey participation occurred at the site of the play, a flagship public

university in the mid-Atlantic region and a predominantly white institution (PWI). Promotional flyers for the performance were displayed in public buildings for undergraduate, graduate students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, there were emails sent to promote the event through the Office of Diversity Equity Inclusion, the School of Education, an organization that coordinates undergraduate volunteers, and a Law School theater group. This is an audience of interest to the partner Epic, who primarily performs for middle/high school students, K-12 teachers, university-affiliated audiences, and non-profit employees.

This performance was a part of the organization's Southern tour in states with prominent classroom censorship legislation. Epic intentionally organized this tour, instead of attending mostly local and northeast university partners, given the need for this work in the southern context. For instance, in Virginia, the Republican governor campaigned to censor so-called "CRT," in public schools and later passed Executive Order 1, which prohibited the teaching of such "divisive concepts" (Executive Order 1, 2022). Next, he established a hotline for families to report teachers breaking the Order (Mayberry, 2022). More recently, the administration released guidance to roll back protections for transgender students (Elwood, 2023), and as of 2024, the state ranks fifth for most challenged books (Peifer, 2024). This context likely contributes to the lens through which audience members engage with the performance.

Recruitment for the optional survey measuring reported critical awareness and motivation occurred directly following the performance. I described the purpose of the survey and distributed a QR code, which brought willing participants to a mobile-device-friendly Qualtrics survey. Of the roughly 50 people in attendance for the performance, 22

completed the survey in its entirety, comprising the initial analytical sample (see Table 1). A month later, I emailed a follow-up survey to respondents to measure reported critical action. Follow-up survey respondents (n=11) were placed in a lottery for a $25 gift card for participating. Overall, the follow-up survey sample was more white, female, and progressive on average than the initial survey sample. In terms of attrition, about half of the audience in attendance took the initial survey, and half of that sample completed the follow-up, but the average motivation sum score of those who did and did not respond to the follow-up was identical (a score of roughly 103 out of 120).

Table 1: Characteristics of the Initial Survey Sample (N=22)

Demographic	**Male**	**Female**	**Non-binary**	**Black (non-Hispanic)**	**White (non-Hispanic)**	**Multi-Racial/Other**
Count (%)	8 (36%)	13(59%)	1 (5%)	6 (27%)	11 (50%)	5 (23%)

Demographic	**Conservative**	**Moderate**	**Liberal**	**Progressive**	**18-24 years old**	**25-34 years old**	**35 years or older**
Count (%)	0 (0%)	4 (18%)	7 (32%)	11 (50%)	2 (9%)	14 (64%)	6 (27%)
Total (N)			22			22	

Table 2: Characteristics of the Follow-Up Survey Sample (n=11)

Demographic	**Male**	**Female**	**Non-binary**	**Black (non-Hispanic)**	**White (non-Hispanic)**	**Multi-Racial/Other**
Count (%)	3 (27%)	8 (73%)	0 (0%)	2 (18%)	7 (64%)	2 (18%)

Demographic	**Conservative**	**Moderate**	**Liberal**	**Progressive**	**18-24 years old**	**25-34 years old**	**35 years or older**
Count (%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (27%)	8 (73%)	1 (9%)	7 (64%)	3 (27%)
Total (n)			11			11	

Survey Measures

The initial survey (see Appendix C) included one open-ended qualitative question relating to critical awareness and one to critical motivation. The qualitative response questions allowed for an investigation of mechanisms or underlying factors that raised critical awareness and motivation, while the quantitative data allowed for a better understanding of average reported motivation and action levels. The critical motivation measure initially included 26 multiple-choice questions. This measure was adapted from an existing critical consciousness measure for youth and discussed with the partner before beginning data collection (Diemer et al., 2017). Like past work, the survey employed a 1 to 6 Likert scale that ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* (Rapa, 2016, p. 20). Adaptations from the initial youth-oriented measure involved reframing questions to focus on adults' motivation to act on classroom censorship, specifically. To ensure the survey's appropriateness for adult audiences, nine graduate school students provided written feedback. Finally, I dropped six questions (aimed at capturing neutral and negative critical motivation levels) given concerns to the validity of these questions (i.e., removal enhanced alpha levels, the question framing included the word not which the author speculated led to misinterpretation), leaving half of the final 20 questions focusing on racial classroom censorship and the other half on LGBTQ+ classroom censorship (see Appendix D for additional validity information).

The follow-up survey measuring reported action (see Appendix E) consisted of two open-response questions about what resonated and a drop-down menu question of the types of action they took. This mirrored the initial motivation survey and had an option to write in other responses. Finally, both surveys included the same five demographic questions at the end, and both redirected to a custom-made resource guide of ways to get

involved on this issue within their state and local context (see Appendix F). This resource guide was developed with the partner and was a novel approach that the researcher recommended to nudge audience members toward action.

Analytic Strategy

Given the limited sample sizes (N=22 and n=11, respectively), the team used mixed methods survey data and ethnographic notes gathered by the PI for formative purposes to inform future practice and gain an initial understanding of potential impacts on critical consciousness. Epic was interested in learning more about the sample's average motivation levels, what resonated with audience members, and what types of critical actions occurred following the performance. These findings helped inform what to highlight following future performances (e.g., hopeful stories of collective action, protest opportunities, true stories, satire, etc.). Finally, collecting critical actions completed helped illustrate where the organization is having a direct impact and helped them brainstorm how to increase their reach.

To ensure the critical motivation measure was valid for adults within this context, I completed several validity checks. First, with the twenty remaining items, I calculated inter-item correlations, total-item correlations, item variance, and Cronbach's alpha. There were relatively strong total-item correlations and alpha levels, with mixed inter-item correlations, as would be expected given the sample size. Alpha levels were calculated for critical motivation as a singular construct (α=.92) and two constructs (one for motivation to act on classroom censorship relating to race, α=.79, and the other for LGBTQ+ censorship, α=.89). All alpha levels were around the standard roughly .8 threshold (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Given that quantitative survey data provides a limited understanding of mechanisms driving motivation averages and audience awareness/sensemaking, I included a qualitative component. For instance, in Dedoose, I abductively or flexibly coded open-ended responses and ethnographic notes—many focused on performance elements and the in-the-moment emotional responses of audience members. This coding strategy allowed for the application of existent theory to inform coding schemes while remaining open to emergent themes that could contradict or extend existent theory (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). When coding the ethnographic notes, specifically, most of the codes related to emotion, as the intended purpose of including this form of data. These notes from in-the-moment emotional responses complemented what the critical consciousness survey likely missed (Pugh, 2013). For the survey responses, I drew on theory relating to the construct of critical consciousness (knowledge, motivation, and action), the potential dimensions (cognitive, emotional, behavioral) (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Speer & Peterson, 2000; Watts et al., 2011), and past work on the power of theater (Ngo, 2017; Wernick et al., 2014) paired with discussion (Lind, 2019). After coding, I produced memos to brainstorm common themes as well as narrative threads. Finally, I discussed the raw and analyzed data with the co-founder via Zoom for their insights/feedback.

Results

Intervention Summary

To better contextualize the findings, I will first provide a performance description, created from the ethnographic notes, of the roughly 25-minute play and 20-minute dialogue. The performance began with the sounds of protest coming from students

positioned at all corners of the room. They then introduced a guiding question, “What is students’ right to learn?” Audience members tracked performers across the stage, nodded their heads, widened their eyes, and adjusted their posture. Scanning out into the crowd, almost all audience members sat with arms and legs uncrossed, perhaps reflecting an openness to the upcoming performance. After this quick introduction to the issue of focus–classroom censorship in public K-12 schools–the students transitioned to a series of comical short sketches. One example involved K-12 teachers assembling as game show contestants. The host asked that they explain various concepts without invoking illegal words from real legislation located by students through their research process. Audience members gasped and laughed in response to student performers struggling to teach a lesson that did not include banned words, like “Black,” “woman,” “community,” and other descriptors.

Following the performance, students transitioned to the discussion portion. Throughout the student-led dialogue, they experienced similar levels of receptivity, as indicated by the number of audience participants in the conversation. For instance, about half of the audience spoke at least once, representing a balance of voices and identities and leading to a free-flowing conversation. The topics discussed ranged from personal experiences with education (as teachers, students, parents, etc.), resonant moments from the performance, and how to act upon the information presented. The survey distribution occurred directly following this dialogue and the feedback mirrored much of the feedback from the former.

Critical Motivation and Awareness

From the quantitative portion of the survey, average audience motivation scores indicated a strong willingness to engage with issues of classroom censorship. This was not surprising given that attending the performance was an optional activity and one may expect these averages to look different within an audience with less choice in attendance (e.g., school-aged students, teachers, and conference attendees). For the respondents in this audience, responses were concentrated in the four through six range on the Likert scale (responses: slightly, agree, and strongly agree). The distribution of individual sum scores can be found in Appendix G. For simplification, responses five and above were dichotomized as being critically motivated, with average motivation levels displayed in Tables 3 and 4. These tables provide two important pieces of information. First, they indicate which types of action audience members report being most and least likely to take. For instance, audience members reported the highest levels of motivation to engage in a discussion/learning opportunity and sign a pre-made petition (e.g., between 95-100% of respondents felt motivated to do both actions for censorship related to race and LGBTQ+ people). Audience members reported being least likely to run for school board and provide oral/written commentary at a meeting. Upon discussion with the partner, we were surprised by how many respondents reported feeling motivated to attend a protest (82% for each dimension). Second, breaking up the survey into LGBTQ and CRT dimensions allowed for the analysis of variation between the two categories. Although slight variation existed, given the small sample size, it is difficult to conclude whether one category motivated participants more than the other for certain actions.

Table 3: Initial Pilot Survey, Average Levels of Critical Motivation (Construct Race, N=22)

A8. I would sign a pre-made petition to ensure teachers can discuss systemic racism and different cultures.	100%
A9. If prompted by others, I would participate in a discussion/learning opportunity on censorship of systemic racism and culturally responsive curriculum.	95%
A10. If another person presented an opportunity for action, I would consider acting to make sure teachers can discuss systemic racism.	95%
A6. I would initiate a conversation to defend teachers' right to discuss systemic racism and different cultures in schools.	91%
A7. I would donate to an organization, like the ACLU, working to combat classroom censorship of systemic racism and culturally responsive curriculum.	86%
A5. I would virtually attend a school board meeting to support efforts to allow teachers to discuss systemic racism and different cultures.	82%
A3. I would attend a protest to prevent the implementation of a social studies curriculum that does not address systemic racism and cultural representation concerns.	82%
A2. I would volunteer regularly to discuss systemic racism and different cultures with youth.	68%
A4. I would sign up to provide written or oral testimony at a school board meeting to ensure systemic racism and different cultures can be discussed in schools.	64%
A1. I would run for the school board to ensure public school teachers can discuss systemic racism and different cultures.	50%

Table 4: Initial Pilot Survey, Average Levels of Critical Motivation (Construct LGBTQ+, N=22)

B9. If prompted by others, I would participate in a discussion/learning opportunity on censorship of LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	100%

B8. I would sign a pre-made petition to ensure teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	95%
B10. If another person presented an opportunity for action, I would consider acting to make sure teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	91%
B5. I would virtually attend a school board meeting to support efforts to allow teachers to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	86%
B6. I would initiate a conversation to defend teachers' right to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination in schools.	86%
B3. I would attend a protest to ensure that students are able to determine their preferred pronouns.	82%
B7. I would donate to an organization, like the ACLU, working to combat classroom censorship of LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	82%
B2. I would volunteer regularly to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination with youth.	77%
B1. I would run for the school board to ensure public school teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.	64%
B4. I sign up to provide written or oral testimony at a school board meeting to ensure LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination can be discussed in schools.	59%

Next, the free response data provided a deeper understanding of the possible mechanisms driving critical awareness and motivation in response to the intervention. This analysis involved coding using frames from previous literature, thematic memoing, and meeting on Zoom with the partner to make sense of the themes emerging from the data. Ultimately, the major themes identified include: the power of true stories, emotion, and student voice within the furthering of critical consciousness in terms of awareness and motivation. The first free-response question directly related to motivation, with no respondents reporting that following the show they felt unmotivated. The second free response question was designed to be intentionally more open ended, asking what resonated, which led many folks to share what they learned (critical awareness) and some

connecting this learning to action-oriented motivation. For reporting throughout, quotes supporting themes are de-identified, given the small nature of the sample. For reference, in parenthesis is the respondent's total critical motivation (CM) score, which in this sample ranges from 60-120. The interplay of this mixed methods data provide insight into potential mechanisms behind how such theater experiences could influence critical consciousness, specifically awareness and motivation.

True Stories

In the survey directly following the performance and dialogue, respondents highlighted that true stories from the performance motivated them to take action and increased their awareness. For instance, four audience members noted the power of true quotes resonated with them, with one (CM=106) commenting, "The direct quotes and pulling words from politicians and laws was very powerful." This quote referenced the direct wording pulled from legislation and interest holders, like politicians, that Epic incorporated into their show, which resonated in their awareness following the show. Another interest holder's story that motivated and increased audience awareness was a true story about BIPOC parents. For instance, a respondent (CM=111) noted, "That BIPOC parents don't often have a voice in PTA and school board meetings, and how many decisions on censorship have been done quietly without asking too much input from the community." While these true stories and quotes had a more negative connotation, another commonly referenced story was rooted in hope. For example, a total of five respondents, including the lowest motivated audience member, across the two open-ended questions, discussed the victory of a diverse coalition in Indiana to reject an anti-CRT law. Another participant (CM=119) expressed feeling hopeful and motivated

by the dialogue section and "hearing about the students' own experiences," again indicating the power of sharing true stories. Lastly, participants connected the true stories they saw on stage to lived experiences and personal stories as former teachers and students. For instance, one respondent (CM=103) said, "This wonderful performance reignited a fire from my own experience in K-12 as well as hearing and seeing my little cousin (the only black little girl in her class) experience public education."

Emotional Response to Theater

Live theater and dialogue are uniquely situated to motivate and provoke an emotional community response. This was reflected in audience responses, with one person (CM=105) noting, "Experiencing live theatre with an audience on such impactful issues was incredible; there is power in seeing live performance, sharing in experience, and in holding dialogue with one another in ways that traditional conversation might not allow." Others noted a similar power of theatrical performance, like one audience member (CM=120), who said what motivated them most directly following the performance was, "The energy of the players - they were incredibly effectual in their presentation." These quotes signal how sharing this live, community experience added an extra level of efficacy, which may be less possible by viewing a recorded session alone.

Specifically, audience members referenced emotions like humor, despair, awe, and hope. For example, four respondents noted the power of humor within a scene involving teachers participating in a gameshow where they must give a lesson without using banned words found in real legislation. One respondent (104) said, "I liked the different scenes/bits and the humor injected in it." Another (CM=105) noted that the same scene, "highlights the absurdity of proposed and passed legislature. In doing so, it

provokes questions around who is making decisions about what youth get to learn." This infusion of humor/satire within political storytelling has become a popular tactic, as evidenced by the success of media like The Daily Show.

While humor appeared to be the most frequently reported emotion, despair, hope, longing for change, and awe were also salient. For example, audience members noted that elements of the performance made them feel despair, like (CM=107) the "scene in school where the student tells the teacher, what's the point of teaching us about the civil rights movement if you can't support us in activism." Furthermore, another respondent (CM=104) noted, "The whole show made me kind of sad/disappointed in the country, but also interested in doing whatever little piece I can do to have the most direct impact." This quote, unlike others regarding the hope of organizing in Indiana, strikes a balance between disappointment and desire for change. Other audience members echoed this longing for change, as one respondent stated (CM=103), "The repetition of 'Why teach us about revolution if you won't help us start one?' gave me insane goosebumps. We NEED youth revolution to combat fascism." The goosebumps from this quote demonstrate a sense of awe and the capitalized word need strongly signals a desire to combat fascism, but it is unclear if they are willing to act or rely on a 'youth revolution.'

Student Voice

The play and dialogue were student-written and led; this elevation of students' voices proved to be a powerful component of the work and that audience members reported augmented their critical motivation. For example, one respondent (CM=109) noted their admiration for students' writing, "The fact that the students were the vehicles for sharing this important message was incredibly powerful. I was struck by the

authenticity and the honesty. I was also struck by the fact that the audience was deeply engaged in the post-show discussion and provided such powerful insight and perspectives." Furthermore, others credited student voice as the main motivator for their future actions, with one audience member (CM=106) saying, "I'm definitely more likely (to take action). It brought a lot of the issues to life in a way that is lost in the news. I found it powerful to have students performing who are directly affected by this issue." Another respondent (CM=105) noted, "I'm inspired to take action to empower student voices," which a different audience member (CM=109) echoed saying,

> "I'd love to connect with students to figure out how to amplify youth voice. There is such a need for us to center students in their educational experience and uplift their perspectives, and I want to help share that however I can. Whether through advocacy to legislators or school boards, their perspectives are missing from this discussion, and we must uplift them."

In sum, directly following the show, student voice was credited as a powerful motivator and a month later this mechanism was the most frequently credited as inspiring critical action.

A month later, when survey respondents discussed again what resonated from the performance, they also noted the power of student voice. For instance, two of the eleven respondents noted (CM=106), "The power of the dialogue from the students has stuck with me, and their ability to effectively communicate such a complicated topic. I'm truly impressed by them," and another (CM=107) noted that the performance was, "Transformative. I really appreciate the youth-led organization and performance— from

the research to the writing to the performance delivery." Similarly, another respondent (CM=105) noted the "power of it being delivered by young people. It has sparked many conversations amongst me and my students." In addition to these conversations, others continued to reflect. For example, one audience member noted (CM=109),

> "I reflect often as to both the content and the medium through which it was shared, and the greater need for more youth-devised and driven works. Major kudos to EPIC for uplifting youth voices to help move the needle on key issues! It inspired me to learn more about the topics and gain a deeper understanding of ways to support these efforts. It was a very inspiring, informational, and transformative experience!"

Localized Action

Immediately after the show, respondents reported feeling motivated to act locally in the first survey and these trends played out in the follow-up survey. For example, one respondent noted (CM=109), "I've been trying to get involved with these issues in (redacted state) and feel more empowered to engage on a more local level." Others said they were going to reach out to specific people or organizations locally. For example, another respondent (CM=103) in the first survey said, "I am more likely (to act), I think. It's good to be reminded how easily accessible school board meetings are and other ways to participate in the community." Others spoke of a desire to learn more and engage in conversation beyond their usual circle, like a respondent (CM=111) who said, "I'm even more motivated to talk about these issues with others in my life who are not teachers. It's important to continue raising awareness of how education is being censored on the down low, if you will."

Reported Critical Action

The follow-up survey allowed the research team to better understand if critical awareness and motivation translated into action and if so, what types (e.g., direct, indirect, individual, collective, etc.). Roughly 90% of the 11 respondents to the second survey (drawn from the initial sample, with the same average motivation levels as non-respondents) reported that they had engaged in at least one critical action (see Table 5), but the change was not reflective of critical action in the sense of direct and collective forms (e.g., attending a school board meeting, participating in a protest, etc.). The one respondent not included in this statistic, checked the box 'other' but did not provide an explanation, and therefore, was excluded. Furthermore, this measure did not separate the constructs of race and gender/sexuality, given that the organization was interested in any form of critical action relating to classroom censorship. The most common forms of action were talking to others about the issue (82%, indirect and somewhat collective) and seeking more information (45%, indirect and individual). Interestingly, only one respondent (9% of the sample) reported donating and no respondents reported signing a petition, submitting a letter to a representative (somewhat direct, but individual), volunteering (collective but indirect), or attending a protest (direct collective action). Finally, one of the reported others was signing up for a law clinic that works specifically on transgender issues in schools, like classroom censorship.

Table 5: Follow-Up Survey Average Reported Levels of Action to Address Classroom Censorship (n=11)

Talked with someone else about how to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	82%
Researched LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	45%

Other (respondent enters)	27%
Donated to an organization working to end anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	9%
Signed a petition related to ending anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship.	0%
Submitted a letter to a political representative or written comment at a school board meeting to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	0%
Volunteered with youth to discuss how to combat anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	0%
Attended a protest relating to classroom censorship/racial or LGBTQ rights	0%
Attended a school board meeting to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship	0%

In conclusion, these results suggest the power of youth social justice theater to promote critical consciousness. Specifically, audience members reported that their critical awareness and motivation were raised through witnessing true stories on stage with others, experiencing the emotional medium of theater, and hearing students' voice at the center of the conversation surrounding educational justice. Overall, there were high levels of reported motivation to act, but less reported action a month after this one-time intervention. Specifically, audience members (n=22) reported feeling most motivated to take passive actions like signing a petition and engaging in conversation. A majority of follow-up survey respondents (n=11, with the same average critical motivation levels as the non-respondents) did talk to others about the issue, but direct and collective actions were lacking. This is not surprising given that the action orientation of Epic was not scaffolded for the audience to include a focus on such types of action.

Discussion

These findings confirmed elements of the existing literature and brought informative surprises. First, past literature documents the power of gathering in community to hear stories and engage in dialogue (Greene et al., 2018; Lind, 2019). Furthermore, past work on social justice theater demonstrates how youth feel empowered through participation and the process can inspire emotions, both of which can raise critical consciousness (Ngo, 2017; Wernick et al., 2014). This work extends these findings to adult audience members in the process, specifically, suggesting that youth voice in the process is also very resonant. This finding is supported by youth participatory action research that demonstrates the power of youth voice (Y. Anyon et al., 2018). In conclusion, the youth's CPAR theater and dialogue project reflects the power of storytelling, emotion from theatrical performance, and youth voice.

Next, satire bits and humor are discussed less in the critical consciousness theater literature but emerge in this work. This finding around emotion is not completely new, given that humor has been a tool used by LGBTQ+ people to regain their own power (Craig et al., 2018). This finding may signal an opportunity for other theater groups looking to create resonant performances around social justice issues without triggering potential audience defensiveness.

Perhaps a more actionable finding for organizational improvement came from the follow-up survey. Specifically, there were low rates of action despite high reported motivation, especially in categories like donating and petition signing. This could be due to the more individualized, psychological framework applied by the research team, who adapted a previously validated measure. For instance, the survey and the state/local resource guide were geared mostly toward individual action, thus failing to account for

more collective approaches to organizing around social justice (J. Anyon, 2014; Reason & Bradbury, 2005). To Epic's credit, the creation of the play and content about a diverse coalition preventing classroom censorship legislation in Indiana, model the power of collective action. In the future, the organization could do more to bring audience members together to work collectively following the show, highlight the logistics of such organizing to build audience capacity for change, and identify existing organizations doing desired actions within the geographical location of the performance. This oversight could have contributed to the lack of action (especially collective action), alongside insufficient promotion of the resource guide, and/or the short time horizon to act before the follow-up survey. Further ideas for improvement are discussed in the partner action step section.

Finally, there are considerations related to participatory partnership. For instance, the researcher joined following the CPAR process at the crucial point of measuring impact. One might speculate how the research process might have looked different if the partnership had started earlier than the evaluation phase. With this in mind, I, as a graduate student, faced time constraints in engaging in such work. This meant that youth voice could not be included in this formal evaluation project, which would have been the ideal circumstance. In conclusion, this project demonstrates how CPAR researchers can participate in any phase of a project and make valuable contributions to community partners that result in process improvement and other action.

Limitations

In addition to the underwhelming forms of action, there are limitations relating to survey measure construction, sample size/composition, survey biases, and

generalizability. First, as mentioned above, the survey employed was mostly actions that individuals could engage in alone, some exceptions like attending a protest or volunteering. Overall, the survey and corresponding resource guide could have been more imaginative in capturing collective and context-specific considerations, which may have helped better translate motivation into action.

Next, there are generalizability limitations, given this sample draws from a population that is likely more critically conscious than the broader U.S. population, as they are members of a university community and had to voluntarily come to the show. With this in mind, this audience may generalize to university-affiliated audiences open to engaging in non-required social justice activities. Moreover, these data are self-reported and may be subject to biases, particularly audience members reporting a way to make themselves look more moral. Specifically, in the motivation section, respondents likely over-identified their willingness to engage, given much lower reported actions a month later from a smaller sample. Finally, attrition may impact the generalizability of reported action. Although average motivation levels were identical between the groups that did and did not complete the survey, there were compositional shifts, with the responding sample is also more female, progressive, and white than the initial sample. This would be important if these characteristics are predictive of the type of critical action one may take.

Future Research Directions

Given the limited data sources, there are many future directions for this work. First, additional work could be done to help Epic evaluate its process from start to finish and include more interest holders throughout the evaluation. More collective participation could also be encouraged within the measurement tool and research team action.

Additionally, taking a more sociological approach to contextualize how and why audience members failed to translate their reported motivation into action. This could help the organization and others better address barriers to action. Specifically, researchers could take more extended ethnographic notes, provide stronger nudges like having action accountability buddies following the show, and conduct interviews with participants, beyond qualitative survey questions. Next, from a quantitative perspective, scaling up the sample and providing more incentives/reminders to decrease attrition between the two surveys could help illuminate statistically the connections between the various critical consciousness components, particularly different types of critical action, and potential differences across CRT and LGBTQ+ content.

Partner Action Steps

These data can inform the partner's practice in actionable ways. For instance, we discussed continuing to distribute localized resource guides, to help connect audience members to local opportunities, and even find ways to continuously remind them of school board meetings, donation links, protests, and other opportunities. Furthermore, we discussed incorporating more collective forms of action and even creating systems of peer accountability as well as continued action-tracking mechanisms to increase audience action. Additionally, I led a survey design training with all adult members of the organization, who verbally reported feeling more empowered to apply such best practices on future surveys, thus allowing for sustainable internal evaluation practices.

Finally, even if critical action is taken by only a few individuals following the performance, there can be a lasting impact. For instance, classroom censorship efforts now come from an organized coalition of a minority of Americans, often with racial

power or the property of whiteness. Combatting these anti-critical actions will likely require not only individual action like the audience member who joined a law clinic advocating for LGBTQ+ rights but also encouraging audiences to work collectively, as seen in the Indiana example. The power of collective movements lies in the ability to mobilize. Given that one study finds it only takes 3.5% of a population to mobilize around an issue to make a difference, the continued work of Epic and other organizations to impact critical consciousness remains vital, and future work should view critical action from this direct and collective lens (Chenoweth, 2021). Overall, these findings suggest that we may need to expand disciplinary perspectives on the topics of critical consciousness. For instance, employing frameworks from sociology may provide a better vantage point to investigate the impact of youth theater on audience action orientation. Additionally, this project illustrates the potential of CPAR/E and youth social justice theater to facilitate critical consciousness, especially if the team works together from research-creation to evaluation.

Conclusion

The topic of the performance, public K-12 classroom censorship, is one of a plethora of collective action issues bound to define current and future generations. This project investigated the topic of classroom censorship, youth theater, and critical consciousness development, through critical participatory action research and evaluation (CPAR and CPAE) approaches. The work contributes to various literature on a few dimensions. First, this study provides an example of CPAE work at the unique intersection of audience member critical consciousness and youth social justice theater. Next, the pilot surveys quantitatively measured adults' critical motivation to act against

classroom censorship and their reported actions. Furthermore, surveys qualitatively investigated how a youth theater and dialogue intervention increased critical awareness, motivation, and action. The results indicated the impact of true stories to enhance critical consciousness, theater as an emotional medium, and the power of youth voice. Although these components were impactful motivators for audience members to pursue local action, reported action was limited to more passive and less collective forms (dialogue and additional learning). All respondents did report some form of action and in the future research teams can look to be more intentional in how to easily facilitate collective action during the product creation and evaluation phase. The research team used this finding as an opportunity to discuss how to improve practice and promote effective collective action within local contexts going forward.

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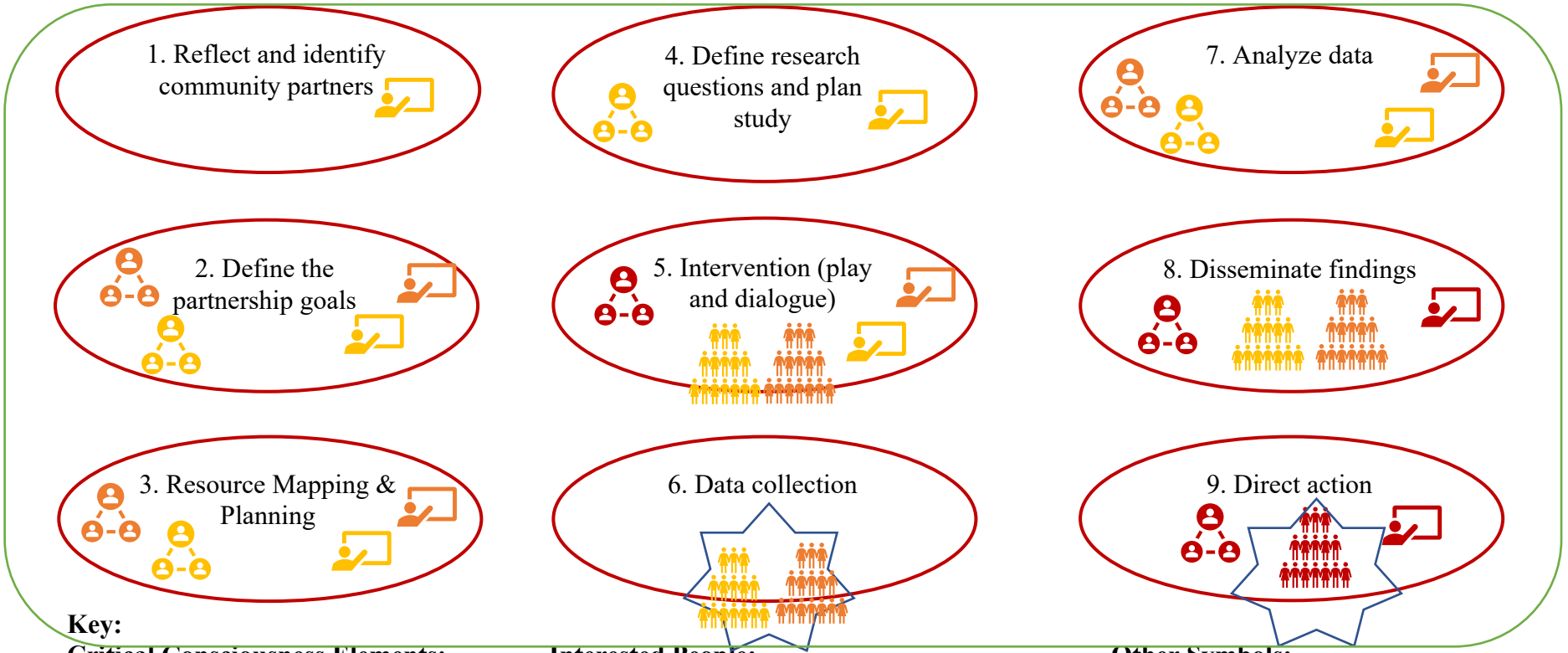
Appendix

Appendix A: Mapping Critical Participatory Action Evaluation and Critical Consciousness of Different Interest Holders[12]

Partnership Formation **Participatory Action Research Process**



Key:

Critical Consciousness Elements:

Critical awareness present

Critical motivation present

Critical action present

Interested People:

Epic organization members

Researcher

Audience Members

Other Symbols:

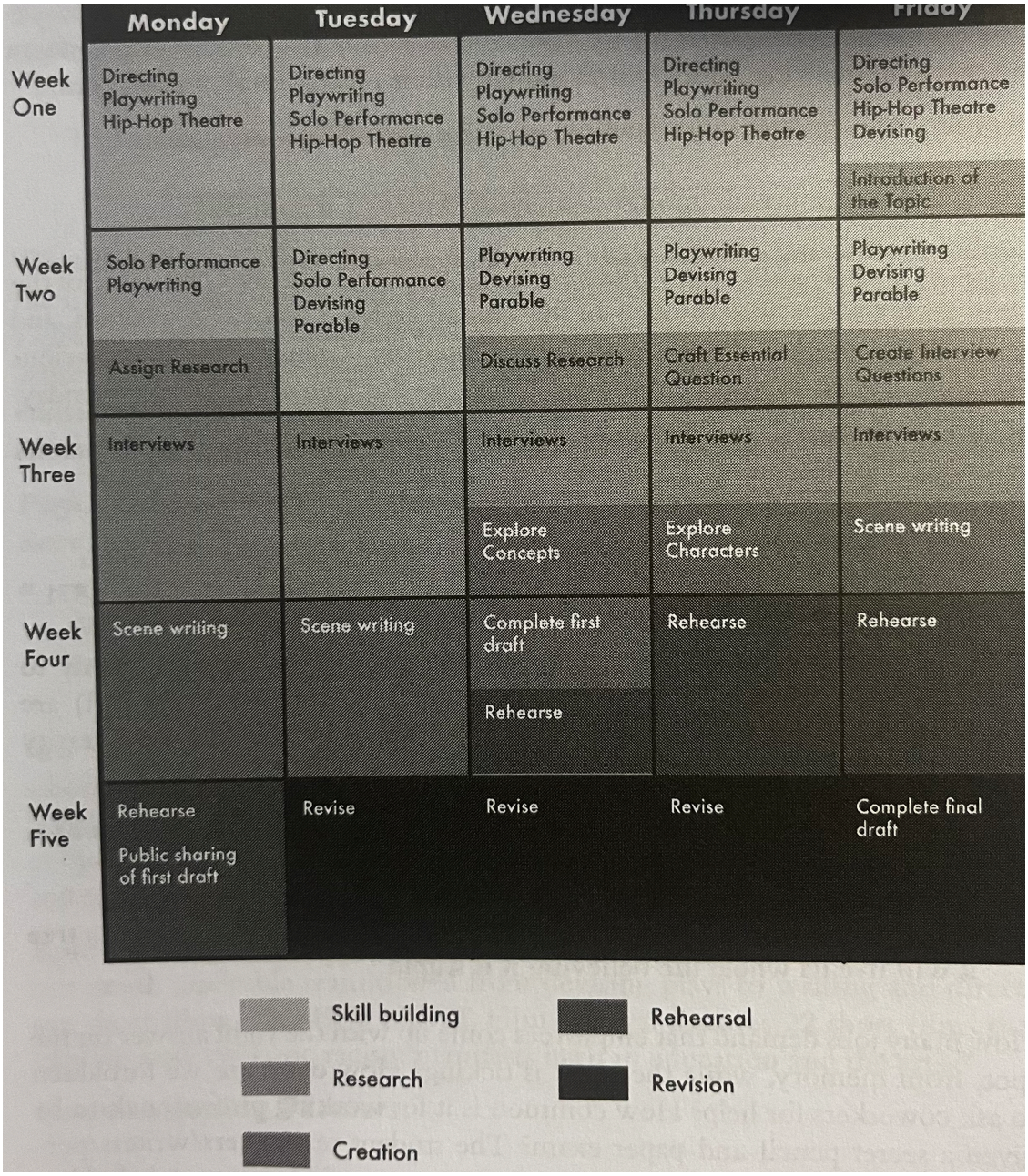
Captured by surveys

Indirect action against oppression

Larger systemic context

[12] Although presented in a linear frame for simplicity, the process can be non-linear

Appendix B: Epic Five-Week Process



Given that the partnership began following the creation of the performance, there is no active data collection from the early phases, where there are connections to youth critical consciousness development

Appendix C: Initial Survey Instrument (Critical Awareness and Motivation)

After the EPIC theater performance, are you more likely to take action around any of the issues presented? Why or why not? What action(s) may you take?

The following terms will appear in the two multiple-choice sections:

LGBTQ+ = acronym for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, etc. 2. **Systemic racism** = "policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

After the show, how true are the following statements

(Scale: Very True, Slightly True, True, Slightly Untrue, Untrue, Very Untrue)

I would virtually attend a school board meeting to support efforts ensuring teachers can discuss systemic racism and different cultures.

I would attend a protest to ensure the social studies curriculum addresses systemic racism and is culturally competent.

I would initiate a conversation to defend teachers' right to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination in schools.

I would sign up to provide written or oral testimony at a school board meeting to ensure LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination can be discussed in schools.

If another person presented an opportunity for action, I would consider acting to make sure teachers can discuss systemic racism.

I would run or work for a school board campaign to ensure public school teachers can discuss systemic racism and different cultures.

I would donate to an organization, like the ACLU, working to combat classroom censorship of LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

I would virtually attend a school board meeting to support efforts to allow teachers to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

I would sign a pre-made petition to ensure teachers can discuss systemic racism and different cultures.

I would volunteer regularly to discuss systemic racism and different cultures with youth.

If prompted by others, I would participate in a discussion on censorship of LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

I would initiate a conversation to defend teachers' right to discuss systemic racism and different cultures in schools.

Tell us about what you learned/what resonated most from the show and dialogue.

After the show, how true are the following statements

I would run or work for a school board campaign to ensure public school teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

If prompted by others, I would participate in a discussion on censorship of systemic racism and culturally responsive curriculum.

I would sign a pre- made petition to ensure teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

I would donate to an organization, like the ACLU, working to combat classroom censorship of systemic racism and culturally responsive curriculum.

I would attend a protest to ensure that students are able to determine their preferred pronouns.

I would sign up to provide oral or written testimony at a school board meeting to ensure systemic racism and different cultures can be discussed in schools.

If another person presented an opportunity for action, I would consider acting to make sure teachers can discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination.

I would volunteer regularly to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and discrimination with youth.

How old are you?

18-24 years old
25-34 years old
35-44 years old
45-54 years old
55-64 years old
65+ years old

How would you identify your gender?

Female
Male
Nonbinary
Other

Do you identify as Hispanic/Latina(o)?

Yes
No

How do you racially identify? (Check any that apply)

White
Black or African American
Asian
American Indian or Alaska Native
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Bi or Multiracial
Other

What best describes your political affiliation?

Conservative
Moderate
Liberal
Progressive
Other

Appendix D: Interitem Correlations and Validity Statistics (N=22)

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9	A10	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9	B10
A1	1.00																			
A2	0.37	1.00																		
A3	0.19	0.46	1.00																	
A4	0.30	0.66	0.74	1.00																
A5	0.22	0.75	0.36	0.37	1.00															
A6	0.15	0.44	0.24	0.34	0.13	1.00														
A7	0.32	0.84	0.47	0.54	0.86	0.22	1.00													
A8	0.02	0.17	0.21	0.33	0.23	0.32	0.32	1.00												
A9	0.10	0.40	0.13	0.40	0.13	0.78	0.29	0.47	1.00											
A10	0.25	0.45	0.63	0.67	0.12	0.44	0.40	0.42	0.60	1.00										
B1	0.64	0.54	0.12	0.41	0.47	0.00	0.55	0.12	0.00	0.12	1.00									
B2	0.25	0.79	0.40	0.47	0.80	0.16	0.90	0.30	0.20	0.36	0.54	1.00								
B3	0.26	0.31	0.73	0.62	0.18	0.26	0.42	0.45	0.49	0.87	0.15	0.40	1.00							
B4	0.33	0.73	0.44	0.51	0.80	0.28	0.82	0.21	0.17	0.21	0.54	0.76	0.27	1.00						
B5	0.27	0.85	0.43	0.51	0.89	0.27	0.96	0.29	0.28	0.32	0.48	0.89	0.30	0.84	1.00					
B6	0.31	0.38	0.17	0.22	0.22	0.45	0.46	0.33	0.48	0.47	0.19	0.53	0.49	0.48	0.45	1.00				
B7	0.32	0.82	0.42	0.56	0.79	0.30	0.95	0.39	0.40	0.53	0.56	0.84	0.49	0.71	0.89	0.48	1.00			
B8	0.36	0.34	0.62	0.61	0.23	0.23	0.55	0.60	0.44	0.81	0.34	0.46	0.89	0.37	0.40	0.50	0.61	1.00		
B9	0.43	0.50	0.31	0.39	0.48	0.15	0.61	0.62	0.46	0.79	0.40	0.55	0.47	0.30	0.54	0.24	0.62	0.57	1.00	
B10	0.38	0.38	0.56	0.62	0.27	0.29	0.54	0.61	0.51	0.79	0.41	0.42	0.87	0.33	0.40	0.49	0.63	0.95	0.56	1.00

Note: A1-A10 represents the ten survey items relating to racial censorship, listed in Table 3. B1-10 represents the ten survey items relating to LGBTQ+ censorship, listed in Table 4

Constructs overlapping with items in the same group in yellow (race questions in dark yellow, LGBTQ+ in yellow)

		1 Construct	
Alpha A	0.788	Alpha	0.920
Alpha B	0.892		
SBP A - Half	0.650	SBP B- Half	0.806
SBP A - Double	0.881	SBP B - Double	0.943

Appendix E: Follow-Up Survey Instrument

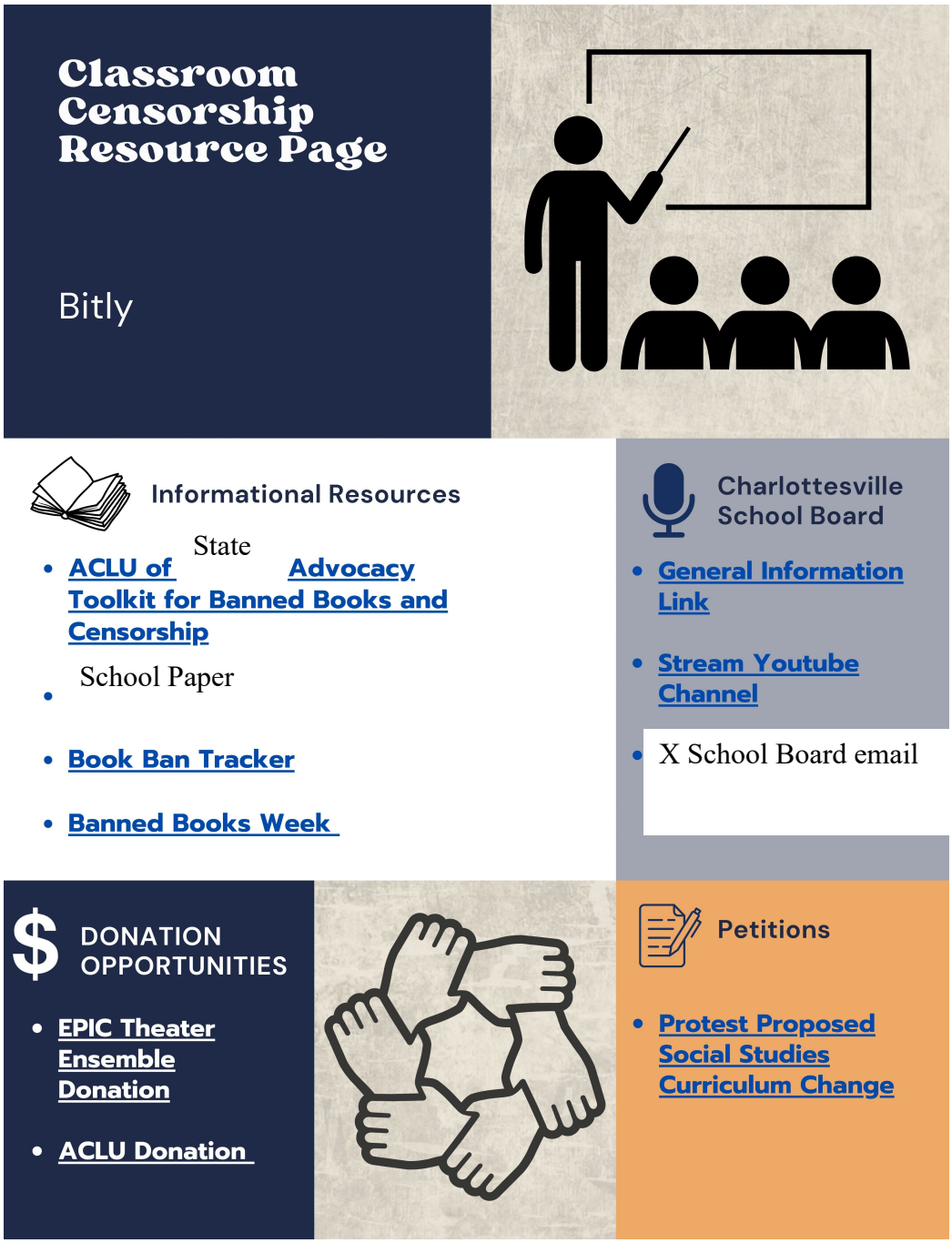
Check any of the actions that you have taken in the last month

- Donated to an organization working to end anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Signed a petition related to ending anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Attended a school board meeting to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Researched LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Talked with someone else about how to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Submitted a letter to a political representative or written comment at a school board meeting to combat LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Volunteered with youth to discuss how to combat anti-LGBTQ+ and/or race-related classroom censorship
- Attended a protest relating to classroom censorship/racial or LGBTQ rights Other (if you checked other, please describe below)
- Other

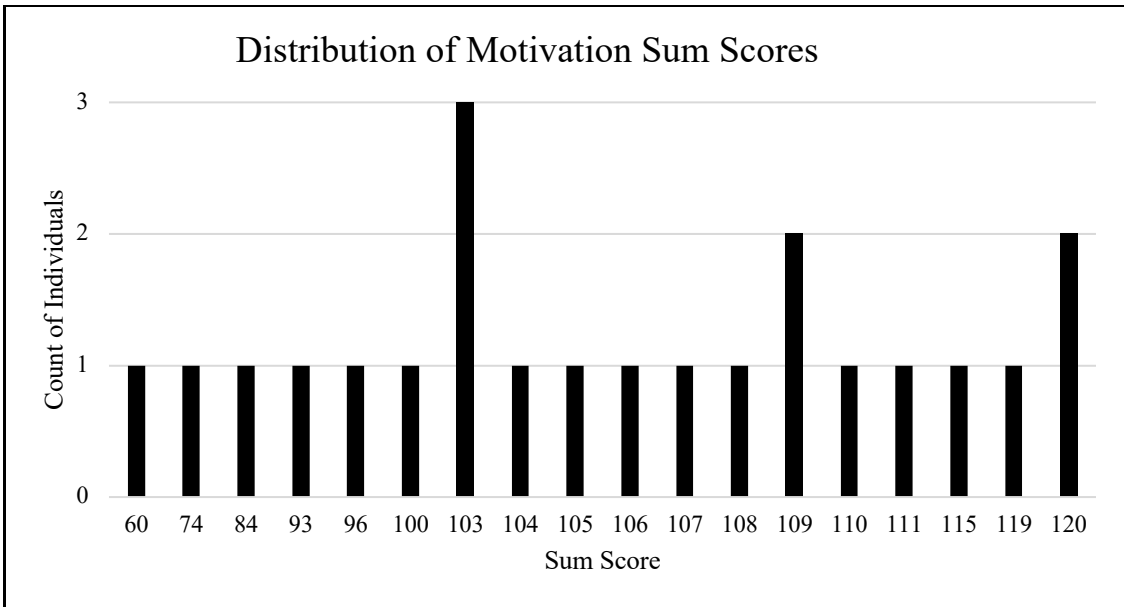
In the past month, you attended a performance by the Epic Theatre Ensemble. How do you reflect back on that experience now? What has stuck with you from that performance? Do you have any praise or recommendations for the organization?

(Same demographic questions)

Appendix F: Resource Guide Provided to Audience



Appendix G: Distribution of Sum Scores



Moving Past “All Deliberate Speed”: An Action-Oriented Approach to School Integration Research

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Acknowledgments

No conflicts of interest to report.

Abstract

The words "all deliberate speed" linger as schools remain highly segregated across lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and other intersectional identities. Such segregation continues to generate educational debt and harm. This theoretical and empirical inquiry reflects upon the sociohistorical context leading to continued school segregation, redefines the policy problem as the lack of substantive integration through empirical and theoretical support, as well as offers concrete examples of schools, districts, non-profits, and social movements working toward integration. The concept of substantive integration, based on the 5R framework, includes racial and intersectional enrollment, restorative/transformative justice, inclusive relationships, equitable resource distribution, representation, and a new component of civic engagement opportunities. Lastly, this paper argues for the use of critical participatory action research (CPAR) to engage various interest holders in collective action efforts to better ensure that research more effectively translates to community knowledge and social justice transformation. A hypothetical example of what this may look like and the needed considerations for implementation are discussed.

Keywords: School integration, critical participatory action research, segregation

Motivation

Seventy years after *Brown v. Board II* (1955), school segregation and educational inequity across lines of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and other intersectional facets of identity (language, ability status, etc.) persist.[13] The power imbalance generated from our segregated past and present prevents the attainment of a pluralistic democracy (i.e., a coexisting, diverse collective body, approach to governing, and culture of shared power) (E. Anderson, 2013). Additionally, this segregated reality harms our interconnected collective across economic, health, relational, and other dimensions (Kramer & Hogue, 2009; McGhee, 2021), thus preventing us from flourishing.

In an attempt to document and address this policy problem, past generations of researchers have produced rigorous evidence (Orfield et al., 2008) regarding the harms of segregation (Matheny et al., 2021; reardon et al., 2022; Reardon, 2016) and the benefits of past court-ordered desegregation efforts for Black and Hispanic students (Anstreicher et al., 2022; Antman & Cortes, 2021; Johnson, 2011). There is emerging theoretical (Blum & Burkholder, 2021) and empirical evidence (Kahlenberg et al., 2019; Orfield et al., 2008; J. Schneider et al., 2022) on the potential of diverse schools to improve outcomes related to academics and well-being, more broadly defined. This knowledge base has, overall, failed to translate into meaningful policy change, as evidenced by ethno-racial and socio-economic school segregation increasing by 37% and 52%,

[13] This paper will primarily focus on segregation across lines of race, ethnicity (most literature relates to Latine/Hispanic populations), and socio-economic status (mostly defined by free or reduced-price lunch). This focus does not deny the significance of other aspects of identity like ability status, language, etc. but limits the scope to the most prominent areas identified within the current literature.

respectively, in the largest 100 districts since the 1900s (Owens & Reardon, 2024).[14] This work seeks to provide a more holistic definition to the policy problem and an action-oriented approach to research to bridge the gap between research and action.

Introduction

A New Definition of the Policy Problem

In this study, I argue for justice-oriented, transformative, and substantively integrated schools that shift the traditional definitions of the policy problem (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993) as segregation or lack of diversity. In contrast to this framing, substantive integration seeks to acknowledge historical legacies, to reduce harm for most marginalized students, and to promote justice, and to ensure a thriving pluralistic democracy. To define substantive integration, I draw from IntegrateNYC's 5**R**s of real integration, which include diverse **r**acial enrollment, **r**estorative justice, equitable **r**esource distribution, inclusive **r**elationships, and **r**epresentation (*The Policy Platform for School Integration*, 2020). For context, IntegrateNYC is a student-driven social movement within New York City, working mainly from 2014-2019 to propel student voices to the center of local policy change movements (*The History of the Movement for School Integration*, 2020). Students collectively assembled the 5Rs, based on factors from the *Green* ruling, with the goal of extending integration beyond school. This definition looks to avoid past failings (e.g., through representative curriculum), protect historically marginalized students (e.g., through restorative justice, relationships, a representative staff, etc.), and promote justice (e.g., through equitable resource distribution, restorative justice, etc.). This intergenerational movement has had lasting

[14] Authors employed the white-Black exposure index to measure ethno-racial segregation and the same index with binary variables for non-free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) and FRPL.

impacts within the larger conversation as well as helped contribute to shifts to middle school choice assignment plans across the city (*The History of the Movement for School Integration*, 2020). This movement, as seen in the past, has faced backlash with shifts in mayoral administration and reticence to implement more radical change (Gonzales, 2025; Gonzales & Naranjo, 2024). Furthermore, this highlights how change movements interact with various levels of power and governing bodies.

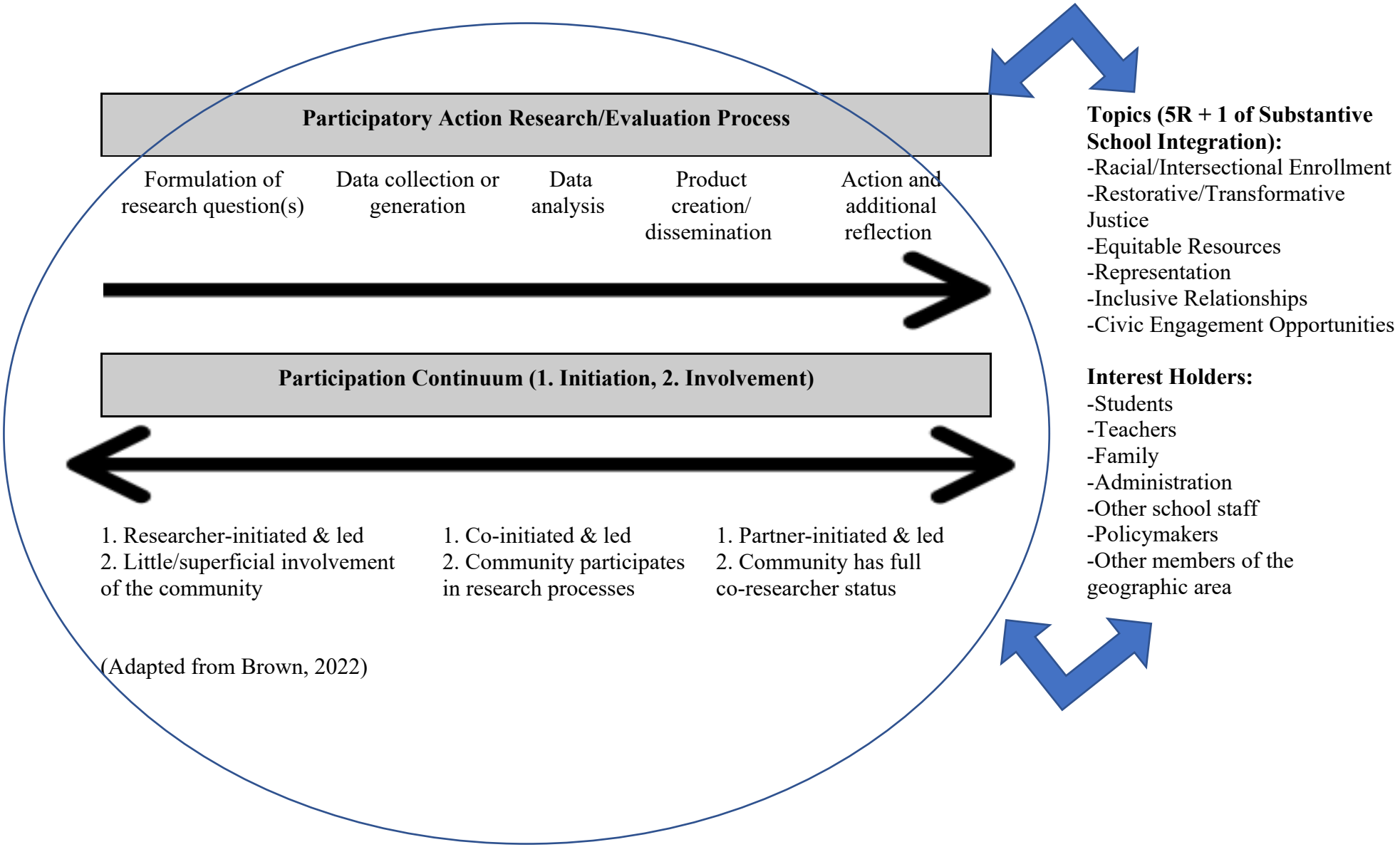
In conclusion, refining the 5Rs of real integration developed by IntegrateNYC contributes to the literature and gives practitioners a more refined goal to work toward. First, given the mention of civic preparation in *Brown* and future rulings, this new definition explicitly acknowledges the compelling interest to ensure equal opportunity in all aspects of life, including civic outcomes, which hinge upon education (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). This component comes out of an assertation that education should serve a civic purpose (Dewey, 2011; Labaree, 1997) and the link between diverse schooling and a functioning pluralistic democracy (Bowman, 2011). Finally, there is empirical and theoretical exploration linking school integration to civic flourishing within a democracy (Blum & Burkholder, 2021; Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022; M. Chin, 2024). Additionally, I expand racial enrollment to include intersectional enrollment to account for other forms of identity. Finally, I add transformative justice to the restorative justice component, to allow for solutions that likewise address root causes of the problem.

A Novel Approach to the Research Process Itself

Next, I offer a critical participatory action research (CPAR) approach as a new way of understanding substantive integration policy formation and implementation

through an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted lens. Critical participatory action research and evaluation have liberatory roots (Adelman, 1993; Fine & Torre, 2021; Freire, 2021) and offer a strong theory of change for implementation mostly, at the district, school, and local levels. This theory of change centers on community power throughout every phase of the research process. Thus this approach seeks to bridge the gap between academia and what is happening on the ground by working with interest holders in a democratic process during policy formulation and implementation, where school integration efforts historically have transformed (Fine & Torre, 2021; P. M. Hall & McGinty, 1997). Figure 1 illustrates the combination of the definition described above combined with the CPAR process. This framework includes the topic to the right, potential interest holders involved below, and then the research process as well as a spectrum of participant engagement levels. Additionally, this process is embedded within and interacts with the socio-historic as well as cultural context, indicated by the circle (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). Given the importance of this context, the next section will examine underlying conceptual frameworks, and national history, and then pivot into concrete examples of districts, schools, and housing organizations engaging in various elements of the 5R+1 approach today. Finally, this paper will conclude with a hypothetical example of CPAR implementation initiated by an advocacy group seeking to create substantively integrated schools in a district undergoing rezoning.

Figure 1: Combined Critical Participatory Action Research and Substantive Integration Framework



Theoretical, Historical, and Legal Building Blocks

Conceptual Frameworks

While the purpose of education and schooling has differed for various groups throughout history (e.g., Black, Indigenous, women, etc.) (Ewing, 2025), this document asserts that public education for all is vital for collective and civic flourishing (Dewey, 2011; Kristjánsson, 2020). First, education policy debates within the modern context often boil down to differing goals of what should be maximized. Labaree's (1997) foundational work reflects three predominant arguments for the purpose of education including democratic equality (schools as places of preparation for citizens, for the collective good), social efficiency (schools as places to train workers, for the collective good), and social mobility (schools as places for individual, not collective advancement). While the latter focuses on the individual consumption of education as a good, this work asserts that education should be a public good with more collective aims. Furthermore, I assert these aims should not simply be to ensure a strong societal workforce, but an informed civic body that can participate in democratic processes and have what they need to flourish more broadly as a human. Furthermore, these arguments appear in the legal sphere. For instance, *Brown v. Board of Education* and more recent segregation cases, like *Cook v. Raimondo* and *IntegrateNYC, Inc. v. State of New York,* cite youth wellbeing and the ability to participate in a democracy as justification for why we need public education (McGuire et al., 2020). Given that the U.S. is a highly diverse democracy, this paper will argue diverse and even integrated school settings will be at the heart of achieving this goal for civic preparation and furthermore, greater flourishing linked to healing some of the past harms outlined (Blum & Burkholder, 2021).

At another broad level, this paper is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), acknowledging that socio-historic and present power dynamics, specifically related to the intersection of race, shape ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals (Crenshaw, 1988; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). This informs the conceptualization of root causes, desegregation policy problem definition, and opportunities for collective social justice transformation (Denzin et al., 2024). This acknowledgment from critical theorists informs why this paper is meaningful. Additionally, critical theory contributes to two distinct topics of interest: desegregation and integration.

Critical theorists value the role of history and have written widely on the topic of desegregation, specifically. For instance, the history of desegregation policy illustrates CRT tenants that racism and other intersectional forms of discrimination are pervasive at all levels of the policymaking process (Crenshaw, 1988, 1989; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). The following history will demonstrate how this is true in the case of desegregation, alongside the theme of racial progress followed by retrenchment. One CRT scholar, Derrick Bell (1980) explains this through the lens of interest convergence, where policies benefiting the most marginalized are only sustained when they also benefit those with power. Power within the school desegregation landscape relates directly to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. CWS builds on CRT’s assessment of power dynamics and interrogates whiteness. With regard to desegregation, this involves questioning how white families hoard opportunities, view education as an individual good for consumption, and avoid conflict relating to race (Matias & Boucher, 2023; Okun, 1990).

In addition to this type of questioning race and power universally, this paper acknowledges that this can look different across contexts. For example, the same federal policy could be implemented in vastly different ways across contexts. This is because policy is about much more than formation and must include considerations relating to implementation and interpretation at each level of the policy process (e.g., state, district, local, school, classroom, etc.) (P. Hall, 1995). Ideally, the policy implementation process begins with an understanding of root causes, a shared problem definition, and a policy plan that addresses the underlying causes/corresponding problems (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). In reality, interest holders translate policy into practice that may not resemble the initial intent (Hall, 1995). Finally, given differing histories and political cultures, policy in the Northeast, for example, may be formed and interpreted in different ways than in the Southwest (Marshall et al., 1989).

Given each level of policy creation and implementation involves the influences of power and values, there is a need for thoughtful implementation to avoid harm. For instance, individuals and collectives interpret and act in the face of the permeating influences of power/privilege at individual, interactional, institutional, and ideological levels (Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Rahman & Kazmi, 2024) within their policy arena (federal, state, local, etc.) (P. Hall, 1995). Concretely this leads to policy decisions that are not simply a result of looking at quantitative data/methods—notably, derived from numbers that are also are themselves socially constructed—and operating in what some scholars may consider a rational manner. Given the influences of lived experience, values, power, etc. there must be considerations on how to effectively use data paired with ethics in research, policy formation, and implementation. Critical theorists would

recommend shared historical understandings, identification of common values, as well as representation (in the form of voice and shared power). This could look like documenting local desegregation history, identifying root causes, defining the problem with this knowledge, and then adopting values oriented toward collective justice in the implementation process (Wirt et al., 1988). Even with this, the embodiment of such values and change is difficult. The translation of corresponding solutions will likely not be linear (Rochefort & Cobb, 1993). With this in mind, representation in the solution creation and implementation may help with the sustainability of such efforts. This paper will argue that within policy research this could take the form of democratic CPAR processes, where community members are represented during policy formation, implementation, and evaluation (Fine & Torre, 2021).

In conclusion, these theoretical premises, gaining a common understanding of root causes, segregation/desegregation’s history, and a definition of the policy problem are pivotal steps within the policy change process. After establishing this, the paper will shift focus to implementation considerations. Given challenges relating to translation and interpretation of policy at each level, the focus of later sections will be how more localized CPAR and evaluation could help address all facets of the policy problem.

Historical and Legal Context

The history of segregation begins with the creation of caste in American political culture; a root cause of various social justice issues that persist. Colonial powers “founded,” what is known today as the United States (US), through the genocide of Indigenous peoples, the violent enslavement of Africans, and the granting of political powers narrowly to white, landowning men. Such historical legacies, where individuals

across intersectional identities hold various levels of political and economic power, status, respect, privileges, empathy, kindness, etc., continue to shape the modern context (Wilkerson, 2020). Specifically, the history and current context of ethno-racially and socioeconomically segregated schools illustrate how such caste-like hierarchies have and continue to operate, within the political value and policy landscape of the US.

Stories of desegregation over historical periods reveal shifting American policy and political values shaping the greater landscape. Such values shaping policy formation and implementation include equity, excellence/quality, welfare/need, freedom/choice, efficiency/accountability, and safety/security (Marshall et al., 1989; Stone, 2012). The following narratives and Table 1 dictate how such values shaped past desegregation policy definitions and resulting solutions. History demonstrates that some of these are in tension with one another and that they shift over time in terms of dominance at the national level. The struggle over these conflicting values and for justice is ongoing with a constant push and pull during different historical eras and at various levels of implementation (state, local, school, etc.) (Kendi & Blain, 2021). For instance, leading up to, during, and after *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka I* (1954), which had components of equitable and welfare-oriented change, there were others fighting for freedom/choice, accountability/efficiency, and excellence/quality. These conflicts can keep even equitable policy from reaching its intended impact (P. M. Hall & McGinty, 1997).

With the foundation of such value considerations, although the historical arc is longer, we will start this recount of school segregation and related policy around the time of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka I* (1954), which overturned the longstanding

Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) doctrine of separate but equal accommodations for Black and white Americans (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). *Plessy* had allowed for a system of segregation explicitly codified into law–commonly known as *de jure* segregation–and this persisted in schools despite the *Brown* decision, particularly in the South.[15] In schools, separate was not equal, as evidenced by per-pupil spending, facilities, curricular materials, etc. (Clotfelter, 2004). The Supreme Court overturned this precedent, relying in part on social science evidence of Black children's preference for and assignment of positive characteristics to white dolls, indicating a threat to their welfare (Bergner, 2009). This evidence supported claims about segregation's impact on internalized Black inferiority, and although the decision employed deficit-oriented language, the greater theme of inequity and harms of white supremacy persist today (Smith, 2008). In the 9-0 decision, the Warren Court found that separate could not be equal, explicitly ruling that the segregation of students violated the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022; *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). A year later, *Brown II* (1955) infamously declared that localities should move toward compliance "with all deliberate speed" (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (2)*, 1955).

Given this vague decree and the judicial branch's relative lack of enforcement mechanisms, there was notably little initial progress toward desegregation following the ruling. For instance, attempts to overturn *de jure* school segregation were met with massive resistance, particularly in the South, where such explicit policies were more prominent (Reardon et al., 2012). Reporting of massive resistance at this time threatened the U.S.'s international reputation during the Cold War (Watras, 2013). For instance, in

[15] Notably, while school segregation was not enshrined into law in the North, there was de facto racial segregation in schools, caused largely by housing patterns and systemic racism.

1957, Governor Orval Faubus deployed the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the Little Rock Nine from desegregating a local high school. In response, Martin Luther King pressured President Eisenhower to send the National Guard or risk setting "the process of integration back fifty years" (*Little Rock School Desegregation*, n.d.). Due to political pressures both at home and abroad, the President sent federal troops to ensure the nine students, strategically selected by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), could attend school. In 1960, there was a similar occurrence when an angry white mob protested U.S. deputy marshals escorting six-year-old Ruby Bridges to a formerly all-white public elementary school[16] in Louisiana (Rose, 2021). In addition to protests and acts of intimidation, other localities resisted through school closure. For instance, in 1959 Prince Edward County, Virginia, closed public schools for five years to avoid desegregation, while white students attended private schools through a voucher program (Ford et al., 2017), and Black students were left without formal schooling (Titus, 2011). Finally, the political rhetoric served as another form of backlash, as evidenced by Alabama Governor George Wallace's inaugural address infamously stating "segregation now, segregation forever," in Montgomery, Alabama (*Inaugural Address of Governor George Wallace*, 1963).

Given this backlash to desegregation and the non-linear nature of change in policy, the pendulum began to swing in the other direction, toward renewed efforts to desegregate in the mid-1960s. Leading up to this time was the grassroots Civil Rights Movement, which played a role in the passage of key legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Andrews & Gaby, 2015) and reflected support for equity policy at the national

[16] Desegregation efforts at this time mostly went one way, with Black students desegregating formerly white schools.

level. Building upon this momentum, in 1966, the historic Coleman Report documented the state of Black-white segregation and its harmful impacts on achievement and opportunity gaps for Black students (e.g., school facilities, books, resources, etc.) (Rivkin, 2016). Notably, this report attributed the predominant cause of such differentials to family background (socioeconomic status, culture, etc.),which, like the research used to justify the *Brown* ruling, failed to contextualize underlying systemic forces behind deficit frames that portrayed Black families as inferior (Davis, 2019). Additionally, the findings were misconstrued, by some, to suggest schools have little to no impact on educational opportunities (Lillejord, 2023). Despite these shortcomings, alongside the collective organizing of the Civil Rights Movement, and media coverage of morally reprehensible acts of massive resistance (Andrews, 1997; Klarman, 2007), these forces helped spark critical consciousness and propel policy change and implementation in the mid-1960's (e.g., the Civil Rights Act of 1964).

As a result, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was an increase in court desegregation orders, and the Supreme Court began to weigh in more explicitly on strategies ("Brown v. Board," 2004). Specifically, two prominent rulings, *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), significantly reduced white-Black segregation between 1968 and 1971 (Owens & Reardon, 2024). For example, *Green* determined that a "freedom of choice plan," implemented to promote desegregation, violated the Equal Protection Clause, given the plan had no real impact (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 1968). Additionally, *Green* shifted the Court's definition of desegregation to ensuring "racial balance in schools," alongside five other key factors: faculty, staff,

transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022).[17] Next, *Swann* directly addressed the consideration of transportation, holding that the 14th Amendment allowed for the systematic use of busing across district lines and other race-conscious measures (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 1971). As evidence of the impact of shifting priorities related to national political culture (e.g., from equity to choice), this ruling additionally allowed for choice-oriented magnet schools and other compensatory education services as remedies to the harms of residential segregation, replicating in schools ("*Brown v. Board*," 2004). In the period following these rulings, from 1968 to 1980, the percentage of public schools with more than 50% students of color decreased from 77% to 63% nationally, and from 81% to 57% in the South (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022, p. 42). This time of forced desegregation policy, largely implemented through busing, may have reflected a win for values of equity and quality, but backlash prompted a new era of choice and freedom as dominant values, as evidenced by a shift to magnet schools.

This emphasis on busing as a remedy was met with political, policy, and legal backlash in the 1970s, leading to a shift toward desegregation mainly through choice strategies. For instance, political leaders like President Nixon (elected in 1969) campaigned with rhetorical tactics to mobilize coalitions around fears of busing, which was positioned as a threat to choice (Clotfelter, 2004). White families organized to resist busing by employing protest tactics that mirrored those of the Civil Rights Movement. For example, white coalitions organized and executed large marches in major cities like Boston, New York City, and Chicago, using the language of liberty, neighborhood

[17] It is noteworthy, that these factors serve as a baseline for conceptualizing more holistic approaches to school integration.

schools, parents' rights, and choice to defend their resistance to desegregation (Delmont, 2016). Resistance around this time, especially in city spaces, coincided with racist housing policies (Rothstein, 2017) that facilitated white flight to the suburbs (Clotfelter, 2004). With more white people living in suburban school districts, the *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) ruling signaled another hit for school desegregation efforts. In a close 5-4 decision, the Burger court found that if school district boundaries were not drawn with *explicit* racial intent, then they were considered constitutional (*Milliken v. Bradley, 418 U.S. 717*, 1974). In other words, policymakers were not *required* to work across district lines to promote school desegregation, as long as there was a lack of evidence of explicit racial discrimination (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022). This marked the end of the limited number of years of enforced desegregation, with the height of such enforcement lasting mainly from 1968 to 1971.

The early to mid-1970s backlash to desegregation led to a series of court cases, starting with *Milliken*, which unraveled the original equity orientation of *Brown*. More recently, following the passing of No Child Left Behind (2002) there was a renewed emphasis on choice in addition to quality, efficiency, and accountability over equity (George W. Bush Archives, 2007). Additionally, conservative-leaning Supreme Court coalitions continued to restrict diversity efforts. For example, in *Parents Involved v. Seattle Schools* (2007) *and Meredith v. Jefferson County* (2007). The Court found that the public interest in school diversity/racial balancing is "compelling," and noted that this interest includes 1) a desire for a historical remedy (acknowledging that past policy translated into continued segregation, caused at least in part by school-specific policy), 2) improved educational performance/opportunity for global majority students, and 3)

democratic flourishing within a pluralistic society (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022; *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007). Furthermore, strategies to address segregation must be "narrowly tailored" under the standard of strict scrutiny, which prohibits districts from using remedies like racial quotas. With this consideration, the Court struck down elements of the diversification strategies in Seattle and Jefferson County, which likely had a chilling effect on other districts (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022). The Court did list acceptable strategies, such as voluntary transfer programs, using geography as a factor in diversification efforts, and even race-conscious measures that could be included as *one* part of districts' "narrowly tailored plan," (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007). In conclusion, in the current time, parental response to diversity, equity, and inclusion-oriented policies, specifically around desegregation, parallels past rhetoric around choice, quality, and security (Roda & Wells, 2013). Additionally, studies show implicit anti-Blackness in hypothetical (Billingham & Hunt, 2016) and actual white family school choice (M. Schneider & Buckley, 2002). This anti-Blackness and anti-DEI broadly continues to shape the political and cultural context.

Most recently, following a controversial ruling on affirmative action in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2022), the Supreme Court denied cert of *Coalition for TJ v. Fairfax County School Board*. This case involved race-neutral admissions processes in a prestigious public school of choice in Virginia (Nathanson, 2022). The denial of certiorari functioned as deferral to the 4th Circuit's ruling, which had found that there was "no racially disparate impact on Asian students" (Quilantan, 2024). This case, notably centered around Asian students and families,

illustrates the greater complexities of modern diversity efforts within an increasingly diversifying country with persistent ethno-racial hierarchies (Nowicki, 2022). Overall, diversity advocates within the legal community considered this denial of cert a win.

Given this context, fears have reemerged with the current administration. This administration on Friday, February 14th, 2025, released a Dear Colleague letter. This letter, although not law, dictated that attempts to advance diversity even through race-neutral policies with the *intent* of racial balancing are subject to federal investigation (Elsen-Rooney, 2025). This, alongside widespread attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, will likely have a chilling effect as the U.S. enters a new era of education policy (Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing, 2025). Finally, the administration's larger plans to shift to plans representing choice and freedom (The White House, 2025), like vouchers, and mass layoffs at the Department of Education, with discussion of full abolishment of the Department (Goldstien, 2025), signify a shift similar to the 1980s, which will also likely impact generations of public school students.

Overall, shifts up until this point are described in Table 1, indicating non-linear moments of progress, equilibrium, and regression in desegregation policy. To summarize, the 1950s-60s represented a time of renewed visions of equity and a political movement toward justice. While this was followed by backlash, there was a period of actual equity-oriented implementation of desegregation in the late 1960s and 1970s. Next, from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, choice and freedom began to dominate the U.S. desegregation policy landscape. There was a shift from coordinated inter-district desegregation implementation through court orders to an emphasis on optional, smaller

scale, choice-oriented magnet school approaches to desegregation. In the current era, school and district level systems of choice have expanded as a way to symbolically address racial and socioeconomic inequity in schools; however, open-enrollment choice systems, compensatory programs, magnet schools, charter schools, and vouchers have largely failed to include equity-oriented guardrails for choice; in turn, they have failed to address segregation and consequent inequities (Ford et al., 2017; Heinecke, 1997; Monarrez et al., 2022). Arguably, the next wave of desegregation and integration efforts will have to grapple with balancing the values of choice, equity, and fairness (Stone, 2012) as well as how to operate within political, geographical, legal, and other logistical constraints.

Overall, my review of the history of desegregation policy (see Table 1) illustrates a transformation of policy intentions from equity to other dominant values found in the American political cultural landscape, the need for more expansive problem redefinition, and to adjust past traditional approaches to policy change (Hall & McGinty, 1997; Heinecke, 1997; Marshall et al., 1989). While this history is not all encompassing and looks mostly at values and policy from a national level, it should be noted there are nuances at each level of implementation across contexts that cannot fully be captured here. For instance, policies’ success depends on if the values and political culture are in alignment with the underlying goals (Marshall et al., 1989). Given the national hostility at this moment, there is a need to understand past histories of resistance and how past failings can inform a more expansive problem definition. Building from the successful strategy of working at more local levels in community to mobilize existing resources,

future examples will focus on more localized integration movements. Finally, the last section will focus on how this collective work could look with researchers.

Table 1: Timeline of K-12 and Higher Education Desegregation Efforts

Timeline	Themes	Cases and Events
Prior to 1950	*De jure* segregation Strict racial caste system, enforced by law. As we see throughout, oppressive realities exist alongside organizing for justice.	*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)
1950-1960s	Early desegregation shifts from *de jure* to *de facto* segregation, in other words, although segregation may not be legal, ever transforming resistance efforts keep segregation a reality. In this time, see a theoretical emphasis on tangible (e.g., classroom resources) and intangible factors (e.g., prestige, social networks, moral obligation). In terms of resistance, Milton Friedman proposes vouchers as a resistance tactic in the mid-1950s and white flight from the city to the suburbs increases.	*Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) (higher education) *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950) (higher education) *Brown v. Board of Education I & II* (1954, 1955) (K-12) White flight facilitated by public policy decisions, highlighting the important intersection of housing policy School closings and vouchers emerge as a way to resist school desegregation (K-12)
Mid-1960s-early 1970s	With litigation and additional pressures from grassroots organizing and foreign policy, start to see implementation creating way for mostly one-way busing. See a greater focus on tangible factors that can be measured and less on intangibles (e.g., experiences of	*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) (K-12) *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1970) (K-12)

	belonging/inclusion). This is the time with the most notable impact on desegregation, but as highlighted there are devastating reductions to Black teachers and administrators, who are pushed out of the profession.	Court-ordered desegregation enforcement, emphasis on busing
Mid/Late 1970s-1990s	This enforcement of desegregation court orders leads to more prominent resistance. Also see shifts to the Court composition and ultimately a retreat from past desegregation policy. Choice-oriented policies rise in prominence, in the battle of values with equity taking a back seat. See approaches like magnet schools as the new preferred tool for desegregation, instead of inter-district plans. In admissions and educational access, tangible factors become more complicated. In action, see intangible factors become more of a focus with more school-level resistance.	*Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) (K-12), now under the more conservative Burger Court *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) (higher education), can consider race in college admissions, but limit the use (e.g., no strict quotas) Busing restricted across districts as a remedy, emphasis on voluntary magnet options Ethnic studies movement De-tracking movements Rise of neoliberal ideologies with focus on market orientation and individual choice in the education policy space
Mid-1990s-2020	Expansion of other school choice models (e.g., charter and vouchers) in K-12 and policies preventing diversity continue to undermine the equity-desegregation efforts of previous eras. There is an emphasis on quality and punishment of	*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District. No. 1* (2003) (K-12) *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) (higher education)

	"low-performing schools," but less emphasis on desegregation litigation. Higher education, in contrast, has growing litigation and research on affirmative action, valuing diversity, and preparing students for globalized world. Overall, neoliberal values continue to prevail, with additional emphasis on quality and accountability.	*Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016) (higher education) Accountably era Covid-19 pandemic Racial reckoning and influx of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives
2021-Present	Backlash to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging efforts in higher education and K-12. In higher education see weakening of affirmative action policy and in K-12 continued push for parents' rights, educational choice, and other neoliberal principles. Most recently, the presidential administration through executive orders, Dear Colleague letters, and other rhetoric have attacked education from the Department of Education, to individual districts, and higher education institutions.	*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023) (higher education) *Coalition for TJ v. Fairfax County School Board* (2023) (K-12 with similar cases in NYC, Boston, and Montgomery County) Moms for Liberty (2021) Classroom censorship initiatives The re-election of Donald Trump and threats of educational disinvestment (e.g., abolishing the Department of Education, anti-DEI executive orders, Dear Colleague letter) Monitoring of DEI in public data and scholarship.

(Adapted from Stuart Wells et al., 2016)

Current Landscape and Future Directions

Barriers

Following the 2024 election, this moment of backlash represents a window of opportunity for decentralized counter-movements working to create more substantively and authentically integrated schools. While the federal and national culture at this moment is hostile to school diversity, particularly related to racial diversity and even some attacks on social emotional wellbeing (M. Anderson, 2022), that is not the dominant political culture everywhere (Marshall et al., 1989). For example, polling from 2021 of over 1,000 respondents, weighted for national representativeness, demonstrated roughly half of Americans believe racially and economically diverse schools are important (Potter et al., 2021). Given considerations this may be dated with the quickly shifting political climates, more recent evidence from 2024, two surveys with similar sample sizes and diversity found that 71% of Americans favored reorganizing school districts to have more ethno-racially and socioeconomically diverse student bodies and equitable resource distribution (Lake Research Partners, 2024), and 50% supported redrawing district lines and expanding low-income housing in wealthier areas to create such diverse schools (Washington Post staff, 2024).[18]4/23/25 9:54:00 AMWhile surveys are subject to question framing bias (Nelson et al., 1997) and there is no guarantee such expressed preferences translate into actual action (M. Schneider & Buckley, 2002), this

[18] Representativeness weights were applied across a diverse range of categories like gender, age, race, educational attainment, region, etc. Notably, in the first survey, these coalitions crossed ethno-racial and party lines. Such surveys may be subject to self-report bias, measurement error (estimated between 2 and 3 percentage points), framing, and other biases, but they still provide a meaningful context for growing recognition of integration's importance and the motivation to act.

time is not one for abandoning all hope, especially for contexts looking to engage in this work as a form of resistance.

Rooted in racism, residential segregation remains prevalent by systemic design (Rothstein, 2017) and, alongside potential downstream transportation concerns, is an important constraint to school integration. On a hopeful note, creating racially and socioeconomically representative schools—one facet of truly integrated schools—may be more possible today, given reductions in housing segregation within metro areas since 1991 (Owens & Reardon, 2024). Possible mechanisms driving increased proximity include immigration (Hwang, 2015), affordable housing supply shortages (Frey, 2022), gentrification in city spaces, (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021), and migration of the global majority into the suburbs (Frey, 2022). Furthermore, simulations show that there are geographically feasible pathways, like redrawing school and district lines, to address school segregation without long commutes (Monarrez & Chien, 2021). Another study showed a median 14% reduction in racial segregation through redrawing elementary school attendance boundaries and relocating roughly 20% of student placements, with an overall reduction in travel time (Gillani et al., 2023).

With this in mind, community members, policymakers, and school administrators have failed to leverage increases to housing diversity, likely due to unfettered school choice, private school options, districting/zoning decisions, secession, lack of available transit, and political challenges (Castro et al., 2022; Monarrez et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2019). For instance, multiple redistricting or rezoning case studies to maximize spatial diversity have demonstrated that this process triggered political uproar (Bill, 2024; Castro et al., 2022; McDermott et al., 2015; Mendez & A. Quark, 2023; WXII

Greensboro/Winston-Salem, 2025). Furthermore, if passed such initiatives may not automatically translate to classroom-level diversity. For instance, white supremacy could take new forms with privileged parents pursuing private school options, increases to school choice without controls, and/or the implementation of specialty programming or tracking, all essentially perpetuating the problem (Billings et al., 2018; Conger, 2005; Diem et al., 2019). Within this historical and present context and the failings of past desegregation efforts, this paper will justify the lack of substantive integration as the policy problem, which I define through a 5R+1 framework.

Methods

This theoretical paper incorporates a review of evidence relating to the 5R + 1 substantive school integration framework in addition to a description of direct applications. First, I conducted a comprehensive search of empirical and theoretical literature on representative racial and intersectional enrollment, equitable resource distribution, restorative justice, representation in staffing, curriculum, policy, language, etc., relationships, and civic engagement opportunities. Specifically, I entered search terms in quotations in combination with the Boolean operator AND followed by “education” AND “meta-analysis” OR “systematic review” into Google Scholar. Search terms included segregation, desegregation, school funding, teacher quality, restorative justice, teacher race match, representative workforce, representative curriculum, relationships, student-teacher relationships, and civic engagement. This initial step helped ensure the incorporation of a wide range of studies. I prioritized more recent literature (mostly in the last five years, between 2020 and 2025) and incorporated pieces of literature that were highly cited within literature review sections.

For each of these components, I incorporated secondary sources to provide examples of the application of each component. These examples primarily draw from secondary sources describing the work of districts, charter, as well as magnet schools, and housing organizations. The majority of these examples are members of the Bridges Collaborative, a non-profit working to support those pursuing substantive integration and to provide a face for the collective movement. I mostly consulted the website of the Bridges Collaborative and a recent evaluation of the organization. Through reading more about partners in public-facing documents and searching within their websites, I was able to fill out examples for each category. Additionally, when applicable, I used background knowledge on districts, schools, and other organizations to fill the needed gaps.

Next, I employed a similar search strategy to justify the critical participatory action research (CPAR) component of the combined framework (see Appendix A). Similarly, I searched “critical participatory action research” AND “education” AND “meta-analysis” OR “systematic review.” Results from this search helped explain the CPAR process itself (question generation, data collection, analysis, product creation and dissemination, and action), justify the use of this approach, gain insight into potential interest holders that could be included in the process (e.g., students, families, teachers, etc.), and understand levels of their participation (e.g., does an interest holder initiate or the researcher, are they full co-researchers or does one group lead). Finally, I apply these lessons to a hypothetical example of what this process could look like from the perspective of a community group looking to initiate a CPAR project to create more substantively integrated schools. Overall, this paper provides a roadmap for interest holders and researchers looking to create effective action toward truly integrated schools.

Results

The following section provides the results from my examination of the empirical justifications for the 5R+1 framework. I then provide examples of mostly schools and districts attempting to implement the framework of at least certain components. Next, I provide an overview of how CPAR can be used by advocates to implement such changes with a hypothetical example.

Racial and Intersectional Enrollment

Current arguments around the need for diverse racial enrollment involve the rigorous evidence on the harms of segregation, the benefits of past desegregation efforts, and the emerging literature base on the benefits of diverse schools. First, schools today are highly segregated along lines of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and in terms of rates of change, segregation appears to be increasing within the largest school districts (Owens et al., 2022; Owens & Reardon, 2024). Such segregation correlates with opportunity and achievement gaps. For example, one study incorporated all third through eighth-grade standardized test scores from the 2008-09 school year to the 2018-19 school years, leveraging within and between district segregation across grades and years. They found that achievement gaps associated with ethno-racial segregation were explained entirely by racial differences in school poverty levels (Owens & Reardon, 2024; reardon et al., 2022). Specifically, the levels as well as growth in achievement gaps are most distinct when there is a stark divergence between wealthy White and poor Black students (Reardon, 2016; Reardon et al., 2024), indicating the distinct impact of anti-Blackness and poverty. Additional work indicates that increases in segregation increase achievement gaps (Matheny et al., 2021) and that there are racial gaps within schools and

classrooms (cite). This is why substantively integrated schools are needed to avoid the replication of such inequities across various levels. In conclusion, this work indicates that concentrating white and economically privileged students in one set of schools and Black, Hispanic, and low-income students in another set of schools results in inequitable academic outcomes, which have long-lasting wellness, economic, and other consequences (Heckman et al., 2016).

Beyond well-documented outcome gaps, the conversation around segregation has shifted toward opportunity gaps or differentials in important inputs that contribute to such outputs (Carter & Welner, 2013). For example, school funding, which rigorous evidence demonstrates improves student outcomes (Jackson et al., 2016), is an input that is inequitably allocated within a segregated school system (Weathers & Sosina, 2022). Specifically, districts serving high concentrations of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are associated with less adequate funding compared to more privileged districts in the same metro area (Baker et al., 2022). Another important input, teacher quality (Chetty et al., 2010, 2014), also appears to be inequitably distributed, with novice teachers more likely to work in schools with high concentrations of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students (James & Wyckoff, 2022). There are also disparities in student-teacher race match for global majority students that can impact academics (Rasheed et al., 2020), school discipline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), and a sense of belonging (Carter, 2024).

One may respond to such inequities with the policy solution of addressing resource disparities (within and outside education) without addressing *de facto segregation*. This argument fails to account for political will as well as the goal of

creating a functioning pluralistic democracy. First, given largely segregated histories (McGhee, 2021) and current trends of opportunity hoarding (Hanselman & Fiel, 2016; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020), addressing these opportunity gaps appears highly unlikely in segregated contexts. In other words, separate will likely not be equal, nor equitable (where more is given to those with the most need). In a famous piece on interest convergence, legal scholar Derrick Bell (1980) theorized that equitable social change can only occur and sustain itself if those in power also benefit. Assuming the political will for equitable resource distribution, to schools with high concentrations of historically marginalized students, there likely would still be backlash, given historical trends and mindsets of those in power that educational funding is zero-sum (McGhee, 2021). Even assuming that organized coalitions could counteract backlash, do we want to live in a country, where we are largely separated by identity, especially within civic institutions like schools? Many scholars would say no, given that education is the basis of a functioning pluralistic democracy (Blum & Burkholder, 2021; Dewey, 2011). This is not to diminish the need for affinity spaces, especially for the historically marginalized, but to acknowledge that the just future of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dreams, will likely have to occur together (McGhee, 2021).

Furthermore, past desegregation efforts’ equitable consequences for Black and Mexican American/Latine students support this argument. For instance, court-ordered desegregation increased school diversity and generated improved long-term educational outcomes (e.g., reduced dropout rates, increased attainment, etc.), health, and earnings outcomes for Black students, without harming white students, thus making this an equitable policy (Anstreicher et al., 2022; Guryan, 2004; Johnson, 2011; Orfield et al.,

2008; Owens & Reardon, 2024; Wells & Crain, 1994). For Black families, these benefits even had lasting inter-generational impacts, with some evidence of the driving mechanism being increases to school funding (Johnson, 2011). Additionally, there is some causal evidence of academic gains for Mexican-American or Latine students following court-ordered desegregation plans (Antman & Cortes, 2021). Despite these equitable impacts on important outcomes, the U.S. has largely failed to achieve and sustain diverse schools (Owens & Reardon, 2024).

Notably, past court-ordered desegregation efforts did not represent substantive integration and allowed harm to Black students during implementation. First, past efforts did increase diverse racial and ethnic enrollment, which is highly correlated with socioeconomic status. Specifically, between 1968 and 1980, there was roughly a 67 percent increase in the average percentage of Black students learning alongside white students nationally, with even larger increases (roughly 130 percent) in the South (Rivkin & Welch, 2006). Given white resistance in housing, transportation, and school policy, this progress was not sustained and, during the time of implementation, still embodied elements of white supremacy, which substantive school integration seeks to address. For example, desegregation efforts included the pushing out of Black teachers and administrators (Siddle Walker, 2019). Black students experienced increased rates of school discipline and special education classifications (enough to suggest over classification) (Chin, 2021) as well as harmful treatment by white youth and adults within desegregated spaces (Delmont, 2016). Future attempts to address parallel policy problems must account for potential harms during implementation and political resistance by the powerful, looking to hoard opportunity under scarcity mindsets (Hanselman & Fiel,

2016; Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). This will likely require working alongside a diverse coalition of interest holders to reimagine schools as truly integrated spaces (McGhee, 2021). This will likely involve cultivating support at each level of the policy interpretation process from federal, state, district, school, etc. Given differing political cultures, this implementation could look different across contexts.

Examples and Considerations

Today, there are examples of districts, schools of choice (magnets and charters), as well as housing non-profits that look to increase representative enrollment. For instance, two widely cited district-level examples include Louisville-Jefferson County and Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which have managed to sustain inter-district plans since the desegregation era. Given that roughly 60% of segregation remains between districts (Owens & Reardon, 2024), inter-district plans are highly effective at addressing segregation but more challenging for districts to implement today, given the lack of legal pressure to do so and transportation barriers. Some districts have looked to take advantage of diversity within district lines by rezoning school boundaries or implementing controlled-choice plans.

District 15, in Brooklyn, New York City, is an example of a district leveraging its existent diversity to increase ethno-racial and socioeconomic diversity within district lines, without the presence of court orders. The district, supported by an active family advocacy coalition, implemented a diversity plan to remove screens and add more controls to its district and charter lottery middle school program. These shifts occurred from 2018-2022 (indicates the fall year), after extensive community engagement, the hiring of a new DEI coordinator, etc. By the 2024 evaluation, the district’s middle

schools had moved from the second most socioeconomically segregated in NYC to the 19th. These changes came alongside minimal increases in travel time and a seven percent as well as a five percent increase in math and ELA scores, respectively. With this in mind, the district does not report racial segregation and the elementary schools remain the most socioeconomically segregated, given the changes did not target this level, indicating the need for continual improvement (District 15 Diversity Plan Evaluation & Reflection, 2024). Other ideas for addressing such segregation, at the elementary level particularly, include school rezoning and merging existent schools to have an upper and lower elementary campus.

Given these barriers and the structural pivot toward a more choice-oriented landscape, many contexts have explored singular school options to increase diversity. For instance, following retrenchment from inter-district desegregation efforts, many states pivoted to establishing magnet schools with specialty programs to generate interest convergence (Bell, 1980). One famous example is Hartford, CT, where following the 1996 state Supreme Court ruling in *Sheff v. O'Neill*, 90 million dollars were allotted toward day care, pre-K, family resource centers, and perhaps most importantly magnet schools to address inter-district segregation (Piliawsky, 1998). Such controlled choice plans have had some success, within the current political climate and legal landscape against forced desegregation. Another example of an extensive magnet system, with over 375 options as of fall 2023, is that of Miami-Dade County, which offers options such as STEM, public service, health, arts, business, etc., with the goal of ensuring increased diversity (*Open Enrollment for More Than 375 Magnet Programs Begins October 1*, 2023). Furthermore, in recent years, many charter schools–distinct from regular public

schools and magnets, given that they involve instituting a charter and are often subject to different regulatory bodies–have adopted a diverse-by-design model. One example is Blackstone Valley Prep, in Rhode Island, which draws from four districts, two that have high concentrations of poverty and two with high concentrations of wealth, to ensure diverse enrollment (*Home – Blackstone Valley Prep*, 2025). With these examples in mind, magnets and charters within controlled choice systems may fail to fully scale to create equitable solutions and most choice options do not have equity guardrails.

Additionally, implementing diverse magnet and charter schools, with existing housing segregation, requires transportation. Many of the options outside strictly public schools do not provide school bus transportation. Particularly at this moment with a shortage of bus drivers, districts have turned to alternatives like mutual aid carpool/walking networks and ride share, although these solutions do not feel tenable in the long term (Long, 2024). Winston-Salem/Forsyth County, which is involved in redistricting right now, has emphasized how redesigning school district lines can lead to some commute efficiency, in addition to increasing diversity, but housing segregation still limits the extent to which this is true (WXII Greensboro/Winston-Salem, 2025).

Other organizations have looked to address underlying housing segregation. One example is Elm City Communities, which exists in New Haven, Connecticut, a state with a progressive state constitution (Defrank, 2021). Elm City Communities has served as the housing authority connecting public, private, and advocacy entities in efforts to address zoning policies that perpetuate segregation at the community and school levels (AIR, 2022). Much of this organization’s work is raising awareness and building coalitions to

make progress across both housing and school lines, again within a state with state constitutional guidance supporting such work.

Finally, for those looking to shift demographic enrollment patterns, there are a few common considerations to mitigate white supremacy transforming the impact of a policy and undermining efforts. First, legal, housing, and transportation barriers make addressing representation challenging. While neighborhood segregation this has reduced in major metro areas, partially due to housing shortages, this has not translated to those major school districts becoming more diverse, in fact they have become more segregated (Owens et al., 2022). Even if addressed then, there are potential ways white and privileged families could avoid diverse classrooms, such as seeking special programming, implementing tracking policies, enrolling in private schools, or leveraging other choice systems within public settings. Furthermore, strategies like school mergers, redistricting, or rezoning could be countered with political and legal challenges. Some populations have gone as far as to secede from their local district and try to form a smaller one, capable of resource hoarding. For this model, that means there will be a need for community buy-in and taking proactive measures, when possible, to avoid the transformation of white supremacy. This could look like implementing anti-secession laws, where the people being left would have to vote in favor of the change, as one example.

Restorative/Transformative Justice

Diverse ethno-racial and socioeconomic enrollment is at the forefront of what many individuals think of when they think about an integrated school. A newer area of exploration, with substantive school integration defined here, is restorative and even

transformative justice, which is a necessary to address harm, specifically, harm across lines of difference that may arise in these settings. Restorative justice, which emerged from the criminal justice system, is defined as repairing the harm caused by a conflict (e.g., through check-ins, restorative circles, questions, and chats, peer mediation, etc.) as well as proactively preventing future harm (e.g., training teachers, students, families, creating restorative school structures, etc.) (Weber & Vereenooghe, 2020). Compared to ethno-racial and socioeconomic enrollment, there is only an emerging social science research base on restorative justice.

Currently, there are several meta-analyses and systematic reviews, which cover similar studies, and show overall, lean positive in terms of impact across various mostly socio-emotional outcomes. For instance, studies suggest that the use of restorative practices (RP) in schools reduce bullying and student-teacher relationships, although evidence remains limited, given that the majority of studies included are correlational and not nationally representative (Weber & Vereenooghe, 2020). Another more recent systematic review of the literature showed “that restorative practices are associated with reduced suspension rates, which suggest that school-based restorative practices are a promising approach to reducing exclusionary discipline outcomes.” (Samimi et al., 2023, p. 28). In this way, restorative justice can serve as a protective factor for students of Color, particularly Black students who experience disproportionate exclusionary discipline (Morgan, 2021; Welsh & Little, 2018). Additionally, two more studies report increases in school safety, conflict resolution skills, and build empathy for students and teachers (Gregory et al., 2017; Samimi et al., 2023). Finally, there is variability given implementation, and more work is needed on documenting the discrete practices and

measuring implementation fidelity (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Given that the combined model of this framework encourages working alongside interest holders, it is possible to address such implementation tracking and challenges. Finally, given the multi-faceted nature of this component an interdisciplinary team would likely be helpful.

Examples and Considerations

There are examples of both school districts and advocacy groups implementing this type of approach. For instance, Oakland, CA, has for years implemented restorative programming in partnership with various community organizations (*Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth - Community Initiatives*, 2017). Additionally, Boston Collegiate Charter School included restorative practice as a central component of their diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This has involved training all staff as well as some student leaders and engaging families in restorative work that allows for building relationships and repairing harm between individuals and communities. Specifically, they have created proactive, student-led community circles during advisory time, individual reflection followed by responsive circles and reintegration programming following harm (Elsayed, 2021). Finally, Integrate NYC, which provided the base for this framework, has transitioned into the organization Circle Keepers, with a renewed focus on restorative and even transformative justice (working to also overturn systems that repeatedly generate harm) healing practices (*The Circle Keepers*, 2025). Overall, in both the research and implementation space, restorative justice has yet to scale to the same degree as other components.

Implementing such initiatives comes with various considerations. First, restorative justice implementation will likely take monetary investment in training, curricula, and

potentially even evaluation resources. Furthermore, when looking to implement restorative practices, it is important to consider culture responsiveness and build support from families, who may be unfamiliar with this approach to harm. Furthermore, some abolitionists will critique restorative justice, when implemented on its own without any transformative components to address the root cause of harm. For this reason, restorative justice in this framework is presented as one of many elements, looking to get closer to the system-level roots of the harm itself.

Equitable Resource Distribution

The next component of substantive school integration, equitable resource distribution, like diverse enrollment, has a more extensive literature. While resources can encompass a wide range of inputs, this paper’s focus will largely be on funding, teachers, and curricular resources that are affected by national, state, and local contexts. First, school funding is a complicated system that incorporates local, state, and federal inputs. When considering all these dimensions, total school funding gaps are correlated to racial and geographic isolation (Baker et al., 2022), are again particularly linked to anti-Blackness within national, state, and local contexts. For instance, in terms of predicting a schools funding, “the optimal model includes an interaction term between % enrollment that is Black and population density and that for majority Black enrollment urban districts, the predicted costs per pupil are 20 to 50% higher when using models with this measure than when using models with race-neutral alternatives. While changes in cost estimates for these districts are large, aggregate national cost increases from including racial composition are 1.3 to 2.7% in most years.” (Baker, 2024, p. 1).

Regressive school funding systems have inequitable impacts. First, there is rigorous evidence that school spending impacts school achievement. For example, increases in per-pupil funding have a positive impact on student achievement, particularly for low-income students, who were ten percentage points more likely to graduate high school and experienced thirteen percentage points higher wages, with even intergenerational impacts down the line (Jackson et al., 2016). Additional evidence shows the power of investing early, in early childhood/elementary school, and how school finance equalization at this time also allows for intergenerational mobility (Biasi, 2023). In conclusion, money matters.

An additional resource input that matters is access to quality teachers/environments conducive to quality teaching. Within the current context of segregated schools, novice teachers are concentrated in high-needs environments, which is problematic given that novice teachers are less likely to be high quality(James & Wyckoff, 2022). From an equity perspective, the opposite would be true, and the most high-quality teachers would teach in the most high-needs environment; however, the system currently burns out novice teachers in high-needs environments with additional stressors. This can result in teachers leaving the profession or going to a school with lower needs that feels more sustainable, and sometimes even higher pay (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Finally, access to high-quality curriculum also dictates the resources available to students. For instance, tracking practices, which have a racialized history, have limited historically marginalized students from accessing quality curricula and programming (McCardle, 2020). This continues today with tracking as early as ECE, schools within

schools, specialized programming, etc. (Francis & Darity, 2021). Additionally, at higher levels there is a differential in advanced placement (AP) coursework access and enrollment along lines of race, ethnicity, and SES (*AP National and State Data*, 2023; Siegel-Hawley, Taylor, et al., 2021). Ideally, all students would have access to high-quality curricular resources with build-in differentiation strategies to avoid within school or classroom segregation through “ability” group separation.

Examples and Considerations

An example of a district engaging in de-tracking and building staff capacity, specifically, is Shaker Heights, a residential suburb in Ohio. In this school district, leaders have implemented a five-year strategic plan around sustainable staffing of a diverse workforce and building professional competencies (AIR, 2024). Part of building staff competency involves their ability to differentiate and support all students during de-tracking implementation from 2013-2020, which removed requirements for students to access honors and Advanced Placement courses. To ensure change is occurring on the ground after policy shifts, the district sets percentage targets to ensure that courses are representative across lines of race, socioeconomic status, and ability. Furthermore, there are organizations like Heal Together and Brown’s Promise working to ensure more equitable education funding through grassroots advocacy and in the case of the latter, legal pathways (Brown’s Promise, 2025; Race Forward, 2023).

Equitable resource distribution is another component that will likely not come easy. Funding formulas on federal, state, and local levels are exceedingly complicated and often regressive (*Making the Grade*, 2023). Given that it is challenging to take away money from those anticipating receiving such funds, more equitable funding may be less

politically possible with large re-investments in public education. Some in opposition to desegregated school contexts emphasize this type of equitable funding within segregated environments as the solution; however, given patterns of opportunity hoarding or privileged families finding ways to adapt to advantage their children this seems unlikely (Sattin-Bajaj & Roda, 2020). Interest convergence in critical race theory acknowledges this and states that equitable policy will only be sustained if those in power also benefit from the policy (Bell, 1980) These notions also apply to other forms of resources, like experienced teachers, high-quality curricular offerings, technology access, facilities, etc. When looking to equitably distribute such resources, it is important to mobilize coalitions toward increased investment, then understand community need and context to appropriately allocate funds, and lastly evaluate usage.

Inclusive Relationships

The next two components build on the importance of staffing and particularly emphasize relationships and representation. First, relationships can broadly exist in school spaces across multiple interest holders like students, teachers, staff, and families. A cross sectional empirical systematic review indicates that relationships are correlated with student engagement (Quin, 2017). Furthermore, theoretically, schools seek to be a place where there are positive relationships across all those in the community to encourage holistic flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020). This section will particularly focus on relationships across lines of difference and the potential benefits according to contact theory.

The expansive body of literature relating to contact theory dictates that when two distinct groups interact across lines of difference and are working toward the same goals,

there can be reductions in implicit bias (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Some of the mechanisms identified within this literature are empathy and perspective-taking. This is particularly salient in diverse environments that can cause individuals to consider novel perspectives, as seen with interventions with pre-service teachers (Whitford & Emerson, 2019). In addition to these more passive perspective-taking exercises, other interventions include direct dialogues around areas of difference like race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc., and affinity groups with active listening activities for non-marginalized students, and trainings on how to combat micro-aggressions for marginalized students (Ramasubramanian et al., 2017). Finally, there are interventions that specifically address ethnic bullying in the case of more direct harm within relationships, which show promising results (Wu & Jia, 2023; Xu et al., 2020). Creating such positive and power-balanced relationships is crucial to reducing bias and promoting the understanding and trust needed for members within a pluralistic democracy.

Examples and Considerations

Two examples of implementing intentional interventions around relationships are the Citizens of the World and Larchmont Charter Schools, both in Los Angeles, CA. For instance, Citizens of the World Charter School seeks to build relationships with families across a wide variety of languages and creates both affinity and collective spaces for families to come together to engage in justice-oriented work relationally (Citizens of the World Los Angeles, 2023). At both schools, relationships and commitment to the mission of school integration are central to hiring and staff development. For example, at Larchmont interview protocols ask about staff’s views on diversity and once hired staff engage in both schoolwide and classroom-level work with coaches, self-paced online

modules, and group professional development to ensure that all staff are able to engage in equitable practices Furthermore, like Citizens of the World does with families, Larchmont, engages staff in affinity groups that specifically address issues like race and leverage expert teachers within the school to push staff knowledge and practice forward through teacher share-backs (AIR, 2023).

This relational and healing work can present many complications. While there are concrete skills that can be taught through practices like social-emotional learning, mindfulness, or psychological interventions, relationships are not a strict science. There are historical and structural forces that impact relationships at the individual level. For this reason, a mix of affinity groups and collectives may be helpful, to accommodate for the fact that those socialized in different identities may have different needs within the work (e.g., working to combat micro-aggressions versus working to unpack internalized supremacy). Broadly, a challenge to relationships across lines of difference, and school integration efforts in general, is that our highly inequitable systems create different realities, experiences, and power differentials. Contact theory hinges upon relatively equal power dynamics, so those implementing this process should strategize ways to reduce such power dynamics (e.g., equity sticks for participation, exposing children to diversity at a young age, ensuring representation).

Representation (in School Staff, Curriculum, Language, and Policy)

The past section alluded to representation through a staffing lens, but representation also encompasses curriculum and voice within policy decisions. For example, there is a broad literature on the power of a representative teaching force. Most literature exists within the student/teacher ethnic-racial match domain, which shows

positive impacts on student achievement, particularly for students of Color, who are less likely to experience such a match in school than their white peers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020). In addition to these academic benefits, there are also benefits in terms of reductions to disproportionate exclusionary disciplinary practice for Black students, perhaps linked to how the lack of match can impact teacher’s perceptions of behavior (Redding, 2019).

Furthermore, in addition to the lack of a representative workforce, there is also often a lack of representative curriculum, language, and voices within important decision-making bodies. First, there is currently a moment of backlash against efforts to bring in studies of non-white histories, like African American Studies, ethnic studies, and gender/sexual identity-related content (James C. & Desiree, 2024; Swann, 2024). Such censorship efforts in themselves indicate the power of students engaging in such representative curricula. Furthermore, some legislation allowing the banning of such course material has been passed partially due to a lack of representation among superintendents, school board members, state government, and even federal positions (Samuels, 2020). Embodying this element of representation would include allowing teachers, students, and others directly involved on the ground to have their voices not only at the table but also holding power within decision-making bodies.

Examples and Considerations

This representation, particularly of youth voice, has been a focus within New York City School integration movements (Gonzales & Naranjo, 2024). For example, IntegrateNYC and Circle Keepers are examples of elevating youth voice on policy issues relating to integration. Additionally, nationally, schools and districts have focused on

diversifying the teacher workforce through strategies like alternate certification/grow-your-own models, public recruitment campaigns, supporting teachers once hired, and setting target metrics (Putnam & Swisher, 2023). Furthermore, there has been a push to include more culturally responsive curriculum and even dual language programming options, which in the case of the Los Angeles Unified School District has allowed for more diverse school enrollments (Asson, 2024).

With these examples in mind, there are considerations for the implementation of the model. For instance, in the case of youth voice, organizations can have representation at a surface level, but this may not be accompanied by any power. Similarly, Black, Indigenous, Latine, Asian, etc. teachers, principals, and staff may not have the same power or support within the school system. Furthermore, the recent political context indicates the backlash to culturally responsive/affirmative curriculum through processes like book bans and other forms of classroom censorship (Swann, 2024). Finally, while dual language programming can enhance diversity on a school level, this may not translate to more diverse classroom environments or even further segregate the greater district context due to family sorting patterns (Asson, 2024).

Finally, there are communities where the majority may not believe in these equitable aims. In theory, this process would be merging diverse communities, where there may not be a clear majority opinion in opposition. When this is the case, the process of working toward justice is one of education. Furthermore, some communities may be better prepared to implement these efforts at this moment and more quickly. Perhaps, looking to start some of this work in places with an existing community with aligned

goals, which will be discussed more in depth in the CPAR section. As the timeline illustrates, this process will be a continual battle.

Civic Engagement Opportunities

Finally, the addition of the input of civic engagement opportunities originates first from the theoretical claim on the purpose of public schools, broadly. For instance, many conflicts within education policy, school integration work being one example, can be traced back to conflicts in underlying goals. For example, those who view education as an individual good, consumed for social mobility, a collective good to promote social efficiency more broadly, or a collective good for democratic equality (Blum & Burkholder, 2021; Labaree, 2000). This paper operates from the perspective that public schools should foster collective flourishing within a pluralistic democracy (i.e., a coexisting, diverse collective body, approach to governing, and culture of shared power) (E. Anderson, 2013). At this moment, with the decay of democratic norms and lack of power balance, democratic engagement is needed. This prompted the addition of direct civic engagement opportunities to the substantive integration framework. This input to the framework requires providing opportunities to support students' civic development. Such activities could take the form of debate, structured dialogue, youth participatory action research, field trips, arts, service learning, political/social movement involvement, governing opportunities, etc. (Galston, 2007), which are not explicitly encompassed in previous categories.

Like restorative justice, civic engagement opportunities within school settings have only an emerging empirical evidence base. Currently, the US underinvests in civic education, with investments of only 50 cents per student per year, with only five states

having requirements in middle school and 37 having high school requirements (Allen & Ong Whaley, 2024). Furthermore, only 22 percent of students demonstrated proficiency in civics on the NAEP and within these low levels, there were disparities across lines of ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status, reflective of larger systemic disparities (NAEP, 2023). There are challenges to researching in this space. For instance, civic curriculums vary across states, which poses threats to generalizability. Furthermore, the outcomes extend beyond more easily measurable test scores (e.g., sense of belonging, safety, critical thinking, civic participation beyond voting). With this said, one empirical systematic review within K-12 and university settings demonstrates that direct civic engagement opportunities (six of the seven qualifying studies related to direct instruction, and one was a semester working in a general assembly setting) are positively correlated with non-voting forms of civic engagement, like petition signing (Manning & Edwards, 2014). This study, which includes quantitative studies almost all related to direct instruction, does not capture civic engagement opportunities as a whole.

Beyond direct instruction, civic engagement can include other inputs. For example, civic engagement opportunity that localities could incorporate is debate programming. There is some initial evidence on the benefits of debate for middle and high schools on critical thinking skills and college-going (Schueler & Larned, 2023), and the need to continue to study which opportunities may be best for encouraging this important skill for students. Other experiential strategies like student government, field trips (Djonko-Moore & Joseph, 2016), and experiential learning (Qolamani, 2024) also show positive impacts. Additionally, one study links interacting in diverse spaces themselves as a civic intervention. This meta-analysis within higher education finds that

diversity is correlated with increases to civic attitudes and engagement, and notably, the magnitude of the effect was greater due to the mechanism of fostering interpersonal relationships, than the curricular experience itself (Bowman, 2011). This evidence demonstrates how civic engagement can intersect with other facets of the framework like relationships and diverse enrollment. Finally, localities should look to providing students opportunities where they can express not only voice but power (Gonzales & Naranjo, 2024). This could look like experiences like youth participatory action research that require to lead democratic decision-making (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Examples and Considerations

An example of a non-profit engaging in the creation of civic learning opportunities for youth is Epic Theatre Ensemble in NYC (highlighted in paper two). This organization trains students in research methods and helps them create a play on a relevant civic issue. Additionally, they present to audiences related to policy and facilitate dialogue. These activities all help youth foster skills needed for a pluralistic democracy. Furthermore, youth participatory action research (YPAR) curricula model similar practices of democratic teaching. I have been able in my own work to support a partnership with a local City Council that engages youth in studying a problem of their choice and having the opportunity to present what they learned. One of the past projects involved addressing tracking processes that created segregated learning environments within a local high school.

The considerations for civic engagement opportunities echo considerations from other components of the framework. For instance, civic engagement opportunities are colored by power dynamics, in whose voice is heard (Daramola et al., 2023). Particularly,

if civic engagement opportunities are completed after school, those participating may not be representative of the entire school. Furthermore, while this component is timely, it will likely also face backlash within an anti-democratic political climate. Facilitators of such engagements may also have hesitations in providing such activities due to fear of backlash from the administration and families. These types of activities, especially with diverse groups, can be challenging but extremely important work at this time.

This overview of each component of the 5R +1 framework presented specific strategies for implementation and anticipated challenges. When implementing this framework, interest holders, should be careful of piecemeal approaches that do not embed values of equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, etc., into all forms of programming. This will likely require implementing all components; however, the timing of implementation, what to prioritize first, and specific strategies, can be left up to the community pursuing such change. In this way, the implementation of the 5R +1 framework allows for flexibility, without compromising on the overarching goal of substantive integration. Table 2 provides a summary of these various facets, given the information outlined above.

Table 2: Summary of 5R +1 of Substantive Integration, Strategies, and Challenges

5R+ 1 Component	Strategies	Challenges
***R**acial and Intersectional Enrollment*	-Start early, with intentionally diverse ECE -School mergers -School rezoning -Redistricting -Housing solutions -Diversity considerations to open enrollment -Intentionally diverse schools of choice	-Political challenges -Transportation -Legality -Individual schools and within district solutions failing to address the majority of existing segregation -District secession

	-Professional development supports for educators	-Within school segregation emerging -Unfettered choice resegregating -Shift to private/parochial options
***R**estorative and Transformative Justice*	-Full curricular shifts -Family engagement -Circles -Peer dialogue -Alternate consequences -Adjust systems causing harm	-Political backlash and community buy-in -Staff training -Financial and time investment into implementation before and during school day
*Equitable **R**esource Distribution*	-Shift funding formulas -Look at spending of soft money resources (PTA funds, after school resources offered, etc.) -Increase access to programming (e.g. IB, AP, after school etc.) -Incentivize experienced teachers to go to more high-need contexts	-Many legal and political layers (district, state, and federal funding, plus school board dynamics) -Federal enforcement mechanisms -Lack of high-quality curricula with differentiation resources -Supporting teacher retention
*Inclusive **R**elationships*	-Engage wide variety of interest holders in bonding activities -DEI, empathy, and SEL work	-Lack of curricular/professional development supports -Political or threats of legal pushback
***R**epresentation (School Staff, Curriculum, Language, and Policy)*	-Intentional staff recruitment and retention -Reducing barriers to curricular access (e.g., detracting) -Translation services -Dual language programming	-Lack of supports for teachers/staff of Color -Balancing with affinity spaces -Political backlash -Lack of resources to implement certain curricular offerings -Ceding power

	-Variety of interest holders' voices represented in decision making processes	-Increased voice, still not leading to increased power or change
Civic Engagement Opportunities	-Creating opportunities during and after school (e.g., student government, civics courses, debate, arts, YPAR, community-engaged learning activities, service learning, participation in social movements/politics)	-Teacher training -Time for facilitation with other pressures -Finding funding/supportive partners -Ensuring relevance, empowerment, and representation within such activities

Rethinking the Role of Research: CPAR Approaches to Create Truly Integrated Schools

Given the sense of urgency for change, particularly at this moment, many school integration researchers may be frustrated with the lack of change. For instance, schools remain segregated and underfunded despite robust research on the harms of these dynamics. Traditional policy research, based on the technical-rational paradigm, has failed to make lasting change on issues related to segregation, desegregation, and integration signal the need to shift strategies. As mentioned, collective organizing at the grassroots level has promoted successful legal and policy change at higher levels. Researchers have the opportunity to fuse this approach of local level empowerment, direct action, and policy with research and evaluation by pivoting away from traditional, Western approaches.

Specifically, critical participatory action research (CPAR) may provide an alternative. This approach lies at the intersection of both critical and participatory

paradigms, which have unique ontological assumptions (theories of reality and what can be captured within research) and epistemological assumptions (theories of knowledge and its relationship to the researcher) compared to the assumptions of post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms. They also differ in their theories of policy change, relocating power from institutional processes to more participatory and community-based change. Specifically, critical and participatory paradigms embrace more subjectivist and co-constructed versions of reality, with critical theorists emphasizing the role of values and power mediating researcher findings and participatory theorists emphasizing more collective experiential context mediating findings (Denzin et al., 2024). CPAR, is a hybrid of critical and participatory paradigms, with these underlying assumptions. Researchers within these paradigms can use multiple methodological approaches (e.g., case study, ethnography, survey analysis, etc.), with common practices like research reflexivity or reflecting on positionality and centering justice within the context of socio-historic legacies and systems of power (Rahman & Kazmi, 2024). Finally, following methodological implementation and analysis, CPAR aims to go beyond critique and promote some form of collective action (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Within CPAR approaches, researchers work alongside on-the-ground interest holders through a relatively democratic process of knowledge construction and action. CPAR evolved from action research (Adelman, 1993; Lewin, 1946), participatory (Rappaport, 2024), and liberation traditions (Freire, 2021). Such approaches center action and work *with*, not *on,* populations impacted by the policy problem, and in that way mirror social movements which Anyon (2014) argues have historically been the most efficacious for expanding the rights and freedoms for historically marginalized

communities. Furthermore, they value local and technical knowledge by using knowledge from those closest to the policy issue in combination with the technical knowledge of the researcher throughout the process (Brown, 2022; Fine & Torre, 2021; Hacker, 2013). Furthermore, the research team combines these two forms of knowledge through a cooperative and democratic approach to the research process, which culminates in localized action (Fine & Torre, 2021). Initiation of the process and participation in the process can vary (Brown, 2022). For instance, interest holders can initiate researcher assistance or vice versa, and such interest holders can be heavily involved at every phase of the research process, minimally involved at some phases, etc. Furthermore, at the end of the research process, there is an action component. This helps promote the translation of findings, a common challenge for researchers producing literature that may not be accessible by practitioners (Fine & Torre, 2021). In addition to translational challenges, current scholarship often fails to work alongside local interest holders, which can help produce contextually and culturally relevant findings with minimized political backlash.

One example of a real study that employed CPAR to address one of the components of integrated schools—a representative teacher workforce—demonstrates how CPAR can facilitate action-oriented change. In this study, researchers at a university with a teacher education program worked alongside community and school partners to better recruit teachers of Color and ensure curricular offerings to pre-service teachers aligned with an anti-racist framework (Hyland et al., 2025). Through scholar activism one higher education university launched a new teacher preparation program and facilitated the implementation, evaluating the project for success across metrics such as ensuring teachers understand systemic racism and can identify/intervene within patterns

of discrimination. This university group partnered with district interest holders and were able to successfully implement the anti-racist teacher training curriculum and give students a space to engage in praxis, where they implemented these lessons within school districts alongside a mentor. As a result, over the 8 years of implementation, this program reached over 33,000 students and serves as one example of how community-engaged research and evaluation can have an impact (Hyland et al., 2025).

This is only one example with a particular set of interest holders, and this proposed use CPAR really emphasizes the theory of change that local knowledge and grassroots, collective organizing outside of the system, in combination with inside systems shifts, has generated lasting change on social justice issues, specifically within the field of education. For instance, the disarray of the Progressive Era resulted in social movements that pushed for the creation of public schools and later public libraries, all of which have improved educational opportunities for historically marginalized groups (Anyon, 2014). Later during the Civil Rights Movement, groups like the NAACP, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), organized both outside and inside the system to promote legal, policy, and moral change. A specific example, is a group of such activists in Jackson, MS, who organized to form Head Start, which became a federal movement (Anyon, 2014). Additionally, the Black Panthers in Oakland, CA, began providing school breakfast, an initiative that similarly translated later to a federal policy (Abioye, 2021). Furthermore, student activists at San Francisco State and UC Berkley organized during this same Civil Rights period, employing practices like strikes, to create ethnic studies in higher education, which exists today across many universities (Beach, 2021) .

For more contemporary examples of education-related reforms, *A Match on Dry Grass* provides additional context of how outside collective organizing can generate change within systems as well as shape social norms (Warren & Mapp, 2011). One specific example to highlight is a group of parents at one high school in Denver, particularly from 2002-2006, looking for not only a voice in the political process but power to ensure an equitable and inclusive education for Black and Brown students as well as to avoid school closing. The families looked to understand the problem, analyze the impact, and provide concrete solutions. Within the process, they involved those directly impacted: young people. This intergenerational distributed and analyzed a youth-created survey and strategically shared the findings with the media as well as policymakers, which ultimately led to reforms as well as youth empowerment.

Within the field of school integration, specifically, grassroots movements, schools, districts, non-profits, and research collectives have been important players in this work for school diversity and integration. For instance, the intergenerational coalition, IntegrateNYC, created the 5R framework and helped push for local policy change (*The History of the Movement for School Integration*, 2020). More recently, two spin-off projects have commenced including the Peer Defense Project, to empower youth with legal tools to fight injustice (Peer Defense Project, 2025) and Circle Keepers, to empower youth with tools for healing while fighting injustice (*The Circle Keepers*, 2025). In Washington, DC, Learn Together, Live Together, is another grassroots organization that organizes to inform and take political action involving school integration (Learn Together, Live Together, 2017). Additionally, Integrated Schools, a grassroots coalition of families, is an example of a national coalition. Today they have a popular podcast and

local chapters, which help empower families, specifically white and economically privileged families, to choose global majority schools that may be under-resourced/enrolled. Furthermore, they look to unpack white supremacy and give families the tools to work toward substantive integration in their context (*Integrated Schools: About Us*, 2022).

Additionally, there are schools (e.g., magnets, intentionally diverse charters, etc.) and districts doing such work. For example, Brooklyn District 15 underwent community-driven diversity planning/implementation. A recent evaluation showed that this process was effective at increasing socioeconomic balance within district middle schools without increased commute times. Qualitative data showed a reduction in stress for children undergoing middle school choice processes, increases in friendships across socioeconomic status, and students reporting strategies of how to handle conflict (District 15 Diversity Plan Evaluation & Reflection, 2024). Community activism initiated D15’s work, whereas New Haven, CT, had additional pressures from a change to the state constitution and looked to inter-district magnet schools to address the issue, which some argue is not sufficient to address the problem (Peak, 2019). With this in mind, most holistic inter-district schemes were established in the South, under court orders pre—*Milliken*, with two prominent examples including Louisville/Jefferson County and Charlotte/Mecklenburg, etc. (Putman, 2022; Winston Griffith & Freedman, 2022).For additional examples, one can refer to the Bridges Collaborative website for schools, districts, and even housing organizations engaged in such work (American Institutes for Research, 2024; *Bridges Collaborative*, n.d.).

Such past and current examples all have stories of political and legal backlash, although there is some variation across sociohistorical and geographic context. For instance, the era of Civil Rights legislation and *Brown I*, *II, Swann, and Green* Court rulings, etc., were followed by backlash (e.g., white flight, busing protests) and legal counter-mobilization efforts (e.g., *Milliken*) (Delmont, 2016). Such effective counter-movements also worked at various levels within and outside the system and continue today. For instance, more conservative coalitions have organized efforts to appoint state, federal, and Supreme Court justices, to capture local newspapers/electronic sources of information, and to create parents’ rights movements, like Moms for Liberty, etc. (Hemmer, 2016; Kearl & Mayes, n.d.; Teles, 2012). Finally, the 2024 election results and corresponding executive order policies, symbolize a moment of backlash. As in the past, backlash results from threats to existing power structures within multiple arenas (e.g. policy, law, housing, schools, media, etc.) (Breyer & Vignarajah, 2022; Delmont, 2016; Winston Griffith & Freedman, 2022). With this swing of the pendulum, sustaining change and counteracting resistance requires continued vigilance and community-based social movement pressure (Anyon, 2014). For example, in the Charlottesville Albemarle County region, a coalition of scholar-activists help support the development of an anti-racist curriculum in response to a 2017 white supremacist rally, indicating the swing of the pendulum. As a result, community activists and youth, working together in a YPAR model, had an impact on equity initiatives such as creating a school district-wide anti-racist policy (Beach et al., 2023; Heinecke et al., 2025). This example demonstrates the power of community-based social movements exerting pressure to promote action toward localized substantive integration initiatives.

With the current swing in the other direction, however, there is a need to continue to monitor how whiteness and power evolve to transform the implementation of education equity and justice efforts. Additionally, collective and relational engagement with interest holders (e.g., families, teachers, schools, voters, partner organizations, etc.) can serve as a protective force (Anyon, 2014; Yosso, 2005). The next question becomes, where can academic researchers fit into such movements pushing for interdisciplinary action toward more truly integrated schools?

CPAR requires questioning the role of research and the researcher in such movements. For instance, those from more post-positivist traditions may say that supporting various interest holders impacted by an issue in action should be separate from “unbiased” knowledge production (Denzin et al., 2024; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In these instances, researchers may benefit from questioning their positionality, or how elements of scholarship are embedded within a sociopolitical/historical context and how their own intersectional identities impact how they engage with a policy issue in ways that can never be fully unbiased (Milner, 2007; Rahman & Kazmi, 2024). Next, researchers may question if policy problems can be solved with technical solutions and “rational” decision-making and if so, under what conditions. In the case of school segregation, one could argue, if this approach were true, then the existing strong evidence base would have resulted in policy change. CPAR scholars provide an alternative conceptualization of change, which acknowledges the complexity of the policymaking process that extends beyond rational decision-making to include considerations like power, politics, context, values, interpersonal connectivity, etc. (L. Bell & Stevenson, 2006). Furthermore, CPAR begins to account for these considerations through democratic

inclusion of interest holders in creating relevant research questions, engaging in the research process, and ultimately, culminating in context-specific action.

Additionally, CPAR is likely well-positioned for researchers looking to get involved in promoting and sustaining substantively integrated schools. In CPAR, researchers could work alongside local interest holders, not only to document a problem but also to find interdisciplinary, data-informed, and action-oriented strategies to promote and sustain ethno-racially representative schools. Finally, as seen in D15, researchers can assist in the evaluation of such actions once implemented. Like school demographics, funding can be easily tracked numerically, but likely still requires the incorporation of localized knowledge, to reveal additional complexities, such as less visible trends like inequitable PTA funding (Murray, 2019). CPAR helps to equip interest holders with action-oriented tools to work toward the goal of more equitable school funding. Furthermore, other components of the 5Rs are less easily captured through numerical benchmarks and require a mechanistic understanding to improve implementation. For instance, effective implementation of relationships, restorative justice, civic engagement, etc., are exceedingly complex, and while quantitative survey data can provide helpful information surrounding school climate across racial groups, such data may fail to capture the nuances of interest holder experiences, etc. More participatory processes can not only incorporate the experiences of interest holders but even democratically empower them to be agents of change within education research and policy (Freire, 2000; Levinson et al., 2009).

Finally, such participation will likely be necessary to attain and sustain change with the potential for white supremacy to transform and replicate past problems in novel

forms. Strictly critical approaches exclude any forms of participation and assume that high-quality research will translate into socially just policy (Frisby, 2024). Those within critical participatory traditions would rebuke this line of thinking and name that translation will likely be most effective with smaller-scale projects that involve the community and allow for flexibility. A prominent advocate for building evidence through smaller-scale studies across multiple contexts is the famous statistician Lee Cronbach (Shadish et al., 1991). Such smaller-scale implementation allows for comparative work and customization of interventions. Within the context of implementing the 5Rs +1, this could look like having similar overarching values/a guiding framework, but allowing for customization of the framework based on local context, history, political culture, etc. (Wirt et al., 1988). Allowing for flexibility also helps combat against various forms of white supremacist backlash, which likely will shape the change possible, particularly at this moment with executive, judicial, and congressional branches actively opposed to diversity work, particularly those related to race.

CPAR and Substantive Integration Example

For the final section, I present a hypothetical example of what this process could look like in practice. Given that there are many potential variations in implementation, I limit the scope intentionally to a specific political culture and local level of implementation. More specifically, I operate with the example of a community organization, like a grassroots Integrated Schools chapter, initiating a CPAR process to implement the 5R +1 framework as reform at one district.

I select Charlottesville, VA, given my knowledge of a grassroots family activist organization in the area and the current elementary school rezoning process

(Charlottesville City Schools, 2025). Additionally, Charlotteville’s public school district has worked to document its history of segregation (Robertson, 2022) and acknowledged the role of white supremacy, following the 2017 rally (Beach et al., 2023; Heinecke et al., 2025). This alongside the recent election, shapes the modern political climate of this relatively progressive college town. Finally, the school system has retained a pro-DEI website, under an anti-DEI governor and the current administration, indicating some willingness to continue the work (Charlottesville City School Board, n.d.).

Next, I structure this hypothetical from the perspective of working with a grassroots organization, not the district directly, because their positionality gives them maximum flexibility in project construction during a national political climate sparking fear to even utter the word diversity. This choice means there is an increased possibility to demand more radical change that reflects the needs of those on the ground. The trade-off here is that such groups have less direct power within systems, but as aforementioned, this type of organizing has the power to pressure policymakers and mobilize collectives toward material change. This is not to say policymakers cannot be involved, they are simply not driving the process. For instance, depending on the district or school board leaders’ appetite, they could be included in aspects of the process, like data collection and dissemination.

As an academic working with community members, alongside intersectional identity differences, there is a need for relational work to minimize power differentials. Relationship-building is a priority in CPAR, which seeks to engage all in a power-balanced, democratic process (Fine & Torre, 2021). These relationships allow for trust,

co-learning, power-sharing, and reciprocity. Such relationships can take time, especially if there is an initial lack of trust (Christopher et al., 2008) and involve such skills like:

- “Ability to be comfortable with discomfort
- Sharing power; ceding control
- Trusting the process
- Patience
- Acceptance of uncertainty and tensions
- Openness to learning from collaborators
- Self-awareness and the ability to listen and be confronted
- Willingness to take responsibility and to be held accountable
- Confidence to identify and challenge power relations
- Positionality reflection”

(Cornish et al., 2023, p. 6). With this, commencing the process is easiest when there is community trust and knowledge established.

The first formal step in the CPAR process is community asset-mapping with the grassroots organization. This phase allows for assessments of power and the creation of a list of key interest holders in the space. As a community organization, this could look like identifying policymakers at the district, school, city council, school board, and local university level, as well as identifying other community organizations across the housing, health, and education sectors. This time also allows for an opportunity to consider which community interest holders will be included in the research processes going forward, to what extent they will participate (refer to Figure 1), and how these choices could affect future implementation. For example, the grassroots organizers and researchers can decide which set of interest holders (additional examples in Figure 1), who would like to engage, like teachers, students, etc. This could be from question generation to dissemination or one phase of the process, as full participants or only at a superficial level. These decisions will likely depend on context, power, relationships, timing/logistical barriers, and the

existing willingness to engage on these issues. At this time too, the grassroots movement could also decide if they would like assistance from researchers in their process.

Following this planning period, the organization would start developing questions with the 5R +1 framework as well as their community history/context as a loose guide. With a clear collective vision of where they would want a school or district to go, they can then move into the more formal research process. Question generation in this time would likely prioritize how to ensure first that the school rezoning could create more demographically representative schools. Next, additional research questions could take the form of evaluating existing programming (e.g., how do teachers, families, and students perceive current culturally representative curriculum/existing DEI initiatives) or looking toward advocating for adding a new intervention (e.g., how could the district infuse restorative and transformative justice into its current offerings or do better to assure the recruitment and retention of teachers of Color to support global-majority students). Ideally, the research questions would orient schools/districts to outcomes where they infuse all the 5R +1 components into their daily workings, but given capacity as well as community need, the organization may decide to have heavier emphasis on some over others. Additionally, these processes are not necessarily one-and-done, so it may make sense to focus on a few initiatives, evaluate them, and then move to the next step. Ideally, implementation would incorporate some degree of the components of the 5R +1 framework.

After the generation of questions, data collection and analysis begin, and in this time, it is particularly important for coalition building. When coalition-building and selecting samples for data collection, it is imperative to include a representative set of

voices. This time also requires flexibility, as data collection can be an iterative process. For instance, if there is emerging evidence of particular areas of push-back, then the research team can pivot to addressing points of concern through the process. Furthermore, at this time, starting to build relationships of trust and reciprocity is pivotal. Particularly in this example, this collective mobilization and coalition-building is important for the CPAR project’s success, given that those involved will likely lack formal power over decisions, then school/district leaders and/or school board members. With this said, community organizations have more flexibility in pushing for more radical change, and with broad enough grassroots support, can minimize potential backlash. Given trade-offs from working with either partner, this example focuses on more grassroots community organizing to pressure systems and generate lasting change, given past events. Additionally, I would recommend looking to contexts with similar political cultures. In this example, this could look like learning from a rezoning study in Richmond, to see what backlash may be expected in the dissemination of rezoning/other 5R-related recommendations (Castro et al., 2022; Siegel-Hawley, Castro, et al., 2021; Siegel-Hawley et al., 2017).

Finally, dissemination of findings and corresponding actions are perhaps the most pivotal in this process. While all points of this process represent largely democratic decision-making, this phase is the most challenging to agree on a set of actions within the research team and then work to convince others. There are various examples of engaging the community in processes like rezoning and seeing outcomes that reflect more moderate change proposals at the end of the process (Bill, 2024), alongside a political backlash (Winston Griffith & Freedman, 2022). This could look like organizing a

community-engaged coalition to present a plan to the school board and district to promote implementation. Finally, continuing to partner with universities can help in evaluating implementation, preventing attempts for white supremacy to transform policy implementation, and fortifying against future backlash.

Discussion

While it is impossible to predict every potential consideration relating to the framework itself, and perhaps even more uncertain, its implementation, this discussion section serves to address some of the potential concerns and considerations. First, the arguments presented in support of the content of the 5R + 1 framework at times rest on more theoretical evidence/claims than empirical. For instance, there is a much more robust research base supporting the harms of segregation and the benefits of past court desegregation orders. Questions remain if past desegregation benefits translate to today’s context, particularly given demographic shifts within the public school population (The Institute of Education Sciences, 2024). Within this framework, there is also strong evidence on the importance of school funding, teacher representation, relationships, and representative curriculum. The evidence base is still developing within restorative/transformative justice as well as various civic engagement opportunities. Finally, there are many nuances within each category to be explored and more exploration is needed within districts and schools doing all components at once. CPAR offers not only an opportunity to study such context but help create coalitions to push for this reality.

Next, when implementing this framework, there is consideration of how rigidly to adhere to the 5R +1. While the outlined inputs together are meant to provide more

justice-oriented protective factors, particularly for global majority students, there are multiple ways the framework could: 1) not cover all of the relevant protective factors needed by the community, 2) have some components that are more relevant than others to the community, 3) fail to translate from abstraction to the intended impact on-the-ground, due to the various levels of policy transformation. I want to acknowledge community-autonomy in reference to the first two points to tailor the framework to their needs. What is important to consider is if equity and justice are not infused at various levels, which the framework helps pinpoint, although it is not all encompassing to all nuances. This gets to the third point, that policy transforms at each level of implementation, especially when not coming from a bottom-up perspective. When top-down or perceived as such, plans are subject to more interpretations at each level of translation (e.g., federal, state, local, district, school, classroom) (Heinecke, 1997; P. Hall, 1995). Building bottom-up support takes time and can result in more messy deliberative processes.

Finally, there are questions of how feasible this process is with the power dynamics existing in the external context, which generates a sort of chicken or egg challenge. Some scholars present the argument that there will not be politically successful school integration efforts if greater systems and structures of economic inequality, minimal social safety nets, and lack of public trust persist. Others would counter that these hierarchical systems of power will not dissipate without efforts in school to structure the experiences of the next generation differently. There is likely validity to both arguments and the need for intentionality in implementation to support all students, but particularly historically marginalized students. This support must be holistic and promote empowerment, flourishing, belonging, etc.

Even in cases with goal alignment, there is further debate surrounding what level to intervene and how. This paper provides more localized examples, given varying contexts and the U.S.’s decentralized education systems. Furthermore, I emphasize a more bottom-up approach to pressure those at the top to implement change, but also with the idea that if the hearts and minds of a large enough coalition support the work, then there is a greater chance at lasting change. This does not negate the role of higher-level policy shifts (e.g., economic redistribution) but rather emphasizes that such change can be initiated by strategic bottom-up, community-based pressure. Finally, for researchers looking to engage in this work, thinking about whether working with a school, district, or community organization and how to structure the participation will likely shape the types of action possible. This model of change envisions community-based organizations working with or without district policy makers. Engaging with a grassroots movement, compared to working with a district, may offer a less direct connection to policymakers and there may be more concerns related to scalability. On the plus side, this choice allows for more flexibility because of mission alignment to push for within system changes. Overall, there is no singular path to this work, but this paper aimed to provide some helpful guiding premises, evidence, as well as considerations for creating substantively integrated schools. Finally, given the current regressive anti-equity political climate, I would advise focusing efforts and resources within communities with an appetite for this work. More progressive political cultures at the state and local context will likely allow for a more favorable conditions for the implementation of the 5R +1 framework.

Conclusion

Moves to more substantive integration models are constrained by broader climates of civilizational and structural racism (Scheurich & Young 1997) and white supremacy. This is evidenced by historical cycles of regression and value-based movements in American political culture that have transformed and compromised the equity policy intentions of the *Brown* decision in 1954 to the present. Since this time, desegregation policies have been based on problem definitions that fail to encapsulate the full extent of the issue. In addition, social science research approaches to desegregation themselves have been based on paradigms disconnected from action and change. Overall, this theoretical paper makes three key contributions for those looking to work toward substantive integration. First, I present a new definition of a policy problem (the lack of 5R +1 approaches) and solution through innovative research/evaluation approaches (localized CPAR approaches to research, implement, and evaluate the facets of substantive school integration). This is a contribution, given that much of the current research focuses on the policy problem of segregation and equates numerical school desegregation with true diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. Previous policy responses, like choice-oriented magnet schools, have failed to address the root of the problem reflecting the perpetuation of white supremacy transforming policy intentions in new ways such as compensatory programming or schools within schools. Today *de jure* segregation may be over but *de facto* segregation persists. Second, I justify this the alternative framework with empirical and theoretical literature. Third, I provide tools for researchers to connect with community interest holders to translate the new model into policy justice action within existing systems of power and sociohistorical contexts. Specifically, this paper justifies the use of critical participatory action research (CPAR)

approaches to investigate how to translate more holistic integration findings into practice, given such barriers. Finally, documenting examples of how this novel combined framework could inform how interest holders could engage in such work and create transformative change on the issue of substantive school integration.

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