

A Step Closer to Racial Equity: Towards a Culturally Sustaining Model for Community Schools

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Abstract

In this article, we explore community schools, as first theorized through community organizing, in relation to movements for racial justice in education to address the following question: How has educational equity been radically imagined by the community school movement in New York City to reframe how we understand success, meaningful school experiences, and the possibility for hope, healing, and racial equity in education?

Using ethnographic methods, we answer this question by examining what went into the grassroots commitments of organizers and the grassroots implementation of the community schools' strategy at the district level. This examination sets a context for exploring what we saw happening at the school level, where we observed community meetings with organizers and district officials and interviewed key stakeholders about their deep histories of advocating for equitable reform. Drawing on an abolitionist paradigm, we describe how organizers such as those in NYC, who were interested in transforming systems as a prerequisite to advancing freedom, were the first major advocates of the original community schools project.

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Valuing the knowledge and strength of communities that have survived and thrived in the face of centuries of oppression, we conclude that community stakeholders in collaboration with education workers, from organizers to students, envisioned a blurring of communities and schools as part of a strategy to build collective power that both exposes and challenges injustice.

Keywords

Latinx, identity, race, identity, anti-racist, subjects, culturally relevant pedagogy, subjects, African American students, urban education, immigrant students, school reform, youth development, trauma

To work against institutional disregard of Black life, new imaginaries are necessary and urgently needed, beginning with our language. Indeed, all the necessary code words for desiring to achieve justice are deeply tainted and have come to represent flawed practices in which Black people are repeatedly placed on the lowest rungs at the point of practice and institutionalized enactments. The language, then, of a desired justice requires a constant and shifting revision, a revision that remains steps ahead of our present coloniality. . . . Imagine anew, yet again, and always.

—Rinaldo Walcott (2018, p. 99)

The village will raise the children, and the children will raise the village.

—African Proverb, Unknown Author

In the 1960s, Black and Puerto Rican communities in New York City demanded community control of schools largely in response to the persistence of racial inequity post-*Brown* and (Maynard, 1970; Morris, 2012) and in recognition of the importance of self-determination as part of a Black liberation movement (Maynard, 1970). Parents and community organizations began to demand control of local districts, beginning with the takeover of a school board meeting in 1966, electing a people's board and issuing a statement on education and community control (Lewis, 2013). The New York City mayor's office allowed for the opening of three experimental districts through which (mainly) less economically advantaged Black and Puerto Rican communities gained increased control of their communities through school governance to fight for both better schools and better community

services (Lewis, 2013). While the teachers' union, was originally supportive, tensions arose over the request from community groups to transfer particular teachers and administrators out of the district. These tensions led to a 6-week teacher strike, withdrawal of support from the district, and eventually the termination of all three experimental districts. This conflict exposed the underlying racial tensions and power dynamics in NYC (Podair, 2002), highlighting the exclusion of Black people from political power and the deep resistance of those in power to supporting and building structures for community control.

Structural racism and market-driven reforms have since exacerbated patterns of exclusion and loss of community control (Lipman, 2013) as schools have been pushed to respond to metrics-driven punitive systems of school management (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). Under NYC mayor Michael Bloomberg, venture philanthropists took advantage of the schools as a frontier for new profits, using color evasive market logics to justify the expansion of charter schools (Scott, 2009). Driving a narrative that positioned schools, communities, and students in low-income neighborhoods of color as failing, the administration and privatizing forces increased school closures and punitive discipline policies (Ofer et al., 2009).

The election of NYC mayor Bill de Blasio presented an opportunity to reverse this trend and begin to bolster public schools as community-based institutions that can provide excellent educational opportunities. After strategic campaigning by organizations such as the Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) and others, de Blasio, in his first year in office, agreed to implement 100 community schools that leveraged the resources of communities to better serve their students (NYCCEJ, 2013). Organizers imagined community schools as a way to redress the deep educational debt owed to economically less advantaged Black and Brown communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006; NYCCEJ, 2013). The theory of community schooling draws on some of the liberatory thought that envisions schools as sites of community control that support well-being (Richardson, 2009).

Below, we explore NYC community schools in relation to the ontological visions of them first theorized through organizing efforts towards a framework that considers how they might be culturally sustaining spaces for students and their communities. Here, we examine what went into this commitment and the implementation of the community school strategy at the district level to set a context for exploring what we saw happening at the school level. We offer insights into this history from observations of community meetings with organizers and interviews with key stakeholders about the deep histories of advocating for equitable reform. This builds on recent research that considers the ways that community schools can move beyond

being simply sites of service provision to begin to address inequalities and support racially marginalized student's wellbeing and academic success (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019).

This visioning reflects on a history of using a community school approach for addressing racialized inequalities (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009; Richardson, 2009) and understands that part of liberatory practices includes transforming institutions to be controlled by and supportive of the people they serve (Berger et al., 2017). Valuing the knowledge and strength of communities that have survived and thrived in the face of centuries of oppression (Love, 2019), these education justice workers are part of an organizing tradition that sees strategies like implementing community schools as part of a broader strategy to build collective power that exposes and challenges multiple and intersecting forms of injustice (Freelon, 2018; Warren, 2014; Welton & Freelon, 2018). Community praxis, since the genesis of the settler colonial project in the western hemisphere, has pushed educators to grapple with short-term strategies that can support rather than contradict the longer-term vision of authentic freedom (Kaba, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017).

We briefly examine the theoretical space in which the New York City Community Schools Initiative (CSI) was dreamed up and how community organizers rallied to give life to their liberation dream. In addition, we describe the case of one community school in the South Bronx, Truth High School (THS), considering the opportunities and challenges of community schooling as a strategy for sustaining vulnerable students. The goal of this article is, then, to incorporate into the conversation of community schools the impulse that advanced out of the various racial equity cosmologies made whole through people fighting against top-down, Eurocentric, culturally destructive manifestations of schooling. In doing so, we address the following question:

How has educational equity been radically imagined by the community school movement in New York City to reframe how we understand success, meaningful school experiences, and the possibility for hope, healing, and racial equity in education?

Theoretical Framework

Our analysis is grounded in critical Black traditions of liberation in education (Dumas, 2016; Love, 2019; Smitherman, 1999). It blends tenets of Black Feminist thought (Collins, 2000, 2004; Roberts, 1999), which explain how structural and cultural forces reinforce stereotypes of low-income communities at the intersections of race and gender, while depoliticizing and obscuring root causes of inequity. These theories also help us understand how people

from non-dominant groups find ways to resist these systems—to heal themselves—performing what Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2004) calls “self-definition.”

From a critical Black and Black feminist perspective, the Black body is theory; thus, the performances of the Black body, which theorize Blackness into existence are everyday acts of resistance (Hartman, 2018; Kelley, 1993). These acts of theorizing radically imagine a Blackness, and thus a “self,” that exists outside the white gaze. By demanding an end to oppressive structures, these acts also help us to see how people radically imagine means of participation that are more attentive to power and difference. Black feminist ways of knowing (Roberts, 1999), further, illuminate both survival and healing as acts of theorization (hooks, 2006; Lorde, 1984), expressing Black futurities—which are themselves both magical and theoretical—where broken bodies, histories, and communities are made whole in the midst of institutional and ideological subjugation (Spillers, 1983).

Ideological subjugation is, however, complex, never bound to time or space. Fanonian post-colonial theory (cf. Fanon, 1959) helps reveal the complex ways in which structures present themselves as just, but also as apparatuses that can reinstate oppressive power dynamics particularly for women of color, using strategies such as a welfare state as a form of discipline, control, and shame (Hughes, 2018; Ocen, 2011; Piven & Cloward, 2012). Transsecting Black Crit and Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1989), Black post-colonial theory is attentive to the ways that schools have been positioned globally as sites of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014), where the weight of overlapping systems of oppression become stacked against multiply-vulnerabilized Black bodies. The intersection of such ideas illuminates the racialized and gendered ways that education often focuses on disciplining Black and Brown bodies, while also shaping opportunities for resistance (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fanon, 1959; Kirkland, 2013; Morris, 2012; Wun, 2016). These ideas also lead us to be critical of approaches to school reform aimed at “fixing” youth and communities of color as they tend to operate from an ideal of conformity to white and middle class norms (Morris, 2012) and rely on ideas about the need to always retreat from the so-called *brokenness* of Blackness (Dumas, 2014; Fanon, 1959).

Borrowing from these traditions, we hope to push beyond liberal conceptions of democracy and justice (Tuck & Yang, 2018), while also creating a space for radical hope (Ginwright, 2015) about the liberatory possibilities of community schools. Tuck and Yang’s (2018) push to complicate ideas of social justice as contingent and constructed on stolen land and in systems that have been founded to enact injustice. Because justice is a term that is used in social movement organizing around issues of education, addressing harm,

and healing, we use the term to imagine education as part of a liberatory praxis (sustaining and transforming), but only when it can “meaningfully attend to social contexts, historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness” (Tuck & Yang, 2018, p. 5). Thus, while it sustains, it simultaneously seeks to dismantle those structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness to dream up and offer new ways of treating and teaching each other free from the white gaze (Morrison, 1992) and the white listening subject (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Finally, we integrate tenets of Ginwright (2015) Healing Justice framework, which helps us understand pragmatic models for repairing broken systems plagued by issues such as unemployment, carcerality, lack of access to quality health care, and precarious housing as the root causes of violence, trauma, and racial inequity. Trauma, as we conceptualize it, is useful not as a stigmatizing label, but in how it helps us understand the consequences of racial violence and how that violence can live and grow both within a body and a collective (Kirkland, 2013, 2019b). This approach decenters narratives that position communities and people who have been most impacted by white supremacy, patriarchy, and settler colonialism as damaged (Tuck, 2015), moving the focus and attention from silence to naming and dismantling those systems (Kirkland, 2013).

To address trauma and violence, abolitionists such as Mariame Kaba (2012) have pushed us to consider transformative justice as a mechanism to not only address harms and repair relationships, but also transform structures and power dynamics that contribute to those harm.

Stovall (2014) reminds us that the same public policies that allowed for the acquittal of the murderer of Trayvon Martin “in the Sanford courthouse should be considered on the same continuum that fuels gentrification and the closing of public schools” (p. 10). The politics of disposability that renders Black lives as less valuable than white lives means that state violence doesn’t only include state-sanctioned deaths of Black people, but the policies that perpetuate multiple forms of structural inequality that sustains that violence (cf. Hill, 2016; Kirkland, 2017).

Communities of color are not passive subjects to violence, however. Ginwright’s (2015) Healing Justice framework pushes us to consider the ways that schools and communities can cluster to build practices that promote well-being. Drawing on Kelley’s (2002) concept of a radical imagination of what freedom, peace, and justice can look like, Ginwright suggests that a crucial aspect of healing justice is created by forming a “collective agreement about why injustice has occurred and a shared vision that ruptures our day-to-day life, propelling us toward seeking a more just and fulfilling way of living” (Ginwright, p. 23). Community organizing efforts that are

transformative, according to Ginwright, build on the positive self-definitions and self-valuation and a radical imagination by building awareness, consciousness, and moving people to take actions that address unjust social conditions. If these efforts are to be transformative, Ginwright suggests, they must engage people in “an ongoing process of personal reflection, individual and collective growth, communal healing and personal transformation” (p. 28). Grounding our analysis in theories of Black feminism, anti-colonialism, and Black healing, we consider how organizers in NYC envisioned community schools as a pathway beyond community traumas to help people collectively and radically heal and build hope, and how one school approximates this vision.

Review of Literature

While there is a sizeable and growing body of scholarship on community schools, the focus trends toward wraparound supports, rather than considering the various ways the strategy could support racial equity (McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019). Wraparound supports are certainly important components of the community schools strategy, but the overemphasis on them often reinforces deficit ideas about low-income communities and communities of color (Baldrige, 2014; Sanders et al., 2018). An increasing body of research pushes back on this tendency, to define community schools as a strategy that includes integrated student supports; expanded learning opportunities; ways to engage families and community members from marginalized backgrounds in shaping curriculum and the running of the school; and collaborative practices in schools (Maier et al., 2017). Emerging scholarship frames community schooling as a transformative approach to advancing racial equity through education examines the ways that teachers, families, youth, and others in the community school can promote the wellbeing of Black and Brown youth (Galindo et al., 2017; McKinney de Royston & Madkins, 2019; Sanders et al., 2018). In particular, the work of McKinney de Royston and Madkins (2019) examined Black students’ and families’ experiences in community schools to understand how discursive and structural characteristics of community schools supported aims of racial equity through improving student well-being and academic success. They found four essential characteristics to schools meeting these aims: (1) race and class consciousness of stakeholders at the school; (2) commitment to the aims of the equitable aims of schools that promote ensuring students have access to “what they need to succeed without deficit notions or value judgements” (p. 254); (3) promoting a positive school climate; and (4) a commitment to providing access to family needs. We find this research illuminating of how

schools can be sites of both individual and collective radical healing that promotes both structural and discursive shifts towards racial equity.

We also draw on Journey for Justice (2014) community organizers' definition of *culturally sustaining community schools*—community schools designed to respond to the students and communities they serve through enriching opportunities for learning and engagement that are culturally sustaining and transformative. Building from these ideas and the literature, we identified four key principles for understanding the community school project within a racial equity frame:

- Radical imagination (Kelley, 2002)
- Community organizing (Williams, 2013)
- Self-definition and self-valuation (Collins, 1986)
- Healing practices (Ginwright, 2015)

The literature on these four essential components highlights equity-oriented practices that seek to make schools welcoming and anti-oppressive environments in which families and communities feel empowered to exercise collective agency in the quest for broader change. It also suggests how community schools can be situated to implement equity-oriented practices such as culturally responsive-sustaining education and engagement practices that grow out of community organizing.

Radical Imagination

Radical imagination is a process of theorization, of dreaming up a world that might be in place of the one that currently is. This is an act of futurity (Womack, 2013), which begins with the courage to think outside the status quo. It is a kind of collective visioning or, more broadly, theorizing that is fundamental to critical cultural approaches to education that dream of schools that deserve Brown and Black children (cf. Johnston et al., 2017). In radically (re)imagining the ways that schooling, if it is to work, must be shaped of culture, frameworks for building culturally sustaining pedagogy (see the New York State Education Department's Framework for Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education, 2019), which is essential to building the power of the collective to theorize (or speak) life into existence in league with the Black prophetic tradition (Morrison, 1992; West, 1993).

Acknowledging that education has been used as an oppressive apparatus toward communities of color and other vulnerable populations, Paris and Alim (2017), for example, radically imagine, *what does it mean for education*

to exist in and serve a pluralistic society absent the white gaze? They answer this question conceptually, explaining how cultural pluralism—part of the democratic project of schooling—is leading to a shift in how we approach questions of equity and justice (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017). They call this kind of schooling culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which they suggest is based on the idea that the experiences of students outside the school provide the foundation upon which students learn, making it necessary for teachers to incorporate the cultural and linguistic knowledge of racially, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students within their curriculum. CSP radically imagines, thus theorizes, how to support students' sense of pride in their racial and ethnic background, as their histories and ways of knowing become valued and valuable in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

CSP expands on the notion of leveraging one's cultural identities for the purpose of classroom learning because CSP "exists wherever education *sustains the lifeways of communities* who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1, emphasis ours). This radical (re)imagining of education offers vulnerable youth access to power due to the recognition that "standard English" and monoculturalism is a shrinking share of the U.S. population (Kirkland & Malone, 2017; Paris, 2012, 2016). Finally, it positions cultural and linguistic diversity as strengths that are rooted in the lives of students and their communities and honored as assets in the classroom. Since community schools ideally engage families and communities as partners in helping to shape curriculum and pedagogy, there is great potential for them to implement such radical imaginings in ways that reimagine, respond to, and sustain students' cultural backgrounds and academic futures (Sanders et al., 2018).

Community Organizing

Freire (1970) defines *praxis* as a theory-action paradox.¹ If radical imagining is theory, then community organizing is where theory meets action. Community organizing work seeks to build power among marginalized people who then push for changes that will improve material conditions and position them to advance broader changes (Su, 2010; Warren & Mapp, 2011; Williams, 2013). By building political consciousness and leadership of marginalized people, community organizing seeks not only to advance social justice campaigns and peoples' sense of agency (Su, 2010). Ginwright (2015) describes this process of consciousness raising, power building, and action taking in the following way:

Community members must see the conditions as unjust, nonpermanent and changeable. It appears that critical action has a powerful impact on hope. When community members act to achieve a specific goal, they foster a sense of control over their future and sense of engagement with society (p. 23).

Such efforts often aim to challenge deficit ideas about communities of color, to draw public attention to inequitable resource allocation, and to reshape ideas about what vulnerable communities deserve as public goods (Lipsitz, 2007; Salinas & Fraser, 2012; Warren, 2014). Increasingly, organizing efforts seek to link with social movements inspired by racial imaginings to work on issues such as housing and employment and to demand equitable access to educational opportunities, seeing education as inextricably related to other aspects of students' lives (Anyon, 2014; Horsford et al., 2018).

Self-Definition and Self-Valuation

The scholarship on consciousness-raising as a key piece of praxis helps us to shift to an examination of collective sovereignty (community control) (Kirkland, 2019a) and self-determination (Dixson, 2011), or Collins (1986) terms self-definition and self-valuation. Collins (2004) has described the importance of self-definition and -valuation for Black women who reject taken-for-granted assumptions and claim their power to define themselves as human subjects. As Collins (2004) points out, this is a form of resistance, because “[m]any of the attributes extant in Black female stereotypes are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to white patriarchy” (p. 107).

The ability to define oneself and one's community—to very much theorize life into existence—means people have power to create or conjure new ways of challenging systems of oppression through collective visioning and hope (Ginwright, 2015)—what Kirkland (2019a) has called “the audacity of theory.” Community schools offer the potential for communities to practice self-definition and self-valuation when they can exercise control over these local institutions. For example, Richardson's (2009) case study of one community school that existed under segregation demonstrates the potential for such spaces to function “as if” the students and community members were liberated from the oppressive conditions outside of school walls.

Healing Practices

Perhaps the most urgent outcome of praxis is the possibility for vulnerable communities to heal themselves of the hurts that their members endure: the

hidden wounds of structural violence (Collins, 2017; Noguera, 2003), the historical traumas of survivance (Patel, 2016), and the lingering pain of having suffered under regimes of political and social neglect (Dumas, 2016). To not acknowledge this context, to mask it in a narrative that erases the systemic violence waged against vulnerable people, is to resign vulnerable people to a place of blame or deletion without responding to the ontological truths of our messy global history—an incursion against justice and a practice of retraumatizing the vulnerable. This isn't to center the damage against vulnerable bodies as somehow natural or belonging to a system of thinking that imagines vulnerable people as historically broken (Tuck, 2016). Rather, it is to shed light on a broken system designed to create and sustain the wounds of vulnerable people rather than heal them.

Malcolm X, in a March 1964 interview, said of healing:

If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there's no progress. If you pull it all the way out that's not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven't even pulled the knife out much less healed the wound. They won't even admit the knife is there.

Scholars are becoming clearer of the complex ways that educators need to recognize how vulnerable people share histories of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as mental labor and negative experiences associated with school settings (Ginwright, 2015; Kirkland, 2013; Noguera, 2003; Paris & Alim, 2017; Raver et al., 2013; Tuck & Wang, 2018). Scholars have suggested the use of a critical trauma-informed paradigm—a paradigm that considers the systemic roles of power and domination in the infliction and maintenance of trauma—as a way of responding with acts of empathy and understanding rooted in anti-bias and anti-racist intentions (Ginwright, 2015; Kirkland, 2019b). Such systems acknowledge the compounding impact of structural inequity and are responsive to the unique needs of vulnerable communities. Further, a critical trauma-informed care understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing rather than practices that may inadvertently stereotype and re-traumatize (Kirkland, 2019b).

We believe that culturally sustaining community schools, radical imagination, community organizing, self-definition/valuation, and healing conspire to transform education for vulnerable students, shaped in the broad interests of the community. Thus, understanding culturally sustaining community schooling might help us understand as well the influence that radical imagination, community organizing, self-definition/valuation, and healing can have on communities and its people.

Methodology and Research Design

Building on scholarship interested in transforming education, this article takes a human-centered approach, understanding schooling and community relative to the experiences that shape one's beliefs and actions. It uses critical qualitative evidence that is "particularly interested in the way in which the world is understood, experimented on, and produced by people's lives, behavior, interactions, and narratives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 4) to understand the relationship between a school district, a school, and a community. We further examine this evidence interested in the purpose of schooling when school goals relate to sustaining communities and their members. This approach to inquiry elucidates the particulars of experience from the perspectives of people who are a part of (as opposed to apart from), most implicated by, and fundamentally situated within that system. In so doing, it describes how students, community members, and school staff and administrators have developed through schooling and associated community experiences, what factors influence their connection to community, and how schooling may inform their relationship to the community and *vice versa*. Finally, as researchers, we see ourselves as positioned as part of data construction; thus, data are a product of the research process and not simply passively observed objects (Charmaz, 2008, p. 402).

Setting and Population

Data collection took place primarily at Truth High School (THS), a community school in the South Bronx, NY. Surrounding THS at the time of this study were cranes and jackhammers, as the street in front of the school was under construction for incoming residents whom developers "hoped would move into the numerous housing units popping up on all sides." As more development was slated throughout the Bronx, gentrification was a looming threat for economically less advantaged residents who faced displacement as rents rose. Walking into the school, however, one found friendly, smiling faces from students and staff. Teachers and students greeted each other in the hallways; teachers often asked questions about students' families. The rapport was often warm and familial.

At the time of this study, THS incorporated community service and internships in its weekly schedule so that students could apply classroom lessons to settings outside of the school and, ideally, bring outside lessons into the classroom. Founded in 1994 as part of the Coalition for Essential Schools, as a small school that was committed to having teachers that knew students well academically and personally; built strong, close knit community in the school; and created structures that included advisory and class time to address student

need. In 1998 THS and other small schools came together to form New York City's Performance Standards Consortium "The Consortium," a group of schools that believed that the state Regents exams were harmful to teaching and learning practices. Using a state variance, they were able to adopt their own performance assessments that they continue to use, including portfolios of exemplary work that answered essential questions throughout the year, often related to questions of justice. This allowed teachers to create opportunities for deeper learning that are community-based and encourage critical thinking and dialogue among students. While not all community schools are able to do this because of accountability to a testing regime, THS demonstrates the importance of challenging the dominant model of education.

The school, located in the South Bronx, an area best known perhaps for the largely landlord-incited fires that decimated the housing stock and took numerous lives in the 1970s and 80s. Too often left out of the stories of these fires are the ways that state-driven urban renewal development (Caro, 1974) as well as planned shrinkage of public institutions (i.e., fire departments) (Wallace, 1988) exacerbated inequalities in access to housing and resources, and tragically often leading to deaths. Dominant narratives perpetuated by city officials and non-profit leaders framed the issue using "culture of poverty" (cf. Lewis, 1968) style explanations that largely apologized for and ignored this history. Further, it justified deficit-based service providing solutions without systemic change (i.e., McLaughlin, 2019).

Notwithstanding, this community in the South Bronx has a rich history of community organizing led by families and youth who have demanded and won powerful campaigns for equity-oriented reforms such as small schools, restorative justice, and increased control by local communities (Fabricant, 2010; Su, 2009). Parents and youth from THS engaged in these efforts since the school's inception, supporting social justice through curriculum and engagement with the community (Olivo, personal communication, November 10, 2018). As a long-standing community school, the district's initiative was not the beginning of THS's employment of the community school strategy. We lift it up, here, as an example of how the strategy was used to support and maintain pedagogies and practices of racial justice (e.g., radical imaginings, community organizing, self-definition/valuation, and healing) with dedicated school and community support over time.

Data and Data Collection

Data for this project consist mainly of interview transcripts related to the demands of grassroots community organizations and based on the functioning of CSI in THS. Transcripts were based on interviews we conducted with two

of the organizers who mobilized communities to compel the City to implement community schools. We also interviewed students, parents, teachers, and administrators at THS to learn more about community schools in relation to the advancement of racial equity.

At the district level, Julia spent 3 years with community organizing groups and CBOs that had organized to advance community schools throughout NYC. As a participant researcher, she attended many community school meetings, helped community stakeholders conduct responsive research, write policy briefs, and conduct internal surveys to support organizing around CSI. She also conducted over 150 hr of observations and seven dialogic interviews with participants.

At the school level, both Hui-Ling and Julia spent over a year in THS, where they observed classrooms, community meetings, and other significant events related to the connections between CSI and racial equity. Together, we conducted 44 interviews with 29 teachers, community school staff, community partners, school administrators, and students. The teachers in the study were majority white, with a small proportion being Latinx and Black teachers. We also conducted roughly 330 hr of participant observations at THS and in partnering organizations, all captured through over 1,000 pages of field-notes. Further, we collected and reviewed documents from the City about CSI: evaluation reports by outside agencies such as the RAND implementation study (2018), the Framework for Great Schools survey data (n.d.), and media reports about the initiative. THS served 470 predominantly Latinx and Black students.

Data Analysis

We met every 2 weeks for 8 months to discuss themes, patterns, and inconsistencies in the data we collected. The focus of our analysis centered on educational equity, how it had been theorized by CSI, and how this theorization played out in practice. That is, we sought to understand to what extent was CSI aligned with the visions of community schools that community organizers radially imagined, and to what extent did it call on new definitions of schooling, reframing how we understand success, meaningful school experiences, and the possibility for hope and racial equity in education.

In terms of process, we developed an inductive and deductive coding schema to code our interviews and observations, and then used thematic analysis to uncover themes in the data and ultimately link those themes to theoretical models as illustrated below (Ryan & Bernard, 2016). We coded data (primarily field notes and interview transcripts) separately, using analytic memos to explore emerging themes in the data, which we discussed during

our meetings. To establish inter-coder agreement and articulate claims we could base in our evidence, we embraced a clear interpretive methodology, using the tools of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) in our analysis to understand how participants made sense of community schools in relation to racial equity. We also conducted discursive and analytic reviews of policy documents to assess the cultural and developmental appropriateness of district/school/community relations and shared our findings through graphic matrices and vignettes to display the relationship between emerging themes and their corresponding evidence (cf. Emerson et al., 1995). After our initial round of coding, we conducted member checks with some of the participants to help ensure validity (Saldana & Omasta, 2018). Finally, we refined codes into sub-units based on our conversations and collective understandings of what our data were saying to establish assertions/draw conclusions (cf. Erickson, 1986) that allowed us to answer our research questions and generate purposeful theory that understands community schools within a racial justice frame.

We present our findings below.

Community Schools as a Theory of Educational Equity: Radically Imagining and Organizing for Racial Justice and Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education

In New York City, the theorization of community school as a tool to advance racial equity was driven by students and community organizers. Their logic was that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution,” that those most impacted by a system must be part of its (re)design. Sorayah, one of the students at THS, summed up these ideas in the following way:

So when I think about the word “community,” I visualize people coming together and fixing the issues of the community. Not just like one person that’s succeeding in life and then everybody else in the community is living in poverty because we live in a very social Darwinist world. Everyone believes in the fight of the fittest, the “survival of the fittest,” and I don’t believe in that. [. . .] even when I work with the kids, it’s because I don’t want them to continue to suffer and think like, “Oh, I don’t have nobody that looks like me to represent me,” or, “I don’t have anybody that looks like me because they’re in jail.”

As Sorayah troubles the notion of meritocracy and the “American Dream” she comes to realize that the Dream has failed many people, especially those from her community (cf. Coates, 2018). Instead, she imagines a *collective*

destiny, an important piece of community praxis that considers the moral principles of collective work and mutual responsibility. Thus, for Sorayah, learning about society and how it operates to privilege those who are white and wealthy gives her the tools to articulate “community work,” especially serving youth, which to Sorayah, matters so much. This collective destiny, thus, radically imagines who gets to act and on what terms.

This imagining is similar to the collective imagining done by the organizers for NYC’s community schools during the 2013 NYC mayoral election cycle leading up to Bill de Blasio’s victory. The Coalition for Educational Justice (CEJ) and allies saw community schools as a bold vision that included many aspects of what they had been visioning together as Black and Brown parents and youth. Natasha Capers, CEJ organizer, suggested that conversations (in regard to what parents envisioned for their children’s schools) consider the schools they had when they were young. She shared:

They would say “we want afterschool programs; we want there to be access to like medical staff like nurses that could give an aspirin and be attentive to students who have asthma.” They of course wanted high quality academics and rich curriculum and a place that’s welcoming for parents and community, where they as parents were treated well and addressed in their language.

Members’ lived experiences as raced bodies consistently placed into hostile educational environments and desires to build a collective radical imagination of socially just schooling became the foundation of a transformative campaign for community schooling (Ginwright, 2015; Williams, 2013).

As Zakiyah Ansari, a NYC public school parent and community organizer described it, the strategy required increased resources in the form of full funding, as well as programs like restorative justice and participatory decision-making. The additional resources and support for community schools were designed to address some of the ways that poverty can create challenges for students. According to Natasha Capers:

[The Office of Community Schools leaders] did some really good things around equity, raising the floor on so many of the schools in terms of funding, and I think that helped a lot. I think the actual resources helped a lot especially for some of these schools.

Since the strategy emphasized increased school resources and deeper engagement with families and community members, organizers saw their potential to provide fertile ground for discussions of current issues in students’ lives, while grounding curriculum and pedagogy in the students’ cultural backgrounds (Daniel et al., 2019). This collective framing of community schools

offered a theory of community praxis, reflective of not just the community cultural wealth but also the intellectual wealth of community members. For Natasha, this framing of community schools was far closer to the liberatory idea of community control than less sovereign framings of schooling:

Because community schools—when we actually take that first word, community seriously—then we have to then be informed by who is in that community. And that means that we have to be culturally responsive in our outreach, in our pedagogy, in our parent engagement, in our discipline policies.

Organizers who fought for the community school initiative saw culturally responsiveness, or what Paris and Alim call culturally sustaining pedagogy, as a fundamental part of the strategy, but did not see it always enacted at a systemic level. According to Zakiyah Ansari:

[A]round Eric Garner’s murder, I remember saying, “What are you going to do in community schools? Do you have a curriculum for students? How are teachers going to go and speak to kids about what happened? . . . Community schools are a great opportunity to bring the community in and say we need to talk about this, it’s an issue that’s on everybody’s mind, kids are hearing it and they don’t know how to process it.” I feel like that’s what community schools can and should be.

As Zakiyah suggests, community schools are well positioned to enact culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE) as they are based in tenets that some schools have been establishing as a framework for advancing racial equity. A model of this was THS, where community partnerships and teaching practices have come together to create critical and culturally sustaining learning opportunities for students that give them space to redefine themselves in relation to school and community while imagining healing in their lives. Thus, the site of healing, which also implies hope, is not principled upon the individual body, but is constitutive of the collective. In NYC, the act of dreaming together (radically imagining) and working together (community organizing) to make dreams real were born of the collective destinies that participants desired for themselves and their communities.

Community Schools as a Reframed Narrative of Schooling: Grassroots Community Partnerships, Student Learning, and Community Advancement

Evidence from THS provides powerful examples of definitions of community schooling based in reframings of how educators understand success,

meaningful school experiences, and the possibilities for hope, healing, and racial equity in education. THS has reframed success and meaningful schooling experiences as intimately tied to community through genuine partnerships, student agency, and culturally sustaining and community-oriented curricula. Significant to this model of community schooling was an idea we termed *clustered reciprocity*, where the village did not just raise the child but the child helped to raise the village. THS achieved this structurally, through their internship program where students worked with local businesses and organizations (i.e., community gardens, after school programs, culinary services) as part of school credit. Additionally, teachers drew from community knowledge in their teaching practices by bringing in Bronx community organizing groups to inspire learning and community engagement as part of their curriculum. Thus, the model of community schooling achieved at THS clustered assets of all stakeholders and reciprocally benefitted the student, the school, and its surrounding community.

This idea of clustered reciprocity is uniquely highlighted in our conversations with Marisa, a THS student of Puerto Rican descent, with deep familial roots in the Bronx. Her great grandmother moved to the Castle Hill neighborhood with the first wave of Puerto Rican immigrants and lived there until she passed. Unfortunately, Marisa had negative experiences with schooling in the Bronx. She deliberately transferred to THS her junior year after her dissatisfaction with her previous high school. After transferring to THS, Marisa admitted:

I feel better. I feel like I'm doing something with my life. And like, if you were to ask me when I was a freshman at the [previous] school and you were to tell me I was going to do all the things that I'd accomplished I would have laughed at you and told you you're a liar because like this school helped shape me into a person within my first year better than what my last school did for 2 years. And I know the difference. I feel the difference.

Once shy and reserved, Marisa grew tremendously through participating in opportunities with THS and her activism in a grassroots organization called Community Justice Collective (CJC). At the time of this study, CJC had been active in the South Bronx for over 20 years and had campaigned for immigrant rights, school reform, food justice, park revitalization, and anti-rezoning. It was also a significant part of the student experience at THS. According to Marisa:

When I joined [CJC] I was a sophomore, I wasn't in THS. I wasn't learning anything in real life, I was learning through textbooks, and what state tests

wanted me to know. [. . .] I thought about [critical issues] in my old school but the thing was, they didn't help me express it as much because it wasn't in the curriculum. With it not being in the curriculum, it left me stuck as to, "but why?" Because I didn't need to know it, I just needed to know a yes or no answer for the regents. [THS] helped me answer my, "but why's?" "Why is this like this?"

For Marisa, both THS and CJC illuminate how a lasting commitment to partnership that is mutually beneficial for school and organization can serve the broader interests of both students and community that is possible because of the community partnerships and the ways they avoid high stakes testing by being a consortium school, a privilege from which not all community schools benefit. Matt, the principal of THS, acknowledged that community involvement is not what THS was evaluated on by the New York City Department of Education. Still, he believed this kind of clustered reciprocity mattered because "school is part of bettering the community, and better communities make better schools." The director of community organizing at CJC, Angela, also viewed her partnership with THS as a "priceless tool" that supports advancement of the community, what Marissa saw as a "rethinking of school." In a similar way, Angela explained how the partnership between CJC and THS rethought school, redefining the metrics of both entry and success by facilitating recruitment to the program: "[I]f I have to randomly go and pick students out of the street, yeah, it happens and it can be done. But it creates a level of consistency that really impacts how young people engage in their school and in our organization and in their community."

Marissa, along with other students in the ninth and tenth grades worked on a project called "Redesigning the Bronx," where students envisioned their desired community and reasoned mathematically about redesigning the Sheridan Expressway.² This curriculum was initiated by students involved in CJC. One student, Ahmed, came to Matt and explained that what he learned at CJC should spread to his peers. Matt and Ahmed worked with THS teachers to construct a unit where students discussed, researched, and wrote about the Sheridan Expressway. This form of clustered reciprocity was about tying school and academic success models to the concerns of the community; thus, how the school imagined student learning would be equally tied to how it understood student engagement with real community issues.

The knowledge gained from THS students regarding the Sheridan Expressway was then funneled back into the community at CJC events. Marisa, who worked at CJC before enrolling at THS, was impressed that THS students publicly spoke at the event about what they were learning about Sheridan campaigns for school credit. Marisa noted, "I was involved in that

campaign of CJC my first year, and I saw how THS actually involved the Sheridan in their curriculum in [9th/10th grade]. I was amazed by it.” Having never previously experienced this type of critical community-oriented education at her previous school, Marisa was inspired by the curricular work that THS students were doing, which also compelled her to transfer to THS.

Further, CJC was incorporated into the school curriculum through an internship class. Ana, a THS teacher who revitalized the internship class 3 years ago, appreciated the partnership with CJC and how it supported student learning. According to Ana:

[Angela] often takes a good number of my interns and this is the third year she’s taking interns and they have participated in Teen Chef Battle, [which is] tied to conversations around food deserts and healthy and unhealthy food. So that can turn into a social issues mastery or elective mastery here in the building but it’s based on the work that they’re doing at the site.

For Ana, the THS-CJC partnership sustained the community but also provided an opportunity for students to think critically about issues around them. Ana explained how clustered reciprocity worked at this level, citing how the community-based internships can lead toward academic mastery that counts toward graduation requirements. Although they used the internship to work for school credit, students often ended up investing as well in community work in the long term.

Students benefited from the back and forth between school and community, where one always existed in the other, where the lines between them became powerfully blurred. This reframing/redefining of school raised important questions for our participants, as to what does it mean for community schools to serve the community in a way reciprocal to how they serve students? In Marisa’s case, this question was addressed through culturally sustaining pedagogies, student agency, and willingness of education workers to work jointly to produce partnerships that inspired students to engage more deeply in both school and community to advance the greater collective.

At their graduation, both Sorayah and Marisa were honored for their school and community contributions. In Marisa’s graduation speech, she emphasized her community engagement, alongside other students who had helped start similar community initiatives. Aurora, a Latinx second year teacher at THS witnessed was inspired by the students’ activism, so she brought the idea of including an action component in their next major lesson to her teaching team at their weekly planning meeting. In these collaborative meetings, teachers discussed challenges and opportunities in their teaching

and helped each make improvements. Aurora shared that this relationship between curriculum and activism was central to her approach to teaching:

The whole point is that we want the kids to take ownership over their voices and over the topics that we're bringing to them so that they can then come up with their own opinions and share those with the world. So that they feel like they have that right like that their voices deserve to be heard and they have something to say.

The teachers agreed that their upcoming units on immigration and the Bronx provided opportunities to support student activism on issues that matter to them. They began the immigration unit with an exploration of the topic itself, grounded in immigrant students' experiences. Students shared stories about immigrating to the U.S. from places like Honduras and the Dominican Republic, sometimes taking over a month to make the trip on boats, buses and by foot.

These conversations provided deep and personal ways of connecting students' stories to the histories and texts they're taking up in class. Teachers sought to build students' understanding of the forces that compel people to leave their home country by discussing these "push and pull factors." When Nora, a first-year white teacher at THS did this in her classroom, she saw that the students were talking a lot about the issues in other countries, as they didn't always have full understandings of the broader socio-political context. When she reviewed student writing on why people leave Honduras, she found that they seemed to leave that day's lesson with the idea that Honduras was "inherently violent or inherently going to have these conflicts and that that's just something that happens in Central America. . . but not really understanding why that is."

In response to this, she redesigned her curriculum to examine the role of the US military and corporate involvement in Honduras in the 20th century. She hoped "to add as many different factors about why people are leaving and coming. . . . To make sense of the current crisis." She had students learn individually about different pieces of this history, then teach each other by building a timeline of the different root causes of violence and economic inequality in Honduras. They then returned to the conversation of immigration with a new vantage point, with a more critical understanding of the US role in creating those conditions.

Incorporating community organizing tenets as well as radical imagining and culturally sustaining pedagogy, Emma and Dante concluded their immigration lesson by co-organizing a youth-led community forum with Angela and CJC titled *La Noche de Resistencia*. At this event, youth members of CJC

spoke about immigrant rights and the importance of organizing to defend communities from xenophobic attacks. Tables were set up at which people could listen to recordings of students share their stories of immigrating to the US, shaping a powerful narrative of the obstacles the students overcame before even getting to high school. Other students read poetry or shared artwork that described complex relationships to where they are from.

Because of the community relationships and the ways that teachers and students can learn from each other at THS, students have opportunities to draw on their experiential knowledge of concepts like oppression, resistance, power, and justice, to apply those concepts throughout history. After deepening their understanding of these issues, they are also able to take action to transform them. This “community-centric” model of schooling (cf. Malone, forthcoming) was effective in redefining success in ways where desired in-school outcomes were equally out-of-school outcomes. THS partnered with the community, investing in its assets to build curriculum that supported and sustained both community and its youth. What we saw at THS moved beyond the community school model that employs “wrap around services” that are typically color evasive and fail to challenge systemic oppression. THS’s genuine relationship with its community advanced a set of efforts that challenged oppressive structures more than just patching problems with social “band aids.”

Teaching and learning practices at the school also consistently interrogated concepts of power. In classrooms students were encouraged to challenge the dominant narratives of white supremacy such as the myths of meritocracy and the American Dream. Students and their experience were centered in their curriculum, which fueled critical thinking and an interrogation of the historical and sociopolitical conditions that shaped them and their communities. At this level, clustered reciprocity was akin to political action, which allowed students to further engage in their communities through such activities as youth organizing, creating food pantries, and participating in events where the community came together as a collective to resist locally-based social inequities. Teachers and administrators found it imperative that they partnered with community organizations that were already working to revitalize and sustain the community.

Towards a Culturally Sustaining Community Schools Model

In New York City, community organizers radically imagined community schools in response to deep racial inequities in education, believing that those closest to the problem are also closest to the solution. The ontological

premise upon which these schools were envisioned centered on making schools places for fostering healing with a community orientation that meant students could have many opportunities to learn about and help change their communities. Schools such as THS offer a model of community schooling closer to the aspirations of organizers and designed based on the promises of its students. These schools not only offer a different view of schooling, they also present a different view of a school in relationship to its community.

At THS, there were pockets where the critical frames of healing, self-definition and self-valuation, community organizing, and radical imagining—the four foundational equity principles of culturally sustaining community schools—could be witnessed. These were principles alive at THS, as a particular manifestation of community schooling grew out of the impulses of community actors weaving lives out of liberation threads and stitching school together through the fabrics of community—embracing at least two key motivators of transformative community schooling: collective destiny and clustered reciprocity. Additionally, THS demonstrated for us how schools can approximate a social justice education by creating opportunities for students and communities to bring together community-based knowledge and culture into the school, reframing how we understand success, meaningful school experiences, and the possibility for achieving a collective destiny of hope, healing, and racial equity in education.

We suggest here that community schools textured within the framings of the equity orientation we describe in this article are especially well positioned to develop high-leverage practices that are themselves culturally-sustaining, curative, and transformative. The community school strategy, at least theoretically, approaches schooling in a holistic way to draw on the local knowledge and resources of the community to shape educational practice and provide a hub for radical imagining and organizing to happen outside school walls. We also suggest that the more concrete ideas of collective destiny and clustered reciprocity give shape to these high-leverage equity practices. Further, they draw upon students' lived experiences and use texts and community-based learning opportunities to create opportunities for students to critically examine and transform their worlds. Here, students and teachers come together (cluster) to examine contradictions between life as it is in their communities and life as they desire it to be. In doing so, they understand together underlying power dynamics and learn to resist/reshape them.

This approach to schooling is meant to “sustain the lifeways” of communities (Paris & Alim, 2017). Rather than a typical community school model that serves the surrounding neighborhood through a unidirectional process of “service,” the culturally sustaining community school model we witnessed at THS was closely aligned to aspirations of organizers and the desires of

students. This model drew from the knowledge of those most invested in community who are from the area and have longstanding engagement with local issues and struggles, while the school partnered with local leaders to bring community cultural wealth into the school. Administrators and teachers filled their knowledge gaps about the community by learning the work of the community advocates and listening to community members who have shaped the local geography through their generational legacies. They came together united by a mutual purpose or destination grounded in a moral logic based on an overwhelming commitment to their communities and to each other—what we've called in this article collective destiny.

Like clustered reciprocity, a collective destiny is essential to culturally sustaining community schools because such schools are intended to offer their communities and their students much more than “wraparound services.” They work to sustain, advance, and unite communities, while empowering those in the community to determine their own destinies, which includes the experience of schooling they share. By centering community, culturally sustaining community schools recognize the legacies of injustice and the continuing oppressive forces that restrict youth agency and voice.

In proposing a culturally sustaining model for community schools, we are acknowledging that community schools in NYC are and remain an outcome of the demands of grassroots community organizing. The driving sentiment was that such schools would help redress historical disinvestment and racism that created vastly disparate access to educational opportunities between students along lines of race, class, and linguistic heritage. We have suggested, here, that returning to these origins, a model for culturally sustaining community schooling can be a transformative strategy for advancing educational equity when premised upon the processes of collectively meaningful work and deep introspection to address both the distribution of resources to schools and issues of power and oppression in both school and community. In order to be a culturally sustaining community school, community schools must meet, at minimum, the following criteria:

- Community schools must be in sustained and collaborative conversations with the people most impacted by the injustices they seek to overcome.
- They must be designed with the people most affected by these injustices to break from top-down hierarchies of knowledge.
- Due to the opportunities for meaningful community engagement in schools, they must create ways in which teachers can “function as change agents in a society that is deeply divided along racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and class lines” (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 104).

- They must create opportunities for teachers and administrators to take advantage of community partnerships to provide culturally sustaining learning opportunities for their students both inside and outside of the classroom.

These are a few elements of what we feel is a more authentic culturally sustaining model of community schools, one that aligns with the original intentions of organizing and the passions of youth. This model for community schools is hopeful because it promises to bring us closer to schooling for social justice, as was the case at THS. Our evidence suggests that community schools can rise to center communities, embarking upon what Kirkland (2013) calls “profit perspectives,” viewing the education of children as an investment in freedom, enlightenment, and collective sovereignty.

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Notes

1. The theory-practice paradox shows up throughout literature in the social sciences, chiefly in the philosophical idea that actions are fundamentally tied to and motivated by our beliefs and that beliefs are uniquely informed by actions. The paradox deals with our inability to define what comes first, belief or action, and it has been further suggested that our true beliefs are in fact our actions, as actions are the only real evidence of how one believes (cf. Bourdieu, 1984).
2. The Sheridan Expressway was constructed by Robert Moses for suburbanites easy access into the city. It divided the South Bronx community, causing pollution and dangerous conditions for street crossing. CJC and other community organizations have campaigned to turn the expressway into a boulevard to reconnect the Bronx.

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David E. Kirkland is vice dean for Equity, Belonging, and Community Action at NYU Steinhardt, where he also serves as executive director of NYU Metro Center and professor of Urban Education.