TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS FROM WITHIN:
EXPERIENCES OF PRACTITIONERS OF COLOR IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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the Degree

Doctor of Education
In
Educational Leadership

by
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San Francisco, California
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Transforming Systems from Within: Experiences of Practitioners of Color in Elementary Schools* by Elisa Meza, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Doctorate in Educational Leadership at San Francisco State University.

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TRANSFORMING SYSTEMS FROM WITHIN:
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This dissertation sought to affirm and highlight the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) in elementary schools committed to disrupting racial inequity. This qualitative study utilized a critical ethnography and grounded theory design to collect data from interviews with ten teachers and school social workers. Data were analyzed through a Latina feminist lens to validate our experiences as Women of Color and expose systems and practices in schools that perpetuate racial inequity. Findings were separated into two chapters to explore the experiences of POC at two levels: the classroom and the school level. At the classroom level, teachers disrupt racial inequity by strengthening relationships with families and transforming the system from within. At the school level, the experiences of school social workers reveal three themes that provide implications for structural change: transgressing professional development, the possibility of critical school social work practice, and engagement with critical practice. This study concludes with a discussion on reflection and transformation implications for practitioners, as well as a set of reflective dialogue questions to engage practitioners in critical practice. The hope from this study is to inspire POC to feel culturally activated and sustained to continue the work of disrupting racial inequity and validate the struggles and joy that come with the work of transforming systems from within.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this dissertation.

Barbara Henderson, Ph.D.
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Culture forms our beliefs.

We perceive the version of reality that it communicates.

*Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as questionable, unchallengeable, are
transmitted to us through the culture.*

Culture is made by those in power—men.

Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them.

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera*

Chapter One: Introduction

This research tells the narratives of Women of Color (WOC) who are teachers and school social workers in elementary schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. Collectively, we are Practitioners of Color (POC) who work in a public school district that defines our vision of equity as “the work of eliminating oppression, ending biases and ensuring equally high outcomes” for all students. As a school social worker, I propose a model of critical school social work practice (CSSW) that engages with this vision and seeks to identify systems and practices that maintain structural oppression through a decolonial lens. To identify systems and practices that maintain structural oppression in schools, I engage in dialogue with POC to understand how we implement racial equity and culturally responsive practices (CRP). Our experiences raise concerns around school conditions that impact our practice supporting Students of Color in the classroom, such as the lack of professional development and spaces to consult and dialogue with one another to improve our practice each day. By focusing on our experiences, sharing our stories, and engaging in dialogue about our own cultural identities in relation to our practice, this research explores how we activate our cultural capital collectively to name structural oppression and support each other to sustain our passion and commitment to disrupt racial inequity in schools.

The Problem of Practice for Practitioners of Color

Despite implementation of policies to increase the presence of Practitioners of Color (POC) in public schools, only 17% of teachers are POC while Students of Color make up over 45% of the student population in public schools nationally (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). The racial disparity between practitioners and students impacts both students and POC who seek to become change agents in schools and give back to the communities they represent (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). An analysis done by two newspapers in Washington revealed that in order to close this disparity, their public school districts would have to hire 22,300 more Teachers of Color to create equitable student-teacher ratios in their schools (Bazzaz & Gillespie, 2018). Barriers for Teachers of Color such as access to higher education, teacher credentialing processes and limited resources to diversity teacher-training programs were also identified. There is a significant gap in the literature committed to addressing this disparity and the retention of POC in education, revealing a need to understand what barriers POC face in schools. To address this gap in the literature, this research will explore the experiences of POC to understand structural barriers that impact their practice as well as the approaches POC take to support students.

POC come into education to disrupt racial inequity in schools but face structural barriers that inhibit the activation of their cultural capital to support students and feel supported as social justice leaders (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Cultural capital, in this research, refers to the resources and beliefs we learn from our families and communities

that we activate to be successful in school (Jaeger & Breen, 2016). This definition comes from Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction that says that particular beliefs and knowledge are valued differently within institutions such as the education system, depending on student's socioeconomic background (Jaeger & Breen, 2016). In schools today, Students of Color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds continue to be viewed often as less capable than students with higher valued social capital (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Yosso, 2005). This perception is due to the perpetuation of deficit frameworks that impact their experiences as learners in classrooms. POC come into education to counter these perceptions and must confront deficit frameworks on a daily basis, even experiencing them firsthand, which negatively impacts their work in schools. POC must then negotiate with colleagues who do not share similar values or empathize as deeply with the experiences Students of Color, creating hostile racial climates that impact their ability to activate their own cultural capital to benefit their students.

Just as students come to school with cultural capital to activate and implement to succeed in the classroom, POC also come to schools with cultural capital to disrupt racial inequity in their practice. POC have lived experiences that they reflect upon to relate to Students of Color, come from similar cultural backgrounds, and have experienced the higher education system, which provides other forms of capital for Students of Color to benefit from. POC utilize their own experiences in schools to inform their practice in classrooms, which gives them valuable insight into the support their students need, and

the importance of building strong relationships with families to improve student learning. However, POC encounter structural barriers in their practice including a lack of applicable, culturally responsive professional development, lack of trust in administration, and a lack of spaces to collaborate with other POC to share resources and experiences (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Understanding structural barriers at the classroom level is a significant problem of practice for educators, one that is more complex for POC who come into education with specific skill sets that strengthen their ability to respond to the needs of Students of Color (Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

For school social workers (SSW), this problem of practice is important because SSW support teachers in schools to improve their classroom climates and create culturally responsive and trauma-responsive learning environments. A barrier for this work is the overemphasis and discourse around standards and achievement gaps in schools, which impacts the role of school social workers (SSW) (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). One role SSW play in schools is to support teachers in strengthening home-school connections and improve school climate through interdisciplinary collaborations (Ray & Ahlman, 2017). But when schools are focused primarily on achievement through a standards-based lens, the wellness and mental health of students becomes secondary, creating a tension for SSW to navigate as mental health practitioners. This is an important concern to address because SSW have a person-in-environment lens that allows them to understand the root causes of the most common mental health concerns among children including anxiety and the impacts of trauma on learning (Ray & Ahlman, 2017). To

establish stronger inter-disciplinary collaborations between teachers and SSW, more research is needed to understand barriers teachers face in their practice, impacting collaboration and flexibility to transform practices in the classroom and school-wide level.

SSW have a systems theory perspective that can help schools identify practices that perpetuate structural oppression and transform classroom practices through collaboration with teachers, which is one of the most significant roles SSW play in schools (Sosa, Cox, & Alvarez, 2017). However, standards-based reform does not encourage school climates conducive to collaboration and transformative practices, given the expectations placed on teachers to teach to particular curriculum and conditions for standards-based assessment (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Teachers of Color, in particular, have described standards-based reform as a barrier in their practice and utilize their cultural capital to supplement curriculum with culturally responsive practices (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Standards-based reform is an example of a mechanism that perpetuates structural oppression in schools, as it places pressure on Students of Color to succeed within these same narrow structures. For this reason, collaboration between SSW, teachers and families is a crucial step towards identifying systems and structures that will create school climates that are responsive to the needs of students, including their mental health and wellness outside of school in their community.

The problem of practice for this research addresses how our commitment to racial equity as POC is impacted by mechanisms and practices that maintains structural

oppression and inhibits our ability to activate our cultural capital. The assumption I had coming into this research was that our struggle as POC is not an isolated phenomenon; structural oppression and racism exist and continue to impact our experiences as POC committed to racial equity in education. Although there is still very little research on the experiences of POC, there are researchers who have exposed structural barriers that impact POC, including teachers, mental health practitioners, and social workers. These include racial microaggressions, stereotype threat, racism, and cultural isolation (Achinstein & Ogawa 2011). However, racism is often viewed as an interpersonal experience, not as a larger structure that impacts institutional practices (Barretti, 2015). When racism is not viewed as a structural phenomenon, structural oppression goes unnoticed and unresolved within institutions. Researchers have explored this tension with structural oppression and the unique experiences of POC committed to anti-oppressive practices (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; 2012; Barretti, 2015; Daniel, 2007, Yan, 2008). This problem of practice seeks to address a call to action for more research to affirm patterns across the experiences of POC and how we activate our leadership and cultural capital to challenge traditional practices in schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012).

POC are recruited to work in schools because of their cultural capital and unique ability to provide culturally responsive practices (CRP) in schools, but it is not enough to increase the presence of POC without creating school conditions that develop POC as leaders to transform institutions from within as change agents (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Institutions perpetuate narratives of oppression that do not address the roots of

oppression and adopt definitions of social problems that place the blame for these problems on oppressed communities, not on the institutions that oppress (Mullaly, 2002). POC come into education having experienced institutionalized oppression and seek to articulate this critical lens through practice in their classrooms that disrupts deficit frameworks placed on Students of Color. However, school districts continue to focus on district-wide professional development that only focuses on raising awareness of racism and white privilege, not deconstructing structural racism and demonstrating how racial power dynamics perpetuate racial inequity (Vaught, 2008). POC, then, feel at odds as agents of change hoping to activate their cultural capital when they are not given opportunities to become leaders in making this change a reality for Students of Color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Kohli, 2018).

Many education researchers have spent decades naming specific mechanisms that perpetuate institutionalized racism in schools: academic tracking (e.g. Oakes, 1985), school segregation (e.g., Anyon, 1997), and the impacts of white supremacy on Communities of Color (e.g., Leonardo, 2009) to name a few. Structural inequity throughout society continues to contribute significantly to the opportunity gap between white and Students of Color nationally (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Hung et al., 2019). However, in order for institutional change to take place, it is often the case that POC have to be the ones to spark the flame within schools to demand racial equity (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Kohli, 2018). This is a particular burden POC have to carry in their work in schools, which is not always supported and acknowledged at an institutional level

(Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). POC are then treated as experts of the communities they racially and physically represent, not as experts on pedagogical approaches in the classroom or as leaders driving structural change within the institution.

Racial inequity continues to persist throughout education because white dominant paradigms reinforce particular systems that create more positive outcomes for white students and even white teachers (Carter, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Kohli, 2018; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). For school social work, this is a significant problem of practice for POC because we already feel a tension with traditional social work paradigms that focus on individual level interventions through a Eurocentric lens (Yan, 2008). Social work as a larger institution within the institution of education creates a second layer of white dominant paradigms given that social workers continue to be predominantly white, reflecting similar demographics of teachers nationally (Salsberg et al., 2017). When school-based interventions continue to focus on micro-level strategies to support Students of Color, the larger macro-level social structures that perpetuate trauma disproportionately in low-income Communities of Color are ignored. If school social work continues to focus on interventions that do not incorporate CRP or how to activate the cultural capital of POC doing to work to disrupt racial inequity, it becomes another institution reinforcing white dominant paradigms in schools, just as mainstream curriculum does on a daily basis (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2012; Hodge, Limb and Cross, 2009; Kohli, 2018).

The white dominant cultural ideologies emphasize individualism over the cultural beliefs, context, and values found in communal Communities of Color (Geneva, 2018; Hodge, Limb & Cross, 2009; Hammond, 2015; Corley & Young, 2018). As many POC already know, white privilege is part of the design of political structures, solidifying a racial contract that maintains the superiority of white identity within institutions (Mills, 1997). Traditional practices also uphold value systems on particular forms of cultural capital in classrooms, which negatively impacts educational achievement for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and from non-dominant cultures (Jaeger, 2011). White cultural ideologies such as individualism in the classroom, Eurocentrism, and merit-based systems continue to minoritized Students of Color, who then are seen as obstacles for teachers, instead of contributors to their own learning (Villegas and Lucas, 2002). Forming deficit frameworks that minimize access to opportunity throughout the K-12 and higher education system is something POC continue to reflect upon and seek to disrupt within their own practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012).

Working within institutions that continue to reinforce white dominant ideologies, particularly through cultural competency models of practice, POC continue to struggle with opportunities to activate their cultural capital to lead institutional change (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). If you ask Practitioners of Color (POC) about their intentions working in the education system, more likely than not, they may refer to their own experiences in schools, how their culture was either cultivated or subtracted in classrooms (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Valenzuela, 2016; 1999). Our experiences in schools are central reasons

why many of us become school practitioners and seek to disrupt subtractive experiences that continue to impact minoritized students in classrooms (Irvine, 2002; Valenzuela 2016; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Our racial identities have been impacted by our experiences with teachers that see us through deficit lenses that subtract our cultural strengths and cultural capital (Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005; Carter, 2003; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Valenzuela, 2016). More resources and research need to be committed to understanding the experiences of POC in schools instead of focusing primarily on making other practitioners “competent” in the cultures of Students of Color. This approach perpetuates the colonial gaze toward students who are often reminded they do not fit the normative culture schools continue to favor and compare their achievement to on a daily basis.

It is important to consider how activating cultural capital and leadership among POC can impact traditional practices in schools because education researchers have highlighted for decades that traditional practices in classrooms are culturally subtractive, oppressive, and fail to support the diverse needs of Students of Color (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Social work as a separate institution has also been known to be culturally subtractive and in conflict with cultural values for Communities of Color (Furman et al., 2009). However, subtractive schooling also relates to the professional experiences of POC not being able to fully activate their potential due to structural barriers that limit their involvement in decision-making spaces (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2007). We must negotiate who we are on a daily basis and assert

ourselves for respect even as professionals with degrees and credentials, because we are POC (Mullaly, 2002; Daniel 2007; Yan, 2008). We must resist the homogenization of our ethnic communities and individualize ourselves while trying to strengthen a sense of community around us as practitioners (Kohli, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) who activate their cultural capital in their practice with Students of Color, but face structural barriers as practitioners (Bottiani et al., 2018). By understanding our experiences as social justice advocates in schools, we can name mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequity and support the retention of POC in the education system. As a school social worker (SSW), I am interested in how SSW can collaborate with teachers who believe they embody culturally responsive practices (CRP) and reimagine school climate from a community-centered, student-centered, and healing-centered approach.

In order to identify the structural barriers that impact POC in schools, this research utilizes critical ethnography and grounded theory to explore the experiences of POC and my own positionality as a school social worker (SSW). Through a critical ethnographic approach, my role as an SSW in this research is to understand how to identify systems and practices that perpetuate structural oppression. Through a Latina Feminist lens, I focus on our experiences as POC working in schools to understand barriers we face in practice and how we envision racial equity as transformative leaders. I

interviewed five teachers and five school social workers who identify as a Woman of Color (Latinx, Chicana, Black, African American, Chinese-American, Indian, and biracial) who work at eight different elementary schools throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, six of which are Spanish immersion schools. As an SSW who participates in multiple professional development and racial affinity spaces within our district, I reached out to POC in these spaces specifically to understand how they applied concepts learned from racial equity trainings in their practice. Asking about how POC implement culturally responsive practices (CRP) was an entry point to exploring how POC name racial inequity and systems that perpetuate it in their settings. By sharing my own experiences and positionality within the district with the POC in this study, we were able to form solidarity across our various contexts and understand structural barriers that many POC face. Identifying mechanisms that perpetuate structural oppression follows the National Association of Social Work (NASW) ethical guidelines as well as critical social work theory that calls for the practitioner to practice through an anti-oppressive and anti-racist lens.

Given the complexity of structural oppression and how to name particular mechanisms within it that drive racial inequity, I utilize critical social work (CSW) theory to frame my purpose as a practitioner-researcher in unpacking what structural oppression means in our district context. Utilizing a critical theory framework to guide school social work practice will require a commitment to understanding how structural oppression is rooted within the education system. CSW, as a theoretical lens, calls for practitioners to

identify structures and systems that impact oppressed groups within institutions and disrupt structural oppression through collective action as practitioners (Mullaly, 2002). A foundational aspect of CSW emphasizes how oppression does not have just one root cause; oppression is relational, contextual, and occurs because a privileged group benefit from it. Structural oppression then upholds a privileged group within an institution, and a subordinate group is created so that the status quo is upheld.

Within the education system, structural oppression looks like racialized achievement gaps between Students of Color and white students. Racialized achievement gaps are caused by particular structures and practices within classrooms and schools, including standards-based reform that continues to pressure practitioners to compare Students of Color to white and Asian student achievement. I argue that this narrative of the achievement gap impacts the activation of cultural capital in classrooms, to transform practices and develop community-centered, student-centered and healing-centered learning environments. Understanding how structural oppression works in schools will require an analysis of historical racism throughout the United States, as we all come into schools having been socialized in a sociopolitical context rooted in settler-colonialism and domination (Patel, 2016).

As a CSW practitioner, I identify structures and systems that can support Students of Color to thrive in the classroom by supporting teachers to understand how trauma-informed practices and CRP can improve their relationships with their students. In our district, we are asked to focus on African American student achievement, in particular,

which guides my priorities as a CSW practitioner as well. This focus on African American student achievement, however, perpetuates the comparison of Students of Color to white and Asian students in this district, causing significant tension among teachers to understand what equity truly means in practice. POC in this study explore this tension, and how interventions and practices perpetuate homogenization of African American students, and Latinx students, in schools. POC then activate their cultural capital to counter this homogenization and the perpetuation of deficit frameworks toward Students of Color. Trauma-informed practices is one tool school social work (SSW) has universally adopted and implemented within districts across the US and that continue to gain traction in schools nationally (Sosa, Alvarez, & Cox, 2017). However, more research is needed on applying a critical lens to SSW, to understand how structures and systems continue to perpetuate structural oppression within the education system and define our role in disrupting racial inequity in schools.

Utilizing a CSW framework for this research pushes my analysis away from minimizing oppression to an individual level and emphasizes the importance of identifying structures and practices that perpetuate institutionalized oppression, which impacts Practitioners of Color (POC). Strengthening the connection between school social work practice and social justice inevitably shapes a new model of practice where collective healing becomes integral to disrupting structural oppression for POC across school sites. Understanding how POC activate their cultural capital to do this work of disrupting racial inequity can lead us into new models of practice that can be shared

between practitioners, both teachers and SSW, who are committed to social justice in schools.

Scope of the Research

The scope of the current research will focus on Practitioners of Color (POC) and their experiences in implementing culturally responsive practices (CRP), including how they define it and barriers they face in their practice. I chose to utilize CRP as an entry point to exploring the experiences of POC because it is a theoretical framework our school district has adopted and incorporated in professional development over the past several years, primarily through the culturally responsive teaching framework by Hammond (2015). In the past five years as a POC in this school district, I have also participated in professional learning communities (PLC) that explore Glenn Singleton's "Courageous Conversations About Race" framework as a way to address racial inequity in schools. Both Hammond (2015) and Singleton (2015) offer extensive racial equity and culturally responsive frameworks that emphasize the importance of self reflection and acknowledging whiteness and privilege. However, both frameworks require an institutional commitment at both the school and district level for the concepts to truly make a difference in practice. More significantly, both frameworks speak to a larger systemic inequity that exists for Students of Color, and that institutionalized racism requires structural change alongside individual transformation to sustain the work.

From my experiences participating in racial equity trainings, I have learned that in order for the content to impact my practice, I needed to find spaces where POC can share their experiences with each other and reflect on how our commitment to social justice is not enough; we need structural change. For many POC, own experiences in education, cultural identities, and cultural backgrounds, inform our practice each day, shaping our CRP ideology and framework of practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). We also have cultural capital that has yet to be fully activated due to school conditions that impact our capacity as culturally responsive practitioners such as our experiences in schools as Students of Color, our languages, and connection to our cultural communities. Our cultural capital allows us to connect deeply with Students of Color in ways that practitioners who are not from a community minoritized by racialized achievement gaps in schools.

POC in this study share stories about working with staff who did not share the same racial equity mindset, lack of trust with their administrators, or from working with white colleagues who operated from colorblindness or race neutrality. They also share stories of particular examples in their classrooms where they must negotiate with mainstream curriculum or interventions and activate their cultural capital to ensure every student can access the curriculum equitably. After listening to the experiences of the POC in this research, the complexity of identifying structural oppression in practice came to the surface. This research will explore how POC identified particular structures impacting

Students of Color, and how they activate their cultural capital to find solutions, new approaches, and the type of support that could potentially transform their practice.

POC apply racial equity in their practice by way of their own experiences in schools and their visions for social justice in education (Daniel, 2011; Achinstein and Ogawa, 2012; Souto-Manning and Cheruva, 2016). The POC in this research had all participated in at least one space or professional development where CRP was discussed, and racial equity raised through facilitated conversations. However, the experiences they had through these spaces did not alleviate the barriers they felt impacting their practice in the classroom. It became apparent to me that many POC are struggling to make sense of their role within the school system to interrupt structural oppression for Students of Color struggling with toxic stress, trauma, and sociopolitical barriers impacting their learning each day. Practitioners in the schools have the frontline perspective of what challenges students face each day coming into their classrooms, and when they leave at the end of the day. Our role then becomes redefining our positionality in the school to help students make sense of their environments, so their learning is culturally responsive, culturally uplifting, and their culture cultivated to support their own cultural identity development.

Resisting the Status Quo in Education as Women of Color

Women of Color (WOC) have spoken up throughout the years about how structural oppression and institutionalized racism in schools impact Communities of Color and the cultivation of cultural identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Yosso, 2006; hooks, 1994,

2010). But our cultural capital and roles throughout society are often minimized to that of a caregiver, or even as a woman with mental health issues, resistant to conforming to colonial institutions (Anzaldúa, 1987; Barretti, 2015). When we speak up against societal expectations, patriarchy, or the status quo, we are seen as resistant, rebellious, *terca* (Anzaldúa, 1987). I am used to being seen as resistant to the status quo. I was born and raised in the Arizona desert divided by a border wall that demarcated *us* from *them*. My identity became intertwined with contradictions, manifestations of borders from within dividing my culture in two: my homeland and culture divided by a wall that continues to be built to this day. Growing up, I never thought about the border wall. But I know that teachers looked at me like I did not belong in their classrooms, especially when I would ask questions about my history. I was constantly otherized, undermined, and marginalized, not expected to do much. This is not any different than how many teachers today treat Students of Color. Education continues to perpetuate these cultural borders for Students of Color in schools each day.

As WOC, we have multiple levels to our identity that are subject to structural oppression in education, particularly working within a predominantly white, female institutional context. As a Latinx woman working in schools, my cultural capital is devalued because I do not speak Spanish. I still remember my first interview with the school district in this study, and how many times the three white women interviewing me interrogated my lack of ability to speak Spanish. This same interrogation occurred in graduate school with white professors. For generations, schools have been sites of

cultural disconnect, labs for Anglo acculturation, missions for white dominant cultural values and beliefs. Sit still, listen to the teacher, speak English, stand in line, say the pledge of allegiance, under god. These Eurocentric norms and values have impacted our ability to see ourselves as contributors to US history, as something more than just a subjugated community through colonialism, or the recipients of mental health treatment and social services (McMahon & Allen-Meares, 1992; Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009; Hodge, Limb & Cross, 2009; Corley and Young, 2018). My 4th-grade teacher, Mrs. Aguilar, a Latinx woman, was the first to disrupt the dominant paradigm in my educational experience. She taught me about the Delano grape field strikes and recognizing the history, power, and dedication my own family contributed to history as field workers. To be a descendant of field workers became an honor, a part of my history that helps me remain humble in a society that constantly wants to create barriers for our empowerment and education. Mrs. Aguilar reminded me that even though I was not raised to speak Spanish, I would be among a community of Latinx leaders who would see my identity as valued, important and impactful. Thankfully my parents raised me to be resistant. The cultural capital passed down to me allows me to understand structural oppression as the root of tensions throughout institutions.

As WOC, our cultural capital gives us the power and skills to see through the curtains of institutions and call out structures of power, yet our perspectives are often disempowered through structural racism. The status quo in education intentionally hides the mechanisms perpetuating structural racism, which is how the racial contract in

America was constructed to benefit whiteness as property (Vaught, 2008; Mills, 1997). However, because we have experienced the education system as students, we are no strangers to how these structures function to limit our ability to change the environment surrounding us. We find ourselves isolated from each other, unable to collectively strategize ways of combatting structural racism, which is an intentional function of the system. I have never been supervised by a POC as a practitioner. I have only worked for white women who struggle to understand my perspective and are unable to impact the school conditions that continue to impact my mental and physical health. It is like watching a movie without subtitles, with the volume completely silenced, and the expectation is to remain silent, watching in the audience. How are we supposed to combat structural oppression if we are not able to be in community and have critical dialogue about what this looks like in practice? This became a question I asked myself each day, prompting me to enter this journey to the doctorate in the first place.

The status quo in our current public education system expects POC to support the pipeline of Students of Color entering college after high school, without preparing students for the realities of structural racism embedded in the higher education system. This is an important factor contributing to systemic racism in our current system because success continues to be measured in a meritocratic system rooted in capitalism. When achievement is only defined by educational attainment, and our public school system continues to emphasize the expectation that we all go to college, this structure further divides our cultural identity, distancing ourselves from our families and communities that

were not provided the same opportunity or privileges (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). Many POC feel estranged from their families going through the higher education system because our cultural identity is not often represented among faculty and leadership or through curricula. Although it is important to many POC to go to college and become a role model for Students of Color in the classroom, many POC also realize how critical it is for students to first see themselves as part of their cultural community, not just as individuals within a meritocratic system. This is why we have to pay closer attention to how we value culture in our classrooms in elementary school, the first classrooms our Students of Color have experiences in. Elementary schools are where we first learn to see ourselves as either part of a counter narrative in our society like Mrs. Aguilar had helped me see, or part of the dominant paradigm of deficit thinking and implicit biases where many of us continue to work.

Naming Structural Oppression Through School Social Work

The presence of school social workers in public schools has continued to expand given the urgent need to support students impacted by historical trauma and contextual factors impacting their ability to engage in school (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). However, classroom and school engagement is often difficult to measure as an outcome for researchers because implicit biases and racism among practitioners impacts Students of Color, as their behavior and even language is often interpreted as disengagement or disinterest in doing well in school [cite]. However, it is rarely spoken of in professional spaces how deeply embedded biases toward Students of Color symbolize colonial,

oppressive practices in classrooms and contribute to structural oppression. The presence of school social workers in schools further symbolize historically oppressive and intrusive practices that often threaten the unity of families, communities, and cultural values and traditions within communities of color (Yan, 2008). Given the context of subtractive schooling in classrooms and social work as a larger institution that has implemented interventions that do not center the values and traditions of communities of color, understanding how to identify structural oppression in school social work is vital.

As a social work student at University of California, Berkeley, I recall the way I sat in my chair, kept to myself, and often did not speak up in certain classes, interpreted by white professors as disengagement, boredom, and even framed as signs of a learning disability. My experience becoming a school social worker in graduate school were all too familiar to my historical experiences in public education in America as a Brown student, searching for my voice and place throughout society, not just in school. I was drawn to school-based practices based on these experiences, and even as a POC, I continue to see and experience these same subtractive practices. As POC, we experience implicit biases and witness colleagues judge families for not having particular skill sets, including English proficiency, parenting language, and enough time to invest in their child's reading at home. We have to advocate for Students of Color when they are asked to leave class, when they experience conflicts with peers or adults, and allow families to also be advocates for their children. We support families to do this because many of us witnessed our families advocating for us in the school system or had experienced

subtractive schooling ourselves and want to break down structural oppression in our current roles. As school social workers, our work should be rooted in anti-oppressive practices to inform systemic solutions that support racial equity in schools.

As a school social worker professionalized at Berkeley, I was trained to implement individualized, micro-level mental health interventions in school settings and lacked training in transforming school climate through structural change. When I was a master's level social work intern in a K-8 school in East Oakland and a K-8 in an affluent neighborhood in the Bay Area, I noticed the impact school climate had on Students of Color. I was providing individual therapy to a caseload of 8-10 students and facilitating group activities in the classroom. However, I began to see how important it was that Students of Color have strong relationships with their teachers because relationships support learning in classrooms (Hammond, 2015). My priority working with any student became focused on creating a meaningful relationship with students, where I find ways to not only hear the student's experiences and stories, but to also find ways to relate my own life experiences to theirs. This is what many Practitioners of Color (POC) do organically when they choose to work in schools, because their experiences in schools inspired them to want to build these relationships with students (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012).

As a social work student at Berkeley, I learned how important it was to build community and solidarity between Students of Color and between Faculty of Color, in order to create institutional change. That year of student organizing, we developed events that invited Alumni of Color from our MSW program and learned that feelings of

marginalization, patterns of our histories being absent from the curriculum, and the lack of diversity among faculty had impacted their own experiences so many years prior. By sharing our experiences across generations of alumni and current students, I understood the value and importance of affinity spaces that allow Practitioners of Color (POC) to empower each other through solidarity and name systems and practices that perpetuate structural oppression.

Becoming a transformative POC means having the ability to utilize aspects of our cultural identity and emerging skill sets to name structural oppression within institutions by identifying, naming, and altering fragmented teaching and discipline practices within schools. Fragmentation occurs within bureaucracies where POC are unable to consult and communicate with each other on a regular basis to learn from each other and feel supported as a practitioner, a phenomenon that happens for many POC in schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). When I was a social work intern in Bay Area schools, I realized there were very few POC around me. I was often subjected to stereotype threat, racial microaggressions from administrators and colleagues, implicit biases, and racist assumptions regarding my nationality and language skills. Many of the teachers I worked with that were white and did not seem to have strong connections to the Students of Color who were on my caseload. As an intern, I realized how isolated I was from other POC who felt a strong sense of cultural identity and purpose in their work. This institutional isolation from feeling in community with other practitioners took an immediate toll on me, especially as a first-generation graduate student. Even as an intern, I undertook the

burden of disrupting these practices by attempting to create spaces for POC in graduate school to share experiences, cultivate our cultural identities and strategize collectively what we need in order to feel successful across our institutional contexts. This led me to identifying needs for racial affinity spaces, work that I would continue to do as a full-time SSW within a Bay Area school district.

Now after seven years of working in SSW, I have come to realize that POC are the ones who are most outraged by inequity, who are vocal, proactive, and resistant to the status quo. For the past several years, I have found myself surrounded by more SSW who identify as a POC and have given our tireless work to transform hiring practices within our department. Alongside POC, I have advocated for the recruitment of POC for the district to gain a deeper understanding of our experiences in order to retain us, and paths to activate our cultural capital to create structural change. The percentage of POC in our department has increased significantly in the past three years, because of the hiring work POC have committed themselves to do on top of their primary role in their school sites. We take on this work because it was what we came here to do as POC. We want to give back to our communities, to increase opportunities for future generations, and to represent our community for Students of Color to see themselves in us. Understanding how we do this work as a collective is important to informing future research on identifying structural barriers that are in the way for us. Structural barriers such as the lack of POC in schools, credentialing, licensing, and standardized test processes and costs, unattainable minimum requirements for leadership positions, and top-down

decision making are just the surface for this research. This research has implications for new models of practice that scratch this surface and begins to unpack next steps forward toward racial equity in schools.

Research Questions

In order to address the problem of practice, the questions this dissertation will ask are: 1) How do Practitioners of Color (POC) activate their cultural capital to support Students of Color in classrooms? and 2) What structural barriers do POC encounter in their practice of disrupting racial inequity? 3) How would a critical school social work framework support a district's vision of disrupting racial inequity?

Significance of the Study

As school districts consider the importance of recruiting Practitioners of Color (POC), it is critical to consider how the institution will support the retention and leadership development of POC in schools. This study focuses on how a school district can support the commitment of POC to disrupt racial inequity by focusing on the structural barriers that may be impacting practice, as well as the structures that support POC and their ability to practice racial equity. Practicing racial equity embodies a commitment to transform traditional practices that negatively impact Students of Color, and a desire to question what we do in our practice that can be improved. I believe that by transforming traditional practices, asking questions about practice, and then engaging in dialogue and forming community across practitioners, we can practice racial equity

collectively. This study seeks to unpack the process of practicing racial equity by focusing on teachers and school social workers as collaborators in the direct service of students. By understanding this process, we can discuss the structures that impact our practice each day and address racialized inequity as a structural concern, not as an achievement gap that places Students of Color at fault for not conforming to standards.

I focus on how POC support Students of Color intentionally in this study because many of us believe that too often our practices and interventions come across as “doing something to” students, instead of with them. This paradigm of “how to support Black and Brown students,” as one POC in this study phrased it, reinforces the gaze of non-Black and non-Brown practitioners toward Students of Color. When that happens, POC are left wondering how we can make an impact that does not reinforce a pathological gaze toward students, especially for myself as a researcher engaging in a decolonial project (Patel, 2016). I ask POC in this study how their commitment to racial equity and culturally responsive practices (CRP) impact Students of Color, because it is important to start from a place of acknowledging our impact in schools. This study focuses on our impact as practitioners because too often, we are expecting Students of Color to meet standards, to conform to the interventions we provide, and behave a certain way in school. We have to disengage with Eurocentric standards as POC in order to engage with the structural issues we have experienced, even as students ourselves. This means asking ourselves, what are we asked to do as practitioners, how are we trained to do these tasks, and what is still missing from our engagement with culturally responsive practices and

racial equity in our district? Instead of focusing on Students of Color as “the gap” we must close, we have to address the gaps in our practice. This study seeks to shift this gaze toward ourselves because without a foundation of critical self-reflection, we will continue to reengage with the narrative POC are here to disrupt.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

To explore and validate the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) in education and the structural barriers they face in disrupting racial inequity, this literature review will focus on the impacts of school conditions on their practice and the role of school social workers in advocating for structural change alongside teachers. In this research, POC refers to school social workers and teachers that work in public schools in the U.S. I introduce critical social work (CSW) theory as a framework to unpack what structural oppression means and connect this framework to school social work (SSW) research to strengthen the application of theory to form a new critical school social work practice (CSSW) proposed through this research. The proposed CSSW framework offers school social workers a practical way of addressing structural oppression collectively and in community with teachers.

In the first section, I utilize research on the experiences of Teachers of Color to describe the structural barriers that impact their ability to activate cultural capital in schools. Structural barriers include hostile racial climates which are perpetuated by the lack of cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity among teachers and contribute to the school conditions that negatively impact the retention of POC. Hostile racial climates maintain school conditions that do not support the activation of cultural capital among Teachers of Color, limiting their ability to disrupt racial inequity within school systems. This section will emphasize the need for increasing the presence of Teachers of Color in schools, in order to create new models of practice that validate their experiences with

institutionalized racism and address structural barriers that perpetuate racial inequity in schools.

My second section will unpack the role of school social workers (SSW) in disrupting racial inequity in schools through a critical social work framework. Critical social work unpacks institutionalized oppression and how it is perpetuated. In addition, it directly addresses the role of social workers in fighting these injustices. Due to the lack of empirical research on utilizing a critical social work framework in school settings or interventions, I draw from SSW research that emphasizes the importance of developing a stronger connection between social work practice and critical theory to address social problems and implement social justice (Sosa, 2019; Stone, 2017). I incorporate SSW research that focuses on how POC work with marginalized communities, such as immigrant students within the education system. This research names particular systems and practices in schools that continue to impact Students of Color and calls for a critical approach to practice that incorporates sociopolitical contexts that students live in. This research proposes a critical school social work (CSSW) model that incorporates critical social work and practice in order to provide concrete practice skill sets POC can activate in order to transform institutions from within for both school social workers and teachers.

Finally, this literature review will focus on what institutional support looks like for Practitioners of Color (POC), for school social workers and teachers. Although there is a significant gap in current literature in both the field of education and social work that discusses how to support POC, the purpose of this research is to propose structures that

address retention and leadership development for POC in schools. Therefore, this section will review ethnographic case studies of school practitioners that utilize a healing justice framework to support their well-being and sustainability in implementing social justice in schools. A healing justice framework presented by Ginwright (2016) is invested in supporting POC to respond to oppression in schools, a task that SSW researchers seek to address among practitioners as well (Stone, 2017; Sosa, 2019). Connecting research from education that I will also summarize recommendations from previous research on SSW of Color, specifically, to inform the critical school social work (CSSW) framework this research recommends sustaining SSW practitioners committed to disrupting racial inequity in schools.

Impact of Structural Barriers on Teachers of Color

The capacity of Teachers of Color to activate their cultural capital in their classroom to support Students of Color is limited due to several structural barriers, including the lack of diversity among practitioners and space to collaborate with others to improve practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). With 50% of our public school population representing Students of Color, it is important to address the shortage of teachers who culturally and linguistically match the backgrounds of their students. In a case study that followed 17 Teachers of Color over a period of five years, teachers who worked on less culturally diverse staff found it more challenging to collaborate in order to improve their classroom practice and make curriculum culturally relevant. Given that 50% of public school students are Students of Color and 82% of teachers are white, this significant

cultural mismatch impacts both Students and Teachers of Color in various ways. Due to the lack of diversity among teachers, Teachers of Color are often treated as experts on racial equity, on the communities they represent, and end up becoming the voice for their racial group in homogenous professional settings (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). The overrepresentation of white teachers contributes to feelings of isolation, experiences with microaggressions, and an inequitable burden on Teachers of Color to support diverse students without adequate institutional support (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). More research is needed on what institutional support would look like for Teachers of Color. However, beginning with understanding the difference in experiences between white teachers and Teachers of Color can begin a necessary conversation about the mindsets that do contribute to institutionalized racism.

It is important to address the shortage of teachers who represent the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of 50% of our public school population that are Students of Color, because cultural mismatch between students and teachers have an impact on racial inequity. To confirm patterns of racial biases among white teachers that previous research has documented, McGrady & Reynolds (2013) analyzed surveys from a national sample of 15,362 high school students and English and math teachers for each student. Survey analysis revealed that Students of Color were rated as caring less about school than white students by white teachers, not Teachers of Color. Teachers of Color, on the contrary, showed a pattern of equal standards between all students, and believed Students of Color cared about their education greatly. Despite the low attentiveness ratings white teachers

gave to Students of Color, surveys revealed that Students of Color actually cared more about school and getting a good grade in class than white students. Understanding the differences in beliefs between Teachers of Color and white teachers is significant because it reveals how institutionalized racism is perpetuated through deficit mindsets, racial stereotypes, and microaggressions toward Students of Color. While Teachers of Color are recruited into education to disrupt these narratives for Students of Color, more research is needed on what districts can do when there is a gap in mindset between practitioners, to ensure all practitioners are aligned with racial equity as a value and practice.

Despite efforts of school districts to recruit Teachers of Color to support Students of Color, school conditions that do not support the professional development of Teachers of Color continue to impact retention. Therefore, perpetuates institutionalized racism in schools given the lack of cultural capital among practitioners (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Bartley, 2018). Taking into account the positive impact Teachers of Color have on academic achievement (Quirocho & Rios, 2000; Dee, 2004), Teachers of Color still only represent 18% of the teacher workforce while Students of Color make up 45% of the public school population (NCES, 2015). Although Teachers of Color stay in hard-to-staff schools for longer than their white counterparts, they also continue to leave the profession at significantly higher rates than white teachers nationally (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011). This pattern suggests that more research is needed to understand what structural change is needed to retain Teachers of Color. More research that focuses on the retention of Teachers of Color may address how to dismantle hostile

racial climates and inform recruitment policies and practices in school districts that create school conditions rooted in racial equity and social justice (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013; Kohli, 2018; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

The lack of racial diversity among teachers and institutionalized racism continues to impact Teachers of Color and their capacity to act as change agents and advocates for racial equity in schools (Kohli, 2018; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011). To understand how institutionalized racism impacts Teachers of Color, critical theory can support our understanding of racial equity and develop shared understandings of how institutionalized racism is perpetuated. In a study of 218 racial-justice oriented Teachers of Color, Kohli (2018) utilizes a critical race theory (CRT) lens to describe how hostile racial climates in schools alienate Teachers of Color based on their beliefs and intentions to disrupt and name structural racism. Teachers in this study reported how challenging it is to address racial equity when white colleagues do not share the same definition of equity, and instead, perpetuate narratives of equality without considering race. They noticed how teachers who held race-neutral and color-blind ideologies tended to blame Students of Color for their lack of achievement. As illustrated previously, mindsets based on racial stereotypes and microaggressions perpetuate institutionalized racism and have significant impacts on the experiences of both Teachers and Students of Color (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). Teachers of Color, then, bear the responsibility to call out how structural racism impacts Students of Color, with minimal to no systematic

support for doing so without being marginalized for their commitment to racial equity (Kohli, 2018).

Having autonomy in the classroom to make curriculum relevant for Students of Color contributes to the retention of Teachers of Color and is an example of how administrators can support their staff to disrupt racial inequity at the classroom level (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kokka, 2016; Gay, 2018). In a study of 16 Teachers of Color, having autonomy in the classroom to develop lessons supported their longevity and job satisfaction in an under-resourced school, despite pressures from the state to prepare students for standardized tests (Kokka, 2016). The benefits of challenging the power dynamics in the classroom from viewing teachers as experts, to learning from students to develop meaningful relationships was another contributor to the retention of Teachers of Color (Kokka, 2016). Viewing teaching as a two-way relationship through which teachers can learn from students and feel empowered from their cultural capital activates a sense of creativity and success among Teachers of Color. By understanding the experiences of Teachers of Color, the cited research surfaces examples of what skills all teachers could be supported with, such as how to structure classroom teaching around building meaningful relationships with Students of Color. Although many Students of Color navigate mainstream curriculum successfully, having support for Teachers of Color to activate their cultural capital more often could benefit all educators.

Another important factor that perpetuates structural oppression and impacts the experiences and retention of Teachers of Color is standardized assessments and accountability in schools. Standardization and accountability contributes to hostile racial climates by limiting the ability for Teachers of Color to activate their cultural capital in their classroom due to constraints on what is taught through mainstream curriculum (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006; 2012; 2011; Gay, 2018; Kokka, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Crosco & Costigan, 2007). In an era where increased educational accountability is linked to standardized test and performance of students, Teachers of Color are caught in a double-bind between their ability to incorporate culturally responsive practices (CRP) in their classroom and the enforcement of accountability measures (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012). The teachers in this study reported feeling unsupported to do CRP at their school site and feeling challenged by constraints on instructional decision-making and curriculum development and by the third year, only four teachers reported engaging in high levels of CRP in their classroom. Providing opportunities for Teachers of Color to develop meaningful curriculum and gain new skills to improve their practices in the classroom can counteract feelings of isolation and marginalization often felt in less diverse schools. Understanding how to teach diverse students in the age of accountability is vital for the retention of Teachers of Color and for the larger task of systematically addressing institutionalized oppression for Students of Color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; 2011; Vaught, 2008).

Throughout the literature presented on the experiences of Teachers of Color, structural barriers that impact the activation of cultural capital in the classroom are illustrated. Structural barriers include hostile racial climates, environments that perpetuate racial inequity, due to the lack of diversity among teachers in public schools. Given that 50% of the public school population are Students of Color, it is crucial to understand why current school conditions impact the retention of Teachers of Color, and what their experiences can reveal about structural oppression. Acknowledging that 82% of teachers are white and quantitative data has confirmed patterns of racial biases toward Students of Color among white teachers, we can see that the lack of racial diversity can have significant implications on racial inequity. Despite efforts to increase the presence of Teachers of Color in schools, there is minimal research on what structures have been created to support Teachers of Color to activate their cultural capital. For example, the cultural background and beliefs they bring with them to their classroom could inform curriculum development that ensures mainstream curriculum is accessible and relevant to the experiences of their Students of Color. Teachers of Color bring with them unique skill sets that make them cultural assets to challenge racial inequity in schools. By understanding what structural barriers impact Teachers of Color in their classrooms, more research can drive policy that calls for recruitment, retention, *and* leadership development to make effective structural change. This dissertation seeks to understand what structural change is necessary to support the growth of POC as leaders, through the lens of their experiences and values as practitioners committed to racial equity.

The Role of School Social Work in Disrupting Racial Inequity

Due to changing policies and education reform shifts focusing on improving socioemotional learning in schools, the role of school social workers has evolved to provide multi-tiered interventions that address racialized achievement gaps (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). The shift in SSW to focus more on academic outcomes rather than a focus on social service delivery has impacted the field and the ways research has sought to address the effectiveness of interventions (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). According to national school social work (SSW) guidelines of practice, SSW are expected to advocate for students marginalized by inequitable access to resources through a social justice lens to remove barriers to learning (NASW, 2013). SSW follow these guidelines by building the capacity of school staff to recognize the sociopolitical barriers that impact student academic achievement and coordinate services that address academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs (NASW, 2013). The role of SSW in addressing barriers to learning, for Students of Color in particular, is a complex challenge that requires an intersectional perspective that considers multiple levels of oppression impacting students, families and larger communities (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). SSW should understand how migration, nationality, gender, race, and language impacts the experiences of Students of Color in schools and the communities they come from that have been historically oppressed. An intersectionality approach, proposed by Sosa, Cox & Alvarez (2017) informs the current research and connects traditional SSW research approaches to critical social work (CSW) values and foundational beliefs. By connecting traditional SSW

practice to a critical and intersectional lens, practitioners can unpack the root of structural oppression within the education system and ensure interventions are aligned with disrupting racial inequity to improve academic outcomes.

Traditional social work and school social work research lacks available research on interventions that positively impact communities of color, inside and outside the education system, which limits SSW ability to utilize evidence-based practices that effectively disrupt racial inequity in schools (Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009; Hodge, Limb & Cross, 2009; Corley and Young, 2018; Pon, 2009; Stone, 2018; Teasley, 2004). In a content analysis conducted by Corley and Young (2018), the researchers found that of the 1,690 research articles published in five highly acclaimed social work peer-review journals, only 7.28 percent (123 articles) discussed interventions for minoritized communities and 65% of the interventions for minoritized groups focused on the individual client without a discussion about historical oppression. The micro-level focus of social work interventions also focused primarily on changing social worker attitudes about minoritized communities, which perpetuates the tendency of social workers to locate mental health issues within the individual, not within the institution that continues to impact outcomes for communities of color. The focus on changing social worker attitudes about minoritized communities also raises significant implications about whether or not practitioners are prepared to address structural oppression in schools. Schools are institutions that continue to enact policies and practices that alienate Students of Color in the classroom. Without evidence-based examples of how SSW can disrupt

racial inequity, the role of SSW in schools continues to be limited in their understanding of practices and systems that perpetuate racial inequity in the first place.

Although national guidelines for SSW call for a focus on racial equity, social justice, and disrupting racialized achievement gaps, there is a lack of research in SSW that utilize an anti-oppressive framework to guide practice and advocacy in schools (Sosa, 2019). An anti-oppressive framework incorporates critical social work (CSW) theory to identify and address structural oppression. Structural oppression from a CSW lens “consists of the ways that social divisions, practices, and processes, along with social institutions, laws, policies, and the economic and political systems, all work together to benefit the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups” (Mullaly, 2002). A critical approach in SSW requires practitioners to consider how social institutions, such as schools, enact policies that further oppress and marginalize Students of Color. Education research has explored how factors such as school discipline has further marginalized Students of Color in schools and can support assessment and intervention frameworks for SSW (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006; Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). Considering how school-based factors and conditions alienate Students of Color due to implicit biases and racial stereotypes in the classroom can inform SSW interventions and practice, which have traditionally been narrow and assumed the source of behavior comes solely from within the child, not their classroom context (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006; Stone, 2018).

To address the gap in SSW research focused on racial inequity, researchers call for a deeper understanding of structural oppression by examining how policy and practices in schools perpetuate racialized achievement gaps and impact the experiences of Students of Color (Teasley, 2004; Sosa, 2019, Stone, 2018). In a review of past and present education reform measures, Teasley (2004) finds that SSW need a deeper understanding of educational research that focuses on advancing the educational achievement of African American students. Education research has spent decades identifying particular practices that perpetuate racialized outcomes for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irving, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Carter, 2003). This is why educational research has called for the implementation of culturally responsive practices (CRP) in classrooms, to disrupt racial inequity and provide equitable access to curriculum (Gay, 2018). By connecting practice to educational theory and research, SSW can play a stronger role in education reform to disrupt racial inequity effectively, aligning with national SSW standards and practice models that recommend SSW to be engaged with educational policy and advocacy (NASW, 2013; SSWAA, 2013).

SSW researchers have proposed that an important role SSW play within the education system is to support teachers to examine their biases and address particular practices in the classroom that perpetuate racial inequity (Teasley, 2004; Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). Because SSW are expected to be vocal about racial disparities and injustices within the education system (Frey et al., 2017), working with teachers to understand the root cause of these disparities is an example of how SSW can incorporate

a critical lens that address structural oppression (Sosa, 2019). The role of SSW in building capacity of school staff to address implicit biases requires an intersectional lens that examines how attitudes toward Students of Color impact academic outcomes (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). For this reason, SSW seeks to disrupt the impact of education reform that has led to biased curriculum and instruction that promotes Eurocentric values and beliefs in the classroom and has perpetuated racialized outcomes (Teasley, 2004). SSW do this by supporting teachers in understanding differences in cultural values so that student behavior is not misinterpreted as disengagement, avoidance and defiance. Engagement with teachers to disrupt practices that perpetuate racial inequity is a task SSW incorporate in their interventions in schools (Teasley, 2004). SSW do this by focusing their interventions on strengthening the relationships between families and the school to intervene in the negative impacts disciplinary actions have on African American student achievement. Applying this theory to SSW practice requires more research that explores how SSW disrupt inequitable disciplinary outcomes. Making stronger connections to education research can better prepare SSW practitioners to address structural oppression alongside teachers, which is a gap in the literature this research seeks to address.

Due to changing policies, education reforms, and the lack of available research on implementing interventions that address structural oppression, SSW can play a unique role in disrupting racial inequity. Examples of SSW practice models that incorporate a critical social work (CSW) lens are urgently needed to guide SSW interventions in

schools. Connecting to educational research that examines the root causes of structural oppression such as research on the impact of school discipline policies on Students of Color, implicit biases, and lack of readiness to discuss oppression, are all areas SSW can focus on in their interventions. Understanding the broader conversations about educational inequity is essential for SSW to align with national SSW standards that expect practitioners to speak out against racial injustices. By incorporating a CSW, SSW can better prepare to support teachers to challenge the attitudes and beliefs impacting the academic success of Students of Color.

Preparing Practitioners to Disrupt Structural Oppression

Many researchers have focused on what it would take to prepare POC to feel sustained in their practice, and a thread I want to emphasize in this study is the importance of having opportunities to activate our cultural capital and be supported to enact our commitments to racial equity (Quiocho & Rios, 2000, Achinstein et al., 2010). It is important to have opportunities to activate cultural capital because historically, specifically for Black teachers in the public education system, POC have been minoritized throughout the education system, even dating back to the 1960s when schools were desegregated and throughout the conquest of North America (Cole, 1986; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Cole (1986) is a historical piece that still has significant relevance in this study because the impact of standardized assessments to measure the qualifications of potential candidates to work in schools has increased the disparity between white and Black educators, in particular. Knowing that Black educators have been systematically

prevented from teaching Students of Color due to measurements of quality, I cannot help but think similar standardized assessments continue to impact POC in other roles, perhaps even school social work. This is why researchers have committed to understanding what it is that POC require in order to feel prepared to work in schools and feel sustained in our practice and be supported to enact our commitments to racial equity (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

Creating systems of support and development for POC throughout school districts and higher education through pathway programs and social justice-oriented graduate programs has positively impacted the presence of POC, specifically teachers, in schools and their preparation to focus on racial equity in practice (Achinstein et al., 2010; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). In a review of studies on turnover and retention of Teachers of Color, Achinstein et al. (2010) found that retention rates among teachers who attended short-term, alternative certification programs were lower, and that Teachers of Color tended to enroll in these programs more than white teachers. After reviewing studies on the quality of these programs, the researchers found that programs that were designed specifically for Teachers of Color led to higher teacher retention in the field. This is significant because these studies support an evidence-based rationale for why it is important to create programs and pathways specifically for POC in all areas of education. Although there is a significant gap in the literature on what systems of support have been established for school social workers (SSW), in particular. I believe that learning about what systems have worked to retain and support Teachers of Color could inform larger

district practices to impact all practitioners, including paraprofessionals, community liaisons, school-based mental health providers, and school psychologists.

Studies that have focused on retention and turnover of Teachers of Color in schools revealed specific approaches in program development that meaningfully support the cultural capital of POC by creating communities of practice that center on nurturing a spirit of hope (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Understanding the specific needs of POC is a gap in the current literature but is a concern that researchers continue to explore by focusing on what programs and systems of support would benefit POC most effectively within districts from a district-wide lens (Kokka, 2016; Goings, Walker, & Gotignola-Pickens, 2018; Gist, 2018). A theme among these studies related to developing a sense of community by cultivating collaboration and support among practitioners, which was found to be particularly supportive for Teachers of Color (Alleksaht-Snider, 1996; Kokka, 2016). Quiocho & Rios (2000), in particular, moved me when they mentioned how important it is to develop programs that nurture the development of hope, joy, and fulfillment as part of the retention strategy for supporting Teachers of Color in schools. The role community plays in the experiences of Teachers of Color is important because building community creates the opportunity to share stories and experiences about personal and professional experiences which can increase our ability to understand broader issues of inequity that impact Students of Color (Alleksaht-Snider, 1996). Given that there is also a concern in schools with the turnover of administration, it is important for more research to be done on the role of building community through collegial support

in schools, which has been shown to positively impact the retention of Teachers of Color (Kokka, 2016). The current study seeks to explore the experiences of POC in order to expand on this literature, particularly defining what systems of support would look like and how they can transform existing systems and practices within schools.

Although literature on POC have focused primarily on the retention and recruitment of Teachers of Color, the limited research we do have on the experiences of school social workers (SSW) who identify as POC highlights how important our experiences are to develop more critical school social work approaches in schools (Stone, 2018; Sosa, 2019). Our experiences of SSW who identify as POC are important to understand because just as Teachers of Color have helped us understand the importance of building community among practitioners, our stories as SSW can inform how we support POC to unpack how we experience structural oppression, to better support Students of Color in schools. Through the lens of Latinx school social workers, Sosa (2019) illustrates the importance of our insight into the multiple layers of identity trauma Latinx youth may experience due to anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and racist climates throughout the U.S. mainstream media and society. Through the lens of Latinx school social workers, Sosa (2019) is able to identify particular strategies other practitioners can adopt in order to approach their work with Latinx children's rights within their roles in schools. These approaches include grounding our positionality within the historical context of our profession to unpack how our presence in schools may actually perpetuate systems of power and domination over Latinx youth. Sosa (2019) introduces a conceptual

framework, school social workers as *neplanteras*, to illustrate how school social workers can become change agents within institutions to acknowledge the intersections of cultural identity, sociopolitical context, structural oppression. Sosa raises implications for future research to continue understanding the insights POC have to offer for us to transform our practices within schools.

In order to understand what POC need in order to be supported as change agents, researchers have focused on how existing practices impact POC, specifically professional development (PD) spaces that perpetuate particular frameworks that do not address racial inequity and cultural identity. For example, throughout school social work and teacher education and training, cultural competence practice models are considered a gold standard for professional development but does not prepare practitioners to understand the connection between learning in classroom and trauma (Abrams & Moio, 2009). This is a particular concern given that communities of color are overrepresented in mental health services but lack the practitioners who understand and address structural oppression through a historical lens (Gilbert, Harvey, & Belgrave, 2009). Studies have shown that simply raising awareness of privilege and increasing knowledge around working with diverse communities through competency models does not translate to practice skills in the field (Petrovich & Lowe, 2005). In fact, cultural competency models used in the social work profession sets up a practitioner to seek specific knowledge that reproduces cultural stereotypes, instead of requesting the practitioner to consider their own identity in relation to the community being served (Furlong & Wight, 2011). Instead,

Furlong & Wight (2011) ask social workers to consider an approach to PD that disrupts the reproduction of cultural stereotypes and engages practitioners in a “dialogue between the personal and the professional, the technical and the cultural.” This shift in discourse to prepare practitioners aligns with programs for Teachers of Color that cultivate spaces for dialogue, self-reflection, and sharing of experiences in order to further our understanding of the experiences of our students. Replacing cultural competency models with spaces that cultivate self-reflection and dialogue is a significant thread in existing literature that can be unpacked further with more research on the experiences of POC.

Researchers have studied the importance of creating professional development (PD) that translates to concrete skills, specifically to disrupt structural oppression as practitioners working in schools, which can enact the commitment to racial equity among POC (Vaught, 2008; Abrams & Moio, 2009). Creating PD that translates to concrete skills is important to the current study because POC come into education committed to disrupting racial inequity and require spaces that activate their cultural capital to enact their commitment (Quirocho & Rios, 2000, Achinstein et al., 2010). To describe the impact PD has on preparing practitioners to disrupt racial inequity, a multi-year ethnographic study of teacher attitudes toward racism reveals that two school districts sought to alleviate racialized achievement gaps through PD on raising teacher awareness around race but failed to address racism as a structural construct (Vaught, 2008). Through this study, Vaught (2008) found that despite having attended PD on race, white teachers continued to distance themselves as being part of racial power structures,

reinforcing white privilege and colorblindness. Teachers of Color, however, were aware of institutionalized racism, as they reflected on their own experiences in school and as a minoritized practitioner. Because the trainings lacked a macro-level critique of education as an institution, the trainings did not translate to practice for white teachers and reinforced the notion that racism is an individualized experience for Students of Color, not part of historical trauma and structural oppression (Vaught, 2008). This study raises significant concerns around how districts allocate resources in order to build the capacity of professionals. School districts continue to utilize PD spaces solely for raising awareness around race which halts the development of POC who have daily experiences with race and racism, particularly in the workplace.

In order to translating PD to concrete skills for practitioners, critical theorists in social work urge practitioners to adopt a critical, macro-level understanding of the root causes of institutionalized oppression and how our individual roles within the institution may be perpetuating mechanisms through our interventions (Mullaly, 2002; Stone, 2018; Sosa, 2019). Understanding structural oppression from a critical theory lens will be important to shift the mindsets of teachers who continue to impact the experiences of Students of Color through their implicit biases and cultural assumptions (Sosa, 2019). By understanding the experiences of POC and their insight into structural oppression, their knowledge and cultural capital can inform interventions that culturally respond to the needs of Students of Color (Sosa, 2019). The skills of building meaningful relationships with Students of Color, understanding how to make curriculum relevant for all learners,

and developing a social justice lens to identify practices that perpetuate racialized outcomes are all examples of skills POC come into education with and utilize in their practice (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Although it is not easy to teach practitioners how to build relationships with students when community among practitioners is not already cultivated, understanding the skill sets that POC come into education with further demonstrates the importance of retention and recruitment of POC to build a school's cultural capital overall. Activating this cultural capital to inform PD could build their leadership capacity and create change district-wide.

Finally, as the work of Gilbert et al. (2009) demonstrates, increasing the presence of racially, linguistically and culturally diverse POC is significant for their retention and capacity to engage in racial equity work. For school social workers, having more POC can not only impact their retention, but also the field's knowledge around evidence-based practices that incorporate a culturally responsive lens from the perspective of POC. The Africentric paradigm for mental health is an example of how POC have shifted the discourse in social work to focus on race within interventions (Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009). The Africentric paradigm emphasizes the acceptance of cultural knowledge and reclamation of African culture as part of the healing practice for the African American community (Gilbert, Harvey & Belgrave, 2009). By incorporating African principles and values such as communalism, spirituality, and collective responsibility, practitioners can promote positive African American goals and sense of self through teaching of history. The Africentric paradigm aligns with many educational

researchers who have advocated for the inclusion of communalism in the classroom in order to support African American student achievement (Hammond, 2015; Irving; Ladson-Billings; Gay, 2018). If more POC are able to provide interventions in schools that incorporate the cultural values and knowledge of Students of Color, SSW interventions will have the capacity to address structural oppression. Increasing the presence of POC that implement critical interventions, interventions that address structural oppression, will allow for more evaluation and research on evidence-based practice models and how effective they are in disrupting racial inequity in schools.

Supporting POC through meaningful and POC-led professional development could have significant impacts on their capacity to do racial equity work. Because most professional development offered in school settings often focus on raising awareness about race rather than identifying mechanisms that perpetuate racialized outcomes, it is a challenge for POC to feel supported and aligned with many of their colleagues who do not have a social justice lens (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Not having colleagues with social justice-oriented mindsets could have an impact on the retention of POC, as stated in the first section of this literature review. Increasing the presence of POC in schools could inform new methods of professional development including spaces where POC may share their experiences with others to validate and activate their cultural capital. Institutionalized support for their professional development would look like engaging POC in a leadership capacity to inform district policies around professional development.

Summary of the Literature

Understanding the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) to inform structural change throughout the education system is a significant gap in the existing literature, particularly for school social workers (SSW). However, research that has focused on addressing structural barriers that impact Teachers of Color have informed many systems-level implications for change, beginning with the importance of recruitment and retention of culturally diverse practitioners (Quiocho & Rios, 2000; Achinstein & Ogawa, 2012; Kokka, 2016). Research on the experiences of Teachers of Color reveal that there are school conditions that impact their retention, such as the emphasis on standards-based reform and the cultural mismatch between teachers and students (Duncan, 2005; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013).

The role of school social workers (SSW) in disrupting structural oppression has shifted in the past decade, due to the emphasis on narrowing racialized achievement gaps, increasing attendance in schools, and addressing the overrepresentation of Students of Color in special education and disciplinary practices (Sosa, Cox & Alvarez, 2017). Researchers call upon SSW to align with our profession's national standards and incorporate the impact of sociopolitical barriers impacting Students of Color and their learning experiences, particularly from the lens of POC (Sosa, 2019). Due to the lack of diversity among POC in schools and in social work as a larger profession, there is a significant gap in the literature on existing evidence-based practices aimed at disrupting racial inequity in school-based practice (cite). However, SSW have the opportunity to

continue shifting the discourse in schools from cultural competency models toward a racial justice framework by collaborating with teachers to identify traditional practices that perpetuate racial inequity (Teasley, 2004).

Finally, understanding how to continue preparing POC to disrupt racial inequity in schools, researchers address current concerns with professional development (PD) provided to school practitioners including the lack of opportunities for POC to activate their cultural capital (Achinstein et al., 2010; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Providing opportunities to activate their cultural capital in their practice is essential the retention and longevity of POC, such as providing autonomy in curriculum development, spaces to dialogue and self-reflect with colleagues, as well as creating communities of practice that cultivate hope, joy, and fulfillment (Allestaht-Snyder, 1996; Kokka, 2016; Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Researchers also address their critiques with the emphasis on cultural competency models in order to shift the discourse from practitioners seeking to be “the all-knowing” experts on diversity and, instead, encourage self-reflection on our own identities as practitioners (Furlong & Wight, 2011). Engaging in discourse that breaks free of the technical aspects of practice in schools can benefit POC because it provides opportunities to activate cultural capital and cultivate community. Creating community among POC is an important thread I would like to emphasize in this research, because as it is commonly overlooked in the existing literature, it is part of the purpose of the current research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The research questions this study sought to address are: *1) How do Practitioners of Color (POC) activate their cultural capital to support Students of Color in classrooms? and 2) What structural barriers do POC encounter in their practice of disrupting racial inequity? 3) How would a critical school social work framework support a district's vision of disrupting racial inequity?* To answer these questions, this research utilizes critical ethnography, grounded theory, and Latina testimonio methodologies to explore our experiences as Practitioners of Color (POC) working in elementary school settings in a public school district in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss how critical ethnography helped me understand my positionality as an SSW and researcher to propose a new model of practice and recommendations for institutional change. The second section will discuss how grounded theory provided multiple strategies to collect data through self-reflective journaling, data memos, field notes, qualitative interviews, focus groups. In this section I will also discuss setting, participant recruitment and data organization. Finally, my third section will explore how Latina testimonio gave me with clarity for my purpose as a researcher practitioner, to open up spaces where we can share our experiences to empower each other and open more doors for future practitioners who are committed to social justice and institutional change.

Research Design Overview

Addressing Power, Privilege, and Positionality through Critical Ethnography

Through a critical ethnography approach, I sought to understand how power, privilege and positionality played out in my research design. To address my positionality in this research, critical ethnography provided a framework to understand my role as a practitioner within the education system. Addressing my positionality was integral for this methodology because I am also a practitioner within the school district studied in this research. For that reason, I needed to consider how my role as a researcher could inevitably have consequences in the way I represent our collective and individual voices and experiences in this research. It is a significant responsibility to be able to tell the stories of colleagues that I work alongside with in the Bay Area. Therefore, critical ethnography pushes the researcher to acknowledge how power and privilege play a role within institutions and our role as practitioner-researchers then is to address “processes of unfairness and injustice” (Madison, 2012, p.4). Because I have witnessed injustices myself, and situations of unfairness as a POC in the Bay Area, I have to consider how my positionality impacts the integrity of this research design. Madison reminds us of this as she states, “Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (Madison, 2012, p.8).

Even though I consider myself a Practitioner of Color (POC), I have a significant privilege of being able to attend school, conduct research on our experiences, and think about how I will present the findings of this study. Critical ethnography helps guide my thinking about representation by expecting the researcher to take an activist stance, not a subjective, neutral stance, particularly through qualitative research. To take on an activist stance, I focused on what structures I felt were impacting POC in schools and sought to address these structural barriers with other POC through qualitative interviews and focus groups. Understanding their experiences and placing myself within the research as another POC impacted by these structural barriers alleviated the power dynamics researchers often have with their participants. To alleviate power dynamics, I did not take a neutral stance in this research. I included myself in the data intentionally because critical ethnography is about inserting myself as an agent of change, understanding structural oppression through a critical lens, and understanding what institutional change is necessary for human freedom and justice

Ethnography, as stated by Madison (2012), is “critical theory in action,” which in this research, is the application of critical social work (CSW) to my positionality as a school social worker. Critical theory is a helpful tool in this research because it centers the experience of the voices less often heard and centered in research, which in this case, are Practitioners of Color (POC). Although some may argue that critical theory is too philosophical, dialogic, and subjective to assert empirical findings, on the contrary, critical theory helps to identify specific examples of how structural oppression manifests

itself within the public education system (Duncan, 2005). In order to identify mechanisms that perpetuate structural oppression, the critical ethnographer must consider data other than narrative data to discover patterns and themes such as school conditions, school segregation, and discourse around how Students of Color are described in research (Duncan, 2005). Pertinent to the current research, Duncan (2005) also states how school conditions and classroom practices, such as overemphasis on standardized testing, impacts[a teacher's ability to empathize and meaningfully connect to their students. By applying critical theory into the methodology, the critical ethnographer can then see how structural oppression is maintained through these classroom practices. To push this analysis forward, Duncan (2005) emphasizes the importance of centering the experiences of POC in order to disrupt structural oppression altogether, because their values and experiences inform the root of racism within institutions. By centering on the experiences of POC, specifically, critical ethnography provides an important framework to be able to see how structural oppression expresses itself in the school setting, impacts both practitioners and students at the classroom level.

Organizing Data Sources Through Grounded Theory

Grounded theory provided me multiple strategies of collecting data in order to strengthen the integrity of this research design and in particular, to strengthen the range of data collected for this qualitative study. I collected data through processes of ongoing self-reflection, self-reflexive journaling, field notes, and data memos to process my experiences, my findings and context of the study (Charmaz, 2014). Throughout this

study, I journaled often from my own individual perspective to process my emotions, thoughts, and ideas about how to interpret the data and my own experiences. My journal entries and data memos provided key insights to how I would construct my research, how I would structure my interviews and focus groups, and how I would present the findings. The more I journaled and rooted myself within my context, the more I became connected to my research purpose. Grounded theory methods are an iterative process that helped me to see through to the ways I would analyze my participant data as actions they took in their practice and how I will engage in my professional role in the district to recommend structural change. Since this study seeks to disrupt structural oppression, the findings in this research are not definitive. Rather, this research is a steppingstone for future research-practitioners to explore how we define structural oppression in various contexts and our role as practitioners to organize as activists are evidence of systems we need to challenge, question and understand more deeply.

To gather the data, I met with seven of the participants at their school sites. I met three of the women in cafes off site to respect their need for confidentiality and comfort in discussing their experiences. I facilitated one to two-hour individual interviews with each participant in the spring semester of 2019. During the summer of 2019, I focused on transcribing each interview manually to immerse myself in their voices and experiences. I coded each interview as I transcribed and organized each interview into a Google spreadsheet to cultivate themes based on process codes, codes focused on action and processes (Charmaz, 2014). I coded each interview individually as I transcribed in order

to respect each individual voice by not cross-coding. This supported me in understanding each individual experience and at the end, understanding the commonalities, themes, and patterns throughout our experiences.

Latina Feminism: An Approach to Data Analysis

As I began interviewing the participants in this study, I learned very quickly how important storytelling was to inform specific examples of how structural oppression can be rooted in our practice and institutional arrangements. Each of the participants in this study described particular situations, examples, and stories of how they attempted to intervene in the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and deficit mindsets among colleagues. They also described stories of students who internalized deficit thinking of their own cultural identity and how they sought to disrupt this narrative by connecting to their students on a cultural level. Each participant shared many significant experiences as a POC, which led me to Latina feminism, a methodology that encourages dialogue, storytelling and narratives in order to identify particular forms of oppression within our settings. Because these stories are nuanced, personal, and illustrate a wide range of experiences from many cultural viewpoints, I saw each experience as evidence of particular phenomena in the education system. Each experience is valid, unique, and introspective of something deeper than just culturally responsive practices.

Through a Latina feminism approach, (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001), our experiences *are* data and can help us understand structural oppression as well as

resilience, transformation and liberation within the education system. Latina feminism encourages the process of theorizing for us since the subjectivity of our lived realities are so often not treated as data in the field of research (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Although having quantifiable data is important in the field of education, I realized that our experiences working in schools as WOC are not often paid much attention to, which perpetuates a decontextualized version of racial equity within our field. Latina feminism gave a much-needed backbone to this research, to support our voices, everyday realities, and the emotional weight of these experiences on our growth as POC. The findings in this research can seem abstract, maybe hard to follow at times, and can be read as non-transferable to other school settings given the unique context each of us practice within. However, through a Latina feminist approach, no one experience is any less significant than anyone else's. This shapes a collectivist approach to understanding what racial equity can look like and forms a sense of hope for many of us who are not often reminded of our natural gifts and power as POC in the education system.

Latina feminism in this research design holds our experiences with great care because our collective stories lead to a stronger sense of solidarity across our communities, which is a necessary tool we need to disrupt structural oppression. Latina feminism also validates the methodological integrity of the data in this study because the stories are evidence of larger phenomenon that may actually be transferable across contexts. I refer to the stories shared with me in this research as *testimonios*, which is a style of methodology that helps us explore how our identity transforms through our

experiences within institutions, to reconnect our lived realities to theory (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Our stories and experiences guide this research design because we need research that makes sense to us, not the institutions we work within, which is why Latina feminism became so integral to the current study. Our stories form cultural solidarity through dialogue about structural oppression and expand our understandings of what it looks like across our communities. A Latina feminist approach seeks to move away from cultural essentialism and toward cultural solidarity across differences to strengthen our narrative within institutions where we are not often recognized fully for our contributions. This study is about our experiences working in schools, our commitment to disrupting structural oppression, and how we sustain our practice in order to do this work more fully. We tell stories, share experiences, and resonate with one another so that this commitment is strengthened, empowered, forming solidarity where institutions often attempt to isolate us and keep us far from forming a movement that could inevitably disrupt its arrangements benefiting certain groups.

It is significant to state here that women are the majority gender demographics of school practitioners, among teachers and throughout the field of social work. In racial affinity spaces I participated in and outside of the school district, WOC typically take up leadership roles naturally to push forward healing-centered spaces. WOC take up roles within our institutions to bring much needed dialogue around our everyday experiences, and naturally raise awareness around collective healing. I did not anticipate for this research to be connected so strongly to healing. However, the more I found myself

surrounded by WOC who wanted to “exert collective power,” the more I realized how central collective healing was for us to be able to do so sustainably within our institutions. I recall the WOC in this research even explaining how they have never been asked the questions I was asking them in the individual interviews. From that feedback, I realized how little time we are able to process collectively in order to unpack how we support Students of Color on a daily basis. This feedback began to inform my conclusion and purpose of my study, which had transformed throughout this research process.

Each of the WOC who participated in this research was committed to supporting Students of Color and examining how her practices can better incorporate their experiences outside the classroom. They acknowledged the presence of significant sociopolitical trauma in their students’ lives, how they entered their classroom with these experiences, and their desire to support them by any means necessary.

The Research Setting

This study takes place in a large public school district in the San Francisco Bay Area. I recruited five teachers and five school social workers who practice in elementary school settings and who identify as Practitioners of Color (POC). Altogether, we represent eight different elementary school sites throughout the Bay Area. For confidentiality purposes, I have omitted school names and neighborhood districts in this research so POC cannot be located in any particular context. However, it is significant to note that five of the schools in this study have between 85-91% Students of Color

(African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Filipino, Hispanic or Latino, Pacific Islander or students who identify with two or more races) and the other three schools have between 22-58% Students of Color. This illustrates the presence of racial resegregation in the Bay Area schools, which is a significant factor in the experiences of POC in this study. Eight of the participants taught Spanish immersion classes or worked in a language immersion program, which also adds another layer of linguistic segregation in San Francisco Bay Area schools as well. Racial and linguistic segregation added a complex geographic research setting for this study, as it impacts the availability of resources in schools that have families who are impacted by complex sociopolitical contexts outside of school.

The Participants

The 10 POC in this research all identify as Women of Color (WOC), specifically Black, African American, Chinese American, Indian, Latinx, and biracial. I intentionally included teachers in this research in order to gather themes across our professional experiences to better understand the role of school social workers in supporting Students of Color in the classroom setting. I recruited teachers from professional learning communities focused on culturally responsive practices (CRP) and from a friend of mine who teaches at a Spanish immersion school. I recruited school social workers from a racial affinity space I co-facilitated within our departmental staff meetings. I want to add a note on the underrepresentation of Black teachers in a school district whose sole commitment to racial equity the year this study was focused on supporting Black

students. Of the eight schools represented in this study, only one POC mentioned they had a Black teacher on their staff.

In the fall of 2019, I recruited each of the participants to focus group gatherings. Because it was challenging to find a date and time that would work for everyone at one location, I met with a group of teachers who teach at the same school for a focus group and began to schedule individual follow-ups with participants to fit their schedule. Facilitating one focus group at one school site was important because it provided me an opportunity to focus on the specific experiences of Spanish immersion Latinx teachers in the same school context. In this focus group, I asked two general follow-up questions based on themes that appeared in the interviews: 1) What does it mean to “respond to trauma” in the classroom? What would support look like to do this effectively? 2) How do you negotiate with curriculum so that it is not a barrier for students? What does support for this look like?

Although I did not intend to recruit only Women of Color (WOC) for this research, I appreciated how our connections brought us together in a large district where we would not have had this dialogue otherwise. I want to explicitly state that I do not seek to homogenize these diverse racial and cultural identities under the identifier of Women of Color. On the contrary, I am inspired by the work of Vakalahi & Starks (2010) in bringing much needed attention to the importance of needing to “exert collective power that breaks barriers” by discussing Women of Color as a community. Portraying the WOC in this research as a community in solidarity of each other’s cultural

experiences as Practitioners of Color (POC) shifts our experiences to become more visible within our institution, as an intentional methodology (Vakalahi & Starks, 2010). I noticed in the individual interviews that several of the participants referred to themselves as Women of Color. Although I have met practitioners who do not agree with the term “People of Color” because of the risk of being homogenized into one group, I feel that in this study, solidarity across our racial and cultural identities will empower our practice collectively.

Ethical Considerations

According to the National Association of Social Workers, the standards for school social work practice state that the value of social justice and human relationships guide our practice in the school system (NASW, 2012). As a practitioner researcher, these values and ethical guidelines are deeply personal to me because of my experience as a community organizer in Tucson, Arizona and as a Latinx Woman of Color who has experienced injustice throughout my educational experiences. I learned so many invaluable skills as a person, a thinker, and a learner within my community in Tucson, who held me accountable for my work and research within the community. I could not conduct research without relationships, and my priority as a practitioner-researcher is to honor these relationships, particularly with the community I identify most with. My identity as a Practitioner of Color (POC) who advocates for racial equity is a central factor in this research and guides my principles as a researcher working within the research setting, I am writing about. When I recruited participants for this study, all but

two of the practitioners were familiar with me as a colleague and friend before this research began. We have engaged together in professional development settings, affinity space planning, or in a mentoring/consulting capacity. Because the participants in this study either knew me or were introduced to me through a close colleague, my activist stance and ethical principles as a practitioner were guided by social justice and human relationships and I believe the participants also believed in these principles coming into the research.

Methodological Integrity

This research study is not written with complicity or neutrality to the history of racial inequity throughout the history of education within the United States. The integrity of this research is rooted in my belief that my role as a researcher is to unpack the history of coloniality in America (Patel, 2016), to share our experiences within oppressive systems, and co-imagine an alternative to the conditions we find ourselves in as Practitioners of Color (POC). I chose to focus on the experiences of Women of Color (WOC), in particular, because I myself, identify as a WOC. I felt it would be important to learn from other WOC who believe in racial equity because it would help me question and challenge my own beliefs as a researcher and learn from how diverse our visions and beliefs are. I knew that by centering our experiences in this research, we could decenter whiteness and finally imagine institutional shifts we are often not asked about and dialogue about what we came here to do: disrupt structural oppression.

Being a practitioner researcher in the same district as the POC in this study became a significant vantage point in the design of this study. Every step of the way, I considered how our experiences could be misconstrued by the institution we work for and the words and phrases we use to express our emotions be taken with offense. I offered each POC in this study a moment to choose their own pseudonym because I knew it would be important for them to be able to locate themselves in this research and how their narrative was portrayed. When I asked the POC how they implement culturally responsive practices (CRP), I suspended any expectations or assumptions within each interview to unlearn CRP as I had been socialized to understand it within our district. Through that process, I learned that these POC were actively trying to disrupt a history of coloniality in our schooling system and were willing to talk about how to unpack it as practitioners.

As an insider-researcher, there was a constant risk I was taking by focusing on structural oppression because it would uncover systems and mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequity in our school district. The participants in this study share personal experiences as POC in this district and expressed vulnerability, humility, and commitment to challenging their own thinking about how they may be perpetuating racial inequity. This work aligns with the project of decolonial education research that seeks to “reverse the pathological gaze” away from Students of Color and toward practices that reinforce whiteness as the norm and level we must all reach in bureaucratic status in schools (Patel, 2016). This work has inspired me deeply, at the right moment in this

research to feel confident that the integrity of this methodology is rooted in my belief system as a social justice advocate, and that my perspective and the perspectives of the POC in this study are valued, important, and can inform the change we constantly philosophize about in the educational research field and beyond. This research is not meant to offer any particular intervention, solution, or completed theoretical framework that can be applied to other contexts. Our experiences in the education system as POC cannot be replicated. However, this research is meant to be relatable to other POC who are seeking energy, examples, and affirmation that our work in the education system is critical, urgent, and valuable.

Finally, the school district this research takes place in provides a unique opportunity to examine structural oppression, in particular, due to its mission and vision for access and equity. To maintain confidentiality of both the setting and participants, I do not name the school district or cite documents from the school district's mission and vision. However, this district believes "equity is the work of eliminating oppression, ending biases and ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants through the creation of multicultural, multilingual, multiethnic, and multiracial practices and conditions." This belief provides a unique context for the current research because an active stance on "eliminating oppression" implies that there are structures in place to do this work effectively. Although the racialized achievement gap is persistent, even within a district with an active equity stance such as this one, being able to work within this context where access and equity is a belief and vision of a district provides an important

opportunity for insider-research to take place. The experiences of POC in this study represent both a tension and an alignment with this mission and vision for access and equity.

Chapter Four: Findings at the Classroom Level

This study explores how Practitioners of Color (POC) disrupt racial inequity at the classroom and school-wide level and the structural barriers they face as POC seeking to disrupt racial inequity. This chapter begins to unpack the classroom level first, with a focus on how teachers in this study conceptualize culturally responsive practices (CRP) in their classrooms and what they still want to know in order to improve their practice. In this study, I chose to focus on CRP as a framework because the school district has utilized CRP as an approach to address racial equity in schools through professional development strategies. I also chose CRP as a framework to talk about racial equity in this study because I wanted to learn from POC how they translate CRP to practice. Each participant in this study were asked three questions in individual interviews: how they define culturally responsive practices (CRP), how they implement CRP, and the barriers to implementation in their practice.

This chapter will focus on findings that address my first and second research questions on how POC activate their cultural capital to support Students of Color and what structural barriers do POC face in their practice. The two themes that emerged from the individual interviews with teachers in this study were: 1) Strengthening relationships with families and 2) Transforming systems from within. These two themes describe values and actions teachers take in their classrooms to create equitable classroom climates that engage with the strengths and cultural capital of their students. The first theme describes how important family and home culture and knowledge is to teachers in

this study, their values and beliefs around the importance of home culture. The second theme focuses on how teachers engage in critical self reflection to question their roles and assumptions of how they have been professionalized to transform traditional practices. Through their critical lens, they transform their practices, and thus, transform systems from within for racial equity. Teachers describe the importance of letting go of “certain perceptions of teaching” in order to be flexible to students’ needs and teach a critical life skill that can transform society: understanding differences. By understanding differences, teachers describe their intention to support their students emotionally, culturally, and equitably to disrupt traditional practices and power dynamics in schools. Disrupting traditional practices transforms the education system from within, as change agents and leaders of racial equity.

Strengthening Relationships with Families

The teachers in this study shared strong beliefs about the importance of partnering with families to strengthen their student’s learning experiences in their classrooms. Strengthening relationships with families is an action each of the teachers in this study take to establish trust with students in their classroom and classroom climates where students can be vulnerable, open and engaged with their learning. The teachers value relationships with families because they reflect on their own experiences growing up in schools as Students of Color. They thought of their own families and how they navigated public schools and how their family’s values have inspired their practice as teachers. For these teachers, relationships with families was central to their role as a

teacher because of our family's experiences in schools. From our own experiences and cultural capital at POC, a lot of our conversation about what culturally responsive practices (CRP) were centered on families.

Teachers share their value of family and home culture as capital in the classroom to engage Students of Color meaningfully in their learning and create environments that teach students not just to recognize cultural differences, but to interact in nurturing and supportive ways toward each other in community. Gloria, a Latinx kindergarten Spanish immersion teacher who was born and raised in the Bay Area, shares how her family in her own educational trajectory was important for her success as a student in Spanish immersion classrooms. Gloria states,

I think of how important it was for my family to be reflected in my schooling and so that it meant in kindergarten, when my dad had my little sister in her stroller, they were present and it means now as an educator that going on a field trip with 20 students and having 14 parents come with me, um, and it just means that my kids feel they are present and welcomed and received in the classroom with a lot of love from all stakeholders. I think that's important to me.

Gloria describes her classroom as an open learning space that includes families in her student's learning, which was an important memory in her own schooling experiences. When Gloria says, "my dad had my little sister in her stroller," she connects this memory to her value as an educator to ensure her students feel their own families are "present and

welcomed and received in the classroom.” Gloria mentioned to me that she had attended Spanish immersion schools, which may be where she had teachers who instilled this value for family in her as well. When she mentions that in her classroom, this inclusion of family comes from a place “with a lot of love from all stakeholders,” she alludes to her classroom as a broader community of families that can come together and be together for their children’s educational experiences. Including families in these experiences is important to Gloria, as she concludes this memory, and comes from a place of love, a place that informs her practice in her classroom.

Gloria understands how her cultural capital gives her multiple perspectives to connect with families and how important it is for her as a teacher to ensure students see the value of their own cultural capital in her classroom. For Gloria, her cultural capital comes from her own experiences as a Spanish immersion student and how this allows her to understand her student’s experiences more deeply. Gloria explains these perspectives and how she utilizes her cultural capital to support her students as she states,

I’ve gotten to see this from both a teacher and a student lens, and I think it’s really powerful to see yourself represented in school, that’s why I wanted to be that model for my kids...I can tell them that they are strong, and they will continue to be strong and they are teaching me something by their experiences.

Gloria refers back to her experiences in Spanish immersion classrooms and how this “teacher and student lens” gives her a perspective to understand how important representation in the classroom. Gloria states her intentions as an educator when she said, “I wanted to be that model for my kids,” just as her teachers had been for her. She sees her role as reinforcing a strengths-based counternarrative for English Language Learners, that they “will continue to be strong” while in her classroom. The way that Gloria’s family was able to be included in her educational experiences strengthens this “teacher and student lens,” and motivates her to strengthen her student’s perspectives of their own experiences by being “that model.” Gloria is also able to strengthen this lens because she acknowledges the privileges she had as a student because of her family’s cultural capital. She mentions, “My parents had opportunity having networks established in the city, having been born here. That’s not reflective of the students I teach today... I think of the privilege that was warranted with that.” By acknowledging her privilege, she is able to learn from her students as she states, “they are teaching me something from their experiences.” This approach as a teacher strengthens their relationships with both families and students, creating classrooms built on trust and relational connections.

Respecting family’s values, beliefs, customs and suspending any judgment of parenting practices at home is another factor several teachers in this study take into account when supporting students in their classroom. Sam, a 2nd grade teacher who self-identifies as an Indian teacher and immigrant to the United States, believes in partnering with families to better understand her student’s needs. Sam reflected on a meeting with a

mother who was worried why her son still sucks his thumb in class and felt there was something wrong with him. Sam paraphrases the thoughts she shared with the mom,

Well, I can understand your worry as a parent, and I can tell you there's no hard fast rules about when you stop sleeping with your children, or when they stop sucking their thumbs, I think it's individual, and it's up to you to listen to those if you want, I can tell you that this is a classroom where all the students, like, respect it, and respect their differences in that way.

Sam attempts to empathize with this mom when she stated, "I can understand your worry as a parent." Empathy is important for strengthening relationships with families because it suspends judgement or reinforces the expert-stance many teachers may try to take when supporting families. Sam disrupts this traditional power dynamic between teacher and family, as well, by reminding the mother that her son is an individual, and ultimately has the power to adhere to other perspectives if she chooses. Sam also informs the mother that students in her classroom value the differences in needs among each other, which speaks to Sam's priorities as a teacher to create inclusive and equitable classroom cultures for all students. Sam's reflection shows us that she takes time to make a connection with this mother, to share information, and reassure her that her child is cared for in her classroom. Sam's approach may contribute to strengthening the relationships between the school and home.

Sam's approach to deepening her understanding and knowledge about her student's home culture strengthens her relationships with families and her practice in the classroom as a culturally responsive practitioner. Deepening her knowledge about home culture illustrates a willingness and a commitment to the impact she makes on students from different cultural backgrounds. When I had asked Sam what she thought of when she heard the term culturally responsive practices (CRP), Sam stated, "...culture is experiential, that there are different ways to be, and that these are different for different human beings." Sam highlights how supporting students from different cultures is important for her practice because culture is "experiential," which includes their experiences in her classroom. For her, culturally responsive means understanding the depth of culture and how it shows up in her classroom, as she asks, "Who are my kids beyond their physical selves? What are they grappling with identity wise? How can I be an individual who impacts them in a positive way?" Sam is mindful of how culture does not always show up physically, but that by understanding what it means more deeply to students, she can make a positive impact. Establishing partnerships with families to deepen her understanding of their home culture is one strategy Sam utilizes to have a positive impact on students as Sam shares her approach to meeting with families,

...if I'm addressing a student behavior, I say, "I'm having a challenge with this behavior in the classroom, do you see similar behaviors at home? And if you do, what would be the way you address them because it might help me?" So, I think in that way, parents see me as someone who is working

along with them and not necessarily someone they have to answer to, and that I'm also seeking their home culture.

When Sam shared with me her approach to talking with a family about her student's behavior, her intent was to explain how she reverses the pathological gaze often placed on Students of Color due to their behavior in classrooms (Patel, 2016). Sam shifts the conversation from blaming students for their behavior, or telling families what to do, by "seeking their home culture" as a tool and resource for her practice in the classroom. Sam asks how they "address them" at home, and how they can help her as a teacher in such a calm, neutral, and steady tone, careful with her word choice but intentionally trying to understand what her student's cultural practices are. Wanting to learn from families on how to support her students transforms the traditional teacher-as-expert role that perpetuates power dynamics between school and home cultures. By the end of the year, Sam shares that she feels her classroom becomes a family, due to her approach to partnering with families and considering home environment as a resource for her practice as a teacher.

Isabel, a Latinx/Chicana 1st grade teacher, also believes in the connection between home culture and learning in the classroom as a resource to strengthen her relationships with families and establish a sense of community in her classroom. Isabel states that culturally responsive practices (CRP) is all about "really looking at where the child comes from, and what their rules and the norms from their home, what their beliefs, and that type of thing as well as how they learn and the best way for them to learn." Just as

Sam does with her role as a teacher, Isabel seeks to disrupt power dynamics between her and families by positioning their home culture as the most powerful resource to support a student's learning in the classroom. For instance, she described her flexibility as a teacher in the classroom, and how she opens up conversations between her and students, specifically about home culture, norms, and beliefs that impact how they interact with one another. Isabel states, "people think that because I work with little guys, because they're 6-year-olds, they can't have those conversations. They're very ready for those conversations." Isabel reflects on an assumption about when it is developmentally appropriate to bring up race, culture, and gender with 6-year-olds that "they can't have those conversations." Isabel raises issues of race, culture and gender through literature in her classroom, and asks her students questions like, "Why aren't there more stories with two moms?" Isabel asks questions about family structures, in particular, because she believes this practice bridges student's home culture to what and how students learn together in her classroom. By modeling how to explore this curiosity around different cultural norms and family structures with her students in a respectful and humble way, Isabel believes that she is teaching her students how to advocate for themselves and say, "This is what I need in order to do better." By bringing in issues of representation of diverse family structures in children's literature, Isabel helps students relate to deeper questions of equity, what it means to feel represented in their learning, and how she as a teacher "sustains them" culturally in the classroom.

When classroom and school cultures reflect the home cultures of our students, a powerful bond can be created to strengthen our relationships with families. Luna, a Latinx 1st grade Spanish immersion teacher, shares her beliefs about supporting families to raise their children through their own, unique home cultural norms and customs. Because she identifies culturally with her students, she shares,

I feel the children I've worked with in the last two years when I started working in Spanish immersion, that connection between how I respond to them and how their parents probably respond to them because we have cultural similarities. The bond between the child and I has been completely stronger and it definitely felt like I laugh and make jokes about it with their parents and no matter what I do they keep coming back to me running with gifts and their parents say it's because they love you, of course they know we love them.

The excerpt above illustrates a transformative dynamic between her and her students' as well as their families, as she describes the power of having "cultural similarities." Luna describes this action of working "with," which describes that dynamic, and how the cultural similarities becomes a resource for her to strengthen a "bond between the child" and herself due to her connection with the family. Luna describes being able to communicate and interact in a culturally relational way, by being able to "laugh and make jokes" with the family. I noticed that Luna laughed herself as she began thinking about times when her and a family were able to laugh in Spanish, something that I

interpret as a significant cultural exchange for a Latinx family. Being able to laugh with a teacher disrupts a traditional dynamic Latinx families often feel with teachers, including myself and my own family. Luna takes great care in establishing this transformative dynamic with her families, as she describes more in depth her approach,

Well, family structure plays most of it just because of how important they are. Like my kids say, I'm their school mom. And so its very important to me to one, be close to the parents and very communicative but also know what is the structure at home because there could be two households, so I might need to send two papers home, or communicate with two parents rather than one. There are some children with no parents, they're in foster care, with grandparents, they only speak Spanish, or they don't speak any English, or they don't speak any Spanish but their child is in an immersion class, so I need to send things home in English

For Luna, being considered a "school mom" comes from the connection she makes with her students' families and how they view her role in their child's life. This is very meaningful because in Latinx families, extended family is just as important as the main caregivers. Being mindful of "the structure at home" deepens this connection to families because it shows she cares about the experience of her student's when they return home at the end of the day. Her relationships with families are strengthened when she takes necessary steps toward including and informing them of their child's learning and schooling experiences. Her role, as a teacher, is to be part of the child's larger social and

contextual experience, as part of a larger network of adults supporting children, as she states,

And I'm not a parent but I've had enough experiences with parents in different situations and different states of their relationships that I feel it takes a village, and I feel I'm a very good part of that village and so I feel like it's a big part of how you respond and are culturally responsive and respectful to each child no matter how old they are.

Luna sees herself as “part of that village” her students come from, and how her relational approach to strengthening relationships with families has a positive impact on her practice as a teacher. Luna helped me to see that strengthening relationships with families impacts her practice as a teacher, not the other way around.

Gloria, Sam, Isabel and Luna create a transformative dynamic with families, through their own lived experiences, their cultural beliefs, and their ability to relate to families on a cultural level, which strengthens their practice in their classroom. Strengthening relationships with families is a “big part of how you respond” in classrooms as a culturally responsive practitioner, as Luna put it so boldly. Starting from a place of love is an essential part of this transformative dynamic between teachers and families. When you start from a place of love, compassion, and curiosity, the teachers describe feeling able to connect their student's home culture as a resource to their learning experiences in their classroom. This is especially true for Students of Color

whose cultural norms and beliefs are not reflected in traditional, mainstream curriculum and classroom practices. This is why these teachers expand on their beliefs of how important it is to strengthen relationships with families, not as a task of a culturally responsive educator, but as an intentional strategy to strengthen their ability to be culturally responsive in their classroom. They do not start from a place of expertise. Rather, they start from a place of love, and from there, are able to learn what it takes to open their classroom doors to every culture and learn from their students through a relational and transformative approach.

Transforming Systems from Within

The POC in this study readily questioned their own practice and positionality and actively sought to transform their practice and the education system from within. Teachers described traditional practices as “a certain perception of teaching” that comes from their professionalization and training as practitioners, including what they have to teach, as Mar describes it. Traditional practices, from their lens, includes expecting students to sit still in desks, behave in particular ways, or perform at specific standards. The teachers in this study feel that questioning their practice allow for opportunities for personal and professional transformation, which allows them to strengthen their practice in their classroom. They strengthen their practice by understanding the cultural differences and needs between their students, and how their own cultural values and assumptions impact students. Their intention to transform the system from within by consistently questioning their practice was inspiring for me as a researcher and

encouraged me to even question my approach to this research and analysis of their experiences. Their intentionality to transform their practices in order to cultivate equity among their students speaks to a broader intention and purpose to transform the school system from within.

The teachers in this study reflect on their experiences in school as Students of Color as a way to inform their practice in the classroom and question what they may have internalized and perpetuate as a teacher. Gloria recalled ways that teachers supported her growth as a Latinx, bilingual student, by including her family in her educational experiences. This informed her values as a teacher now, to include families and create an open classroom culture that allows anyone to engage and participate in her student's experiences. However, there are experiences we have in schools that do not provide positive models of practice and illustrate what structural oppression feels like and looks like for Students of Color. This critical insight provides POC in this study a vantage point that inspires their intentions as a practitioner seeking to transform our practices in schools. As an Indian immigrant teacher, Sam shares, "I'm so aware of the fact that when I came here, my identity was defined by an outsider, um, and I am the other." Being "the other" and an "outsider" in school speaks to an experience within schools that impact Students of Color. Sam states confidently how important it is for her to reflect on her practices because she has experienced being "an outsider" as a student and is "trained within systems" that perpetuate this experience for students each day. She reflects on how she has been socialized as a teacher, stating,

And I know that there is probably, um, harm can be done without intention, because I realized that I am trained in systems that have been harmful to myself even, so what am I extending forth through me that can hurt them?

Sam reflects on having been “trained in systems” that have harmed her and describes the possibility of “extending” that same treatment toward her students. She describes this absorption of institutionalized oppression without stating it explicitly but describes a potential “harm” she could be causing now as a teacher due to having been trained in specific ways. Sam was the first teacher I interviewed for this research, and brought up an aspect of teaching that I considered when talking with each POC in that how do we navigate systems that train us to maintain the status quo? Instead of perpetuating the “good intention” narrative often used throughout the field of education to deflect attention away from structural oppression (Patel, 2016), Sam asks me a critical question about how to identify harmful practices she may be “extending forth.” She reflects on how “harm can be done without intention,” but these same implicit traditional practices have impacted her as well.

Sam’s openness to understand what practices can cause harm opens up opportunity for growth and development as a POC and creates a space where we can ask questions about what has harmed us. In return, we are able to question our traditional practices, to develop a stance rooted in inquiry and growth as practitioners, as Sam asks me,

What practices can we shed that just aren't necessary that we continue to do, and probably continue to...and what are they? What are the practices that continue to box our children, to not allow them to move? Because I want to know, I could be doing that, I could be thinking they're good practices. And where can I find this information? Because that's probably the place where I'm probably unintentionally harming, but somewhere along the line I was told this was a good practice, and who told me that? And do I believe it? I have huge questions around those.

Sam asks critical questions about how she has been professionalized as a teacher when she asked, "What are the practices that continue to box our children...?" As a teacher who has taught for over 15 years, this was a powerful moment for me hearing her narrative because she was also the first POC I interviewed for this study. I was taken off guard by how many "huge" questions she still had about how to transform her practice which is not a sense I get from most teachers who have been teaching for longer than 15 years. Sam models a sense of inquiry and openness to critique her own practice, and her sincere tone around knowing how she may be "unintentionally harming" students showed me that she has an interest in undoing traditional practices that we can "shed," as she puts it. Although she asks questions and feels she does not have the answers to yet, Sam is questioning the very nature of how she was trained as a teacher, which is an important first step any practitioner can take to transform the system from within. Sam states that "somewhere along the line" she had internalized specific practices or beliefs that she may

not even believe anymore as a teacher. She even asks, "...who told me that?" This question was profound for me, because it speaks to the impact professionalization has on a teacher's skills and confidence that they are practicing in ways that are transgressive, transformative, and having a positive impact on Students of Color. She reveals a process that may be happening for other teachers where they may not have space to ask these questions and consider what may need to change. If we aren't able to ask questions that challenge our practices, how are we expected to grow as POC, as leaders of racial equity?

As POC engage in culturally responsive practices (CRP), they describe particular moments in their classroom where they realized how important it was to refrain from imposing expectations on students without first centering the student's needs and modalities as a learner. Mar, a second-year teacher, describes teaching students who require different accommodations in her classroom and how she remembers her own needs as a student. Mar recalls a student who continued to remind her to reframe her expectations in the classroom as a teacher, sharing,

...you can have a certain perception of what teaching should be or what it should look like cuz every kid learns it differently. He is over here doing knee spins as we're going over the sounds but when I ask him individually, he can repeat it to me. I don't know if he's getting photographic memory when he's doing those spins and soaking it all in but he's gotten it. So in that sense, I know that so many minority students

get in trouble for doing things similar to that even though that could be their way of learning.

When Mar describes “a certain perception” of teaching, she realizes that there are often prescribed expectations teachers feel “they should be doing,” instead of centering the experiences and needs of students first. For her student, Mar learned that he did not need to sit still to learn, that he needed physical movement to focus while she taught. Mar explains why it is important to think about what students need to learn when she states, “Because sitting in one particular spot and having to look at the board, you can do that and completely zone out...I know that was me. And I know that’s why I let him do that...it’s difficult for teachers.” Mar states that “many minority students get in trouble” for needing to learn through alternative modalities such as physical movement, which not every teacher recognizes and they “get in trouble” for it. Mar states that this is “difficult for teachers” because it is not easy for teachers to suspend judgement and expectations based on how they have been trained to think about their role in the classroom. However, if we want to disrupt structural oppression, Mar describes CRP as a process of reflecting on our practice to identify practices that Sam would define as “harmful,” and instead, engage in practices that cultivate a student’s learning needs before imposing expectations to measure to particular standards that are set up to reinforce racial inequity in the school system.

Teachers in this study shared a deep concern for providing emotional support for their student’s lived experiences and how emotional and culturally sustaining support are

critical elements for learning in their classrooms. Sam states her beliefs about CRP in her classroom and her positionality as a POC in the education system, stating, “I’m a believer of trying to change a system from within, rather than from outside, Like internal to external, rather than external to internal.” From Sam’s perspective “trying to change a system” refers to focusing on what a student carries with them into the classroom, not just what is expected to be taught, and connecting their lived experiences to their learning. “Internal,” for Sam, refers to how a student feels in the classroom and throughout their cultural experiences, as she states,

...because I had that belief [changing the system from within], I do think I try to address the internal in the child more, and I speak to a lot of feelings, I speak to a lot of thoughts that we have and stories that we have to try and make those connections and try to make those relationships because I think that those ultimately have the most impactful influence on students and on people.

Sam connects with her overall philosophy of “trying to change the system from within” as a POC to reinforce her belief that the “internal” cultural beliefs of her students, including “thoughts and stories,” are critical resources for her students to make connections to their learning in the classroom. By knowing more about her student’s stories, the relationships she can create in her classroom become stronger and focusing on how her student’s stories can teach them have “the most impactful influence on students.” The impact Sam seeks to make is to reinforce to students that their feelings and

experiences are just as important to acknowledge and understand than academic skills in her classroom. This shift Sam makes intentionally breaks from traditional practices, creating a classroom climate that allows students to recognize who they are beyond just a student.

Sam and Isabel bring in cultural negotiation as something both teachers and students have to do in classrooms to support students emotionally and culturally support which goes beyond what is traditionally expected of teachers. Negotiation, for both Sam and Isabel, referred to the choices People of Color, in general, must do in spaces where power dynamics exist. For example, Isabel describes bringing in her own “teacher culture,” such as the expectations in her classroom, how she teaches lessons, and teaching from standards-based curriculum, and states, “...I also know I’m going to need to teach them in a way that sustains them and let them succeed in the culture of power.” She reflects on her practice in the classroom and if her “teacher culture” impacts her students, by wanting to teach them “in a way that sustains them.” Sustaining her students refers to what they need in order to learn in the classroom, just as Mar had brought up earlier on recognizing different modalities to learning. Isabel, however, describes the teacher’s perspective to the choice she has to allow students to stand up, move around, or sit in a V shape on the carpet, asking herself, “...what purpose does it serve to tell that child no?” Here, Isabel presents a question about power dynamics between teachers and students, and how through her humorous tone in her question, she recognizes how odd it would feel for her to deny a student what they are asking for in order to learn better. Isabel even

goes on to state, “That’s just being trying to maintain your power instead of doing what’s the best thing for that kid and how that kid learns?” Instead of maintaining power in the classroom as a teacher, Sam also talks about power dynamics in her classroom, describes one element of CRP, stating,

it [CRP] is about knowing what home culture our kid’s experience and what can they can bring with them, and what they have to sort of negotiate because this is a dynamic where there’s more children in one room, so they’re going to have to shed some layers, and what layers are negotiable.

Sam describes “layers” here as parts of each student or experiences that inform their beliefs about other cultures. CRP is about recognizing how these experiences may appear in a classroom, by how they interact in “a dynamic where there’s more children in one room.” Isabel describes this dynamic as a “microcosm of 22 cultures” that she has to facilitate as a teacher so that all students feel supported in a learning community. Acknowledging that students learn about culture and emotions through various interactions throughout their own lives and within the school community, Isabel and Sam describe processes they take to acknowledge the needs of their students to be able to be fully themselves in their classrooms, and disrupt power dynamics. Students of Color should no longer have to negotiate in schools at all.

Teaching from a “place of love,” from a place that transforms power dynamics in the classroom and provides space for all students to be fully themselves, Gloria reflects

on how she starts with providing emotional support as the foundation of her relationship with her students. Gloria reflects on traditional practices and what she is expected to teach through mainstream curriculum, as she states,

...one of the things that I find interesting about it [teaching] is it's all dependent on how you teach that curriculum. My students have great results in all of their standards and their academic goals because I'm constantly supporting with a lot of love and constantly backing them up. Even my low students are extremely confident in themselves and it's harder to teach confidence than it is to teach math. So it's all about the emotional support that I really value and I make more present than their actual product they're able to produce.

Here, Gloria describes how critical it is for her to be “constantly backing them up,” and how this emotional support leads to confidence in who her students are as learners in the classroom. Despite the standards she is expected to help her students reach, for her, the fact that even her “low students are extremely confident,” seems more successful than the “actual product” of producing specific levels of work. Gloria transforms the paradigm of teaching to value standards over her students’ emotional confidence in school.

When you start from “a place of love,” as Gloria puts it, POC in this study describe how this supports their intentions as a teacher to not only teach students academic skills, but life skills that will impact how they walk in the world and treat

others who are different from them. Mar describes her philosophy and intentions as a teacher to implement CRP, despite having to teach to mainstream curriculum, stating,

I feel like it's [CRP] something you have to try to implement as much as you can regardless of how difficult it is because that leads to accepting differences. It reminds me of someone that said, "The opposite of what you know is also true." So, I'm trying to remind the kids that you may feel one way, but hold on to that, but there's also someone else who is completely different and that's also true, and someone is going to hold on to that as much as you are.

In this excerpt, Mar describes how important it is for her to bring in CRP, despite how "difficult it is," because by teaching CRP, she is providing her students a skill set of how to treat others outside the classroom, an important element of CRP teachers emphasized. Mar states that it is important for her to teach her students how to "negotiate" (as Isabel and Sam stated) their beliefs because she wants to teach her students how to accept differences, an important skill students need in order to learn in her classroom. She states that CRP leads to "accepting differences," which allows for students to understand multiple perspectives to understand different cultural beliefs and practices. This, I believe, connects back to what Isabel, Sam, and Gloria all state about the importance of starting from a place of love and support to teach students' how to negotiate being in a world with multiple perspectives in harmony, not opposition. Mar would say to "hold on to that," and also consider how another person feels, allowing a healthy negotiation of

cultural beliefs and values to occur in her classroom. I also believe Mar illustrates how she breaks down unnecessary power dynamics in her classroom by prioritizing CRP in their classroom and questioning her own positionality as a teacher to impact her students in this intentional way.

Conclusion

To summarize this chapter, teachers in this study taught me an incredible amount about the level of commitment and motivation they have toward transforming traditional practices in their classroom. They challenge what is expected of them as teachers and actively seek new insight from their students and families to improve their practice. As Gloria so bravely puts it, “I know my strengths as an educator. And I know my areas for growth. There will forever be areas of growth because that’s the field of education. And I know that I value my students and it’s not always something I see among educators.” Gloria recognizes that not every teacher feels the same urgency around continuing to learn and transform as practitioners. Sam had even mentioned that teachers “resist change” often. However, Gloria, Isabel, Sam, Luna, and Mar all question what it means to be a teacher, what it meant for them to be Students of Color in schools once, and how this iteration of self-reflection and critique of traditional practices help them to transform their practices each day in their classrooms. Isabel shared with me such deep insights into how her upbringing as a Chicana shaped her intentions as a teacher. She stated, “At the end of the day, if my kids can look in the mirror and grow up, and say they’re a good person, and doing the best that they can and be proud of whatever culture they’re coming

from and they wouldn't give it up for anything, then my job is done." Isabel's hope as a teacher to encourage her students to be proud of their culture, and to not "give it up for anything," encompasses a commitment I feel POC in this study all hope for as well.

Chapter Five: The School Level

When I asked school social workers (SSW) in this study what they thought about when they heard the term CRP, they each reflected on their experiences in professional development (PD) spaces in our school district, spaces where conversations about CRP and racial occur most often. Because I am also an SSW, my colleagues and I were able to reflect in-depth about our experiences in PD spaces that focused on racial equity and addressing structural oppression. As SSW, we reflected on our experiences in PD spaces because that is when we get to discuss racial equity as a collective group of practitioners. However, our experiences reveal a dissonance between traditional SSW interventions and our definitions of CRP. When I reviewed my research notebook that included field notes, reflective journal entries, and data memos, I also saw a process I began to embrace, as a way to engage in a critical practice of school social work.

This chapter will cover findings that address my third research question: how a critical school social work practice framework supports a district's vision of disrupting racial inequity. The first theme that emerged from these findings, *transgressing professional development*, describes how important it is to receive training that values the relationships we need to build with families over interventions that focus on individualized student behavior. We also desire "differentiated" PD spaces that move beyond acknowledging implicit biases and engage practitioners in self-reflection and critical dialogue. From this theme, I came to realize the SSW in this study were describing particular approaches they take to navigate structural oppression, particularly

institutionalized racism which informed the second theme and theory inspiring this dissertation, *the possibility of critical school social work practice*. As SSW, it is imperative that we consider how our interventions and models of practice seek to disrupt racial inequity in schools and address the dissonance we often face with implementing racial equity as a practice. Finally, the third theme, *engagement in critical practice*, illustrates insights and reflections from my research journal as an SSW to inform a process of engagement for practitioners to consider in disrupting structural oppression from within the education system.

Transgressing Professional Development

The racial disparity between practitioners and students in our school system impacts the experiences of POC in professional development (PD) spaces because PDs on racial equity feel intended for a primarily white audience, according to POC in this study. POC expressed how PD spaces often cater to a majority white practitioner audience because racial equity is often taught from a cultural competency approach. Jordan, a Black SSW, thought of her experiences in PD spaces related to racial equity and shared, “Well, I feel like our district is very into...let’s figure out how to work with the Black and Brown kids but it’s all like a very white perspective.” I asked Jordan what she meant by a “white perspective,” and Jordan explained that PD spaces are majority white, which impacts how facilitators and trainers talk about racial equity. When Jordan stated, “let’s figure out how to work with Black and Brown kids,” I interpreted this phenomenon as an example of how cultural competency models continue to be reinforced in PD spaces

for SSW. I believe that cultural competency models otherize Students of Color and open the possibility for someone from a dominant culture to become “competent” of other cultures. The fact that Jordan mentioned the whole district, not just her school site, also makes me think about how powerful narratives in PD spaces trickle down to school sites and particular practitioners, like Jordan. Jordan’s insight made me wonder about how we can transgress traditional PD spaces, to disrupt the reinforcement of competency models altogether.

Transgressing PD spaces entails replacing the cultural competency approach with emphasizing the importance of building relationships with students and allowing spaces for self-reflection to acknowledge how we relate to students altogether. Researchers have acknowledged that cultural competency models fall short of explaining structural forces that impact racial inequity within institutions, and instead, reinforce cultural assumptions (Fisher-Borne, Cain & Martin, 2015). Instead, researchers claim that we need to move beyond mastery in understanding ‘others’ and understand our personal accountability to transforming institutions from within. This critique to cultural competency models, particularly in social work education, speaks directly to the critiques Jordan raised of existing PD spaces that reinforce cultural generalizations of Students of Color. Jordan shares how important it is to consider a relational approach in PD spaces as a way to engage POC more meaningfully in the practice of racial equity, as well as white colleagues who may not reflect as deeply on how they relate to students. From Jordan’s perspective, she states, “I think when I think about all the racial equity stuff, it’s all from

a very white lens, they don't differentiate it for staff, teachers, or social workers of color, and how that's different for them then it is for the white folks." Jordan states that "they don't differentiate" PDs for POC, suggesting that POC experience PD spaces differently than their white peers. Jordan describes a difference in needs for POC in these spaces when she said, "that's different for them [POC] than it is for white folks," so I ask Jordan what differentiation for POC in PD spaces would look like. She replied,

I don't know if I know the answer, but it would be different, you wouldn't necessarily be talking about like, looking at your biases or that as much.

You would be looking at how you can relate to this student, or how has your experience affected your ability to work with this kid?

Jordan describes an approach that would focus on "how you can relate to this student," which is definitely a contrast from spaces that perpetuate a "white lens" of "lets figure out how to work with Black and Brown kids." She mentions that PD spaces would go beyond "looking at your biases," which alludes to a pattern in traditional PD spaces throughout education (cite the article on PDs for educators). Jordan believes that "differentiated" spaces would focus on self-reflection to think about "how you can relate," and how your "experience has affected your ability" to work with particular students. Her reflection on her experiences in PD spaces inspired this concept of transgressing PD, to address the needs and experiences of POC as part of transforming how we discuss racial equity in schools. Jordan feels we need to move beyond just talking about biases because, "We're already aware of those things. We experience them

daily.” Jordan describes a particular experience many POC may feel in PD spaces that may overlook the fact that there are POC in the space who already have experiences with the content. This creates a tension for POC like Jordan who are looking for further development, for spaces that cultivate self-reflection and critical dialogue. From Jordan’s reflection, I realized how critical it would be to discuss in depth the experiences of POC in PD spaces where CRP and racial equity are often discussed and can reveal challenges with translating PD content to practice in schools.

Shifting the discourse in PD spaces from moving beyond biases to cultivate spaces for self-reflection and critical dialogue can activate the cultural capital of POC to transform how we address racial inequity in schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). This shift toward dialogue and reflection may be the “differentiation” Jordan was referring to, as well as other POC throughout this study. Monique, a Black SSW, also raises questions about how PD spaces cultivate the cultural capital of POC to support their intentions as racial equity leaders. Monique states, “I think it [CRP] comes from me, I don’t think it comes from anything that’s being projected or stated, or I mean, you know they’re trying to say it’s part of our job but it’s still a little bit of lip service.” Monique boldly states that the discourse in PD spaces is “a little bit of lip service,” which may imply that CRP is discussed, but not to a level where our practice is being directly impacted by the content. When Monique said, “they’re trying to say it’s a part of our job,” she also implies that there may be a misalignment between PD content and the work we actually have to do as SSW in schools. The fact that Monique also states, “I think it comes from me,” she is

asserting that she believes her own experiences have shaped her knowledge around CRP, forming cultural capital that she activates to support students and families. I thought it was significant that Monique describes CRP as something that is “being projected or stated,” because it seems there may be a lack of consistent conversations in our schools around CRP. Without consistent dialogue and reflection, CRP will continue to be a projection, like a power point slide in the front of the room. Ericka, a Latinx SSW, shares a similar feeling about wanting more critical dialogue in PD spaces, when she states,

I feel like that would be very meaningful to our students if we would get more training like that, or we would have, like you know, constant conversations on cultural responsive practices and cultural humility and all that good stuff...it would have a positive impact for them.

In this excerpt, Ericka feels that by having “constant conversations on CRP,” the content we learn in PD spaces can have more of a “positive impact” on students. Ericka believes that what we learn in PD spaces would “be very meaningful to our students” if we focused more on CRP and cultural humility. From Ericka’s insight, I believe that the “constant conversations” Ericka suggests we have in PD spaces regularly would disrupt the often “projected or stated” versions of CRP we often receive in PD spaces. I also believe that more critical dialogue and self-reflection shifts from just acknowledging biases and moves us toward the differentiated PD spaces Jordan envisions, thus leading to

improving our trust in the education system to uplift our experiences and activate our cultural capital as POC.

For Ericka, having “constant conversations” was a theme throughout her experience as an SSW, and often considered how important it was to her to engage in critical dialogue with colleagues to build more understanding around CRP between practitioners in schools. When I asked Ericka how she defines CRP, she immediately thought of spaces where we talk about CRP. She replied,

I don’t know the exact definition but what I would think how it will play out is that at every staff meeting or like whenever staff joins, there will be like a part where we address, “OK, how can we be culturally responsive in the classroom? How can we incorporate like cultural values that our students have in the classroom, how are we being respectful of their cultures? Just like a conversation, you know. Like, to be honest, we never have conversations like that in our staff meetings. Like, “Are we being culturally responsive? Are we being appropriate? Are we being culturally humble?

Ericka describes how CRP “will play out” in spaces where practitioners come together, emphasizing the importance of having conversations in these spaces as a way to improve our practice. She suggests that our conversations address particular questions like, “how can we be culturally responsive in the classroom,” and, “How can we incorporate cultural

values...?” She emphasizes that it would be “Just like a conversation, you know,” just a beginning of a dialogue that would lead to more consistent dialogue over time, perhaps. She states that “we never have conversations like that” focused on CRP in spaces where she gathers with other practitioners and states it with a hint of frustration and curiosity. The conversations that should happen, according to Ericka, are framed through questions that will engage practitioners in self-reflection of their practice. For example, she asks, “Are we being culturally humble?” I appreciate that Ericka consistently includes herself in this conversation when she says “we,” reiterating that she also will benefit from these conversations with her colleagues. I learned from Ericka that being able to engage in critical dialogue and self reflection in PD spaces could potentially create a stronger sense of collaboration between practitioners in schools. I imagine conversations and the impact they can have on unity, solidarity, and shared understandings between practitioners, which can then lead to deeper empathy, awareness and culturally sustaining practices with students.

Ericka provides another insight into the importance of critical dialogue and self-reflection in PD spaces due to her experiences in PD spaces that did not address racial equity or CRP directly. Ericka shares an experience in a PD space provided by an outside consultant, stating,

...but it was more geared toward like, ‘being supportive, being understanding of each other, more like workplace and working together kind of thing. Like teamwork. Because we had a lot of issues last year, yah

yah, like half our staff left so it was more around that but not really addressing culture and racism or race.

Ericka describes that her school “had a lot of issues last year,” which led to staff turnover, but that focusing on teamwork did not address underlying issues with racism. I felt that Ericka alluded to this because she feels it is important to address issues of race and culture in a PD intended to bring staff together so that there is more retention at this particular school site. However, her feelings about the facilitator provoked emotions about how PD spaces are missed opportunities for deeper learning that can cultivate a stronger sense of community. She shared,

I thought it was a waste of money to be honest with you. Just a waste of money. She did activities like anybody can do, like if they would have just Googled it, they could have saved that money. But I get it, they needed an outside person ya know. I feel like that could have been more of a training on cultures, it would have been more in depth, more rich.

Although Ericka shares that she understands why “they needed an outside person,” she felt it “could have been more of a training on cultures, it would have been more in depth, more rich.” The depth that she refers to is a deeper learning on how culture and race impact our practice with students. Going back to when she emphasized the importance of “constant conversations” about CRP, Ericka describes that some PD spaces are “a waste of money” because the structure that is set up does not engage in critical dialogue about

important concepts, like race and culture. For POC like Ericka, and even myself, it is important that PD spaces cultivate a deeper learning into how race and culture play a significant role in our practice with students. Through sustained critical dialogue and self reflection, we can engage in this deeper learning and could potentially lead to higher retention of POC in schools.

It is important to consider the critiques POC have about current PD spaces that focus on racial equity and CRP because the content of these spaces should feel applicable to our practice in schools. Without information that can help us increase our awareness around structural oppression impacts the education system, PD spaces may continue to seem like “lip service,” as Monique had described. Salma, a Latinx SSW, describes her disengagement with PD in the past because it lacked relevance to her practice. When I ask her if PD for SSW align with her definition of CRP (“to have a basic understanding of where our families are coming from”), she replied, “I would say no. And to be honest. There’s only like a handful of meetings I can tell you I was paying attention. Sometimes they’re just like very dry or not applicable...” Salma describes not being fully engaged with current PD when she said “there’s only like a handful of meetings” that she felt information presented was applicable to her practice. Applicability was important for Salma, because she described her role as an SSW was to become a “parallel ally with families,” and “providing whatever resources these families need.” Understanding what resources families need requires a broader understanding of how our systems and structures create barriers to access resources or support. Because Salma believes in

becoming a “parallel ally with families,” one training Salma did resonate with was focused on systems and structures that perpetuate racial inequity in the Bay Area. She recalls,

...the time they finally got it right was when that Dr. Malawa came, the way she broke down systematic oppression of the education system, the zoning part. Just kids of color, specifically African American students go through, it was just really meaningful, and it was that one I remember. I remember hers.

Salma remembers a training that was given by Dr. Zea Malawa, a Woman of Color who focused on understanding how racism in home ownership policies created segregated neighborhoods in the Bay Area. Because of the prevalence of racism throughout the home ownership process, the “zoning part” that Salma recollects led to segregated neighborhoods, which inevitably created segregated schools. Salma describes “the way she broke down systematic oppression” as something that was “just really meaningful” to Salma’s practice as an SSW. Growing our awareness around how specific systems perpetuate racial inequity was a different perspective we do not often hear as SSW in this school district and was when our department “finally got it right.” For Salma, being taught about structural oppression impacted her empathy for African American students, in particular, as she learned about housing policy and how it disproportionately impacts African American communities. For Salma, I heard that the applicability of PD spaces includes having necessary conversations around how structures and policies impact

Students of Color and their families in the Bay Area. Salma and I realized we had a shared excitement for the opportunity to have learned from speakers like Dr. Malawa, Dr. John Powell, and even Dr. Patrick Camangian, who have spoken to our SSW community throughout the years. However, the conversation needs to persist, beyond one PD, and become “part of our job.” What I learned from Salma was that transgressing PD spaces to teach us about broader sociopolitical climates can positively impact our engagement in PD, and our ability to understand the deeper needs of the families we work with as SSW. This is what it looks like to transgress PD and empower our commitment to racial equity.

It is important to consider the experiences of POC in PD spaces because it is important to understand how different school contexts impact the capacity of POC in schools, particularly SSW. Because we are often one SSW in an entire school, we are able to see school climate from a different lens than are teachers. Teachers are often confined to their one class and do not often get opportunities to explore other teacher’s classrooms to learn about other approaches to teaching. As SSW, we are able to explore each classroom and work with students from a range of ages especially in elementary schools. Being able to explore the entire school provides us with a unique lens that can inform how we address school climate as practitioner. Our experiences in PD spaces have taught us about our own triggers and how important it is for facilitators to understand how school climate impacts the capacity of practitioners in schools. Jordan reflects on an experience in a PD she attended on implicit biases. She recalls,

...she asked me something and it really triggered me, she's like, "Well, how come..." she said something like, "does your school not feel that it's important?" And I was like, "It's not even about whether it's important or not, it's about right now, we're like in crisis mode all the time."

Jordan recalls the facilitator asking a question that implied her school did not feel "it's" important, meaning addressing implicit biases among the staff. Jordan felt "really triggered" by the facilitator's question because it expressed a sense of judgment on her school's commitment to racial equity. Jordan also felt triggered because her school is "in crisis mode all the time," and that it's "about right now," meaning addressing the level of crisis students and staff are experiencing on a daily basis. She says, "It's not even about whether it's important or not," which does not dismiss the importance of addressing implicit biases among staff. However, she seeks to shift the PD space's attention toward a larger more urgent issue Jordan feels is impacting her school. Jordan continues her reflection on this PD facilitator, stating,

She just couldn't get it. She was just like, "Well, you gotta find time to talk about these things," And I'm like, "Yah, we do, but we need to make time when we are ready to make time. And it sucks that that's the way that it is, so it's like, do I have time to be culturally responsive? Or do I have to put out this fire right now? And I feel like it's kind of a cop-out, but it's also what it is."

Jordan feels “she just couldn’t get it,” meaning the facilitator was not hearing her or understanding the urgency Jordan was sharing in terms of her school climate. When Jordan asks herself, “do I have time to be culturally responsive,” she describes having to choose to “put out this fire right now” over CRP. Jordan acknowledges this dilemma as “a cop-out, but also describes it as “what it is,” meaning her reality as a SSW. Although I do not believe Jordan ever stops being culturally responsive, I do feel she is expressing a struggle many SSW feel working in schools.

These feelings, struggles, and experiences among POC are real and are evidence that by understanding more about our experiences within institutions will lead to spaces that cultivate the cultural capital of POC. Cultivating our cultural capital will sustain our commitment to racial equity in schools, and can inform new models of practice, particularly within professional development (PD) spaces. SSW in this study describe many layers of their experiences but focused on their experiences in PD spaces because their need for dialogue, self-reflection, and opportunities to connect were important to them. The SSW in this study also share how important it is for spaces to be more racially and culturally diverse, to break down the majority white audience PD often caters to. This is critical for school social work to take up because given the racial disparity among social workers nationally (Olcón, 2018), it is imperative that we address the conditions we are professionalized in. Just as teachers are encouraged to differentiate in their classroom to cultivate the culture of their students, Jordan inspired a message that POC also may require differentiation in our practice. Differentiation, for us, would lead to

more equitable PD spaces that encourage critical dialogue and self-reflection, both key ingredients to a culturally sustaining practitioner and stronger school climates. School climate is a stressor for many SSW, as they struggle to be present for the needs of their students but are working in “dysfunctional” climates that are hard to describe to any PD facilitator who is not familiar with different school contexts. Having facilitators and trainers who are aware of broader sociopolitical contexts as well as an ear to the ground who understands the impact historical trauma and structural oppression has on school climate can transgress PD as it is today. How to get to that reality is another dissertation. But at least by understanding the experiences of the SSW in this study, we can start with a vision toward a possibility of critical school social work practice.

The Possibility of a Critical School Social Work Practice

Given the insight SSW in this study provided to transgress professional development (PD) spaces to cultivate critical dialogue and self-reflection about racial equity, their critiques and experiences inspired the possibility of a critical school social work practice (CSSW). The possibility of CSSW, as a theoretical approach to school-based practice, stems from the experiences of SSW in this study and builds off critical social work (CSW), a theoretical lens that calls for practitioners to identify structures and systems that impact oppressed groups within institutions and disrupt structural oppression through collective action as practitioners (Mullaly, 2002). A CSSW approach furthers this theoretical lens to apply it in school settings and focus on how SSW can play a role in transforming how we support all practitioners to sustain our work for racial equity.

Elements of CSSW that arose from the narratives of SSW in this study include the importance of questioning current SSW interventions in schools, and whether they connect meaningfully to culture, family and community. I believe that CSSW takes CRP further toward culturally sustaining practice (Paris, 2012), a much-needed shift in the discourse in racial equity that POC in this study are alluding to. Culturally sustaining practices, according to Paris (2012), fosters “cultural pluralism,” which speaks more to the experiences of POC in this study than CRP. Another element of CSSW is strengthening the connection between home and school. Similarly, to teachers and their approach to strengthening relationships with families, as SSW, we can apply the same value into our practice to understand how systems interact and impact the experiences of Students of Color in schools. Finally, the last element of CSSW that came up in this study was creating space for more dialogue and self-reflection to transform our approach to working with students in schools.

SSW in this study raise important questions about whether the interventions we implement in schools have a strong connection between a student’s home culture and their family. Developing a strong connection between a student’s family was important to SSW in this study and is an important element of CSSW. Just as the teachers in this study brought up the importance of strengthening relationships with families, SSW also bring up family and how we are trained to provide services to them. Salma reflects on PD for SSW focused on tier two interventions, a category of interventions that focus on groups of students in school contexts. She shares,

They don't talk about how to...they just talk about the theory but not the actual practice of implementing this behavioral chart or this check in check out, or the self-regulation. It goes beyond this form of intervention. It's deeper than that. There's a connection, another child attached to this, an experience attached, there's a family attached.

In the context of individualized student interventions implemented to support particular behavioral needs, Salma feels that existing PD for SSW overlooks the importance of a student's connection to their family, that "there's a family attached" to the student's learning in the classroom. Salma states that "it goes beyond this form of intervention," meaning the root cause of student's behaviors goes deeper than just implementing a particular strategy; it meant going beyond the strategy to consider the family. She believes that in PD spaces, "they just talk about the theory but not the actual practice," alluding to a gap between the content in PD spaces and the experiences of SSW in their particular school contexts. The practice, according to Salma, is about finding that connection, acknowledging that there is "an experience attached" to why a student may be behaving a particular way in the classroom. Understanding a student's experiences and their connection to family is an important element of CSSW, as it shifts away from the tendency to "just talk about theory" and actually inform how we relate to the families we are supporting in schools each day.

Being able to put CRP theory into practice through SSW interventions was important in this study because strengthening the connections between home and school

help us understand the various systems our students interact with to improve our approach to interventions in schools. In Salma's experiences as an SSW, particularly supporting Latinx families in a Spanish immersion school, she feels that current intervention models can do a better job at thinking about the multiple systems a student interacts with instead of micro-level interventions, such as behavioral charts and check in check out systems she had mentioned previously. She reflects on her experiences in PD spaces for SSW and how important it is for us to connect our interventions in schools to a student's experiences with other systems, as she states,

They don't talk about the family stuff; they don't talk about the importance of it being full circle. The child is one being in an entire system. But they are just giving you, again, I keep saying textbook, because that's what it feels like. I get what they say, and then I apply it, how I, in my way.

When Salma mentions "they don't talk about the importance of it being full circle," she describes a lack of dialogue in SSW spaces that explore the multiple systems students interact with aside from schools. Salma explains how understanding how a student's school experiences will come "full circle" when we understand their broader sociopolitical experiences, such as the immigration system or accessing resources in the education system. She states, "The child is one being in an entire system," meaning this child cannot be isolated from one system in their life, such as home, school, or their community outside of school. This is why she shares her frustrations about PD spaces

when she states, “they just feel textbook,” which may relate back to what Jordan had talked about when it came to audience and how certain interventions are being taught. A “textbook” approach to SSW interventions in schools remind me of graduate school and how we are professionalized as practitioners. Then we enter school contexts with certain perceptions of what work with certain populations looks like, when in reality, Salma reminds us that there are larger systems at play for each child, and they are part of different systems and family contexts that shape their experiences. Understanding the needs of her students and their connections to their family and multiple system inspires CSSW, and the need for practitioners to search for these connections as vital resources that can activate learning in schools.

As an element of CSSW, strengthening the connection between home and school was important for SSW in this study because as practitioners within the school system, it is important to unpack why connections between home and school can be challenging to strengthen in the first place. As POC, we are vigilant of the relationships families of color, in particular, have with the education system because we often become mediators between families and the school as an SSW. Monique describes a challenging experience when a teacher treated her as a cultural mediator in implementing an intervention with a Black family, as she shares,

My contact with one parent, my first contact with her, her son was the only Black boy in his class, and the teacher requested that I come to a meeting she was having with the mother. You know, I was just like OK,

we put together a reward chart for the boy and wanted me to explain it to the mom. But then it gotta be like, oh you're afraid of this mother, because she's Black, so that's why you wanted me to come to this meeting?

Monique initially felt that she would be able to focus on collaborating with the student's mother on a reward chart she was implementing with the teacher but ended up feeling she was only asked to be present because she also identifies as Black, as she states, "...oh you're afraid of this mother, because she's Black." Monique interpreted the teacher's invitation to attend the meeting as a sign that the teacher is intimidated by the parent because this was also the first time Monique had been introduced to the family. Monique specifies, "her son was the only Black boy in his class," and felt this was an apparent sign that the teacher needed some type of reinforcement of what strategies were being implemented to support their son. I felt this was a pivotal moment to capture in this chapter because it is not easy to communicate specific actions that perpetuate structural oppression toward Students of Color in schools. However, Monique described a common example of when there is a cultural and institutional disconnect between family and school. Monique describes further about institutional disconnect as she states,

I realized I wasn't able to forge a lot of the relationships with the [African American] parents because they didn't trust the school, and I worked for the school. And I was new, and I was only there half time, so I was only there half time. So, I didn't get a chance for me to gain their trust, and then

I also realized I didn't want to go back...That part really hurt my soul to put that in motion.

Monique describes her struggles to support an African American parent committee at her school site when she states, "I wasn't able to forge a lot of the relationships." Monique sought to forge relationships between the families and the school because "they didn't trust the school." However, it was a challenge for her to do so as an SSW because she states, "I worked for the school." Working for the school placed her between the family and a system that she felt "they didn't trust," which was a unique position for a Black SSW who wanted to support African American families in particular. She also specifies she was "new, and I was only there half time," meaning she had just been assigned to this school earlier this year and was only on site two to three days a week. Given her positionality as an SSW, and the obligations she had to fulfill as an SSW working only half time at this school site, she could not commit enough time to strengthen relationships between the school and family, which she describes, "...really hurt my soul to put that in motion."

Through the experiences of SSW in this study, I heard a blooming vision of how we can transgress traditional PD structures in schools, to create space for more dialogue and self-reflection to transform our approach to working with Students of Color in schools. When more space for dialogue and self-reflection is created among practitioners, perhaps this is where we can become intentional about exploring cultural differences between Students of Color, to break down generalizations, assumptions, and racial

stereotypes often perpetuated through traditional practices in schools. I gathered this insight from how SSW defined CRP in this study. Jordan, in particular, describes CRP as a way to disrupt cultural generalizations that reinforce racial stereotypes, assumptions, and universalism within our practice. When I asked Jordan how she defines CRP, she replied,

I don't know what I define it as. I guess, like, [pause] taking every kid as an individual and not lumping every kid into a box because even if you talk about like everything right now is we're focusing on the Black kids, as if all the Black kids are the same, but they're not all the same. So, one practice that we do for one kid is not gonna necessarily work with the other kid even though they're both Black kids.

Jordan describes that in current PD spaces for SSW, "right now is we're focusing on the Black kids, as if all the Black kids are the same," referring to a pattern of cultural generalizations that are being perpetuated in PD discourse. She describes the importance of seeing "every kid as an individual," and avoiding "lumping every kid into a box," to disaggregate each student's experiences as their own within different cultural contexts. This statement was powerful because she feels that SSW are being professionalized through a lens that reinforces racial stereotypes, especially when she says, "one practice that we do for one kid is not gonna necessarily work with the other kid even though they're both Black kids." Jordan explains that PD cannot not be simplified to just "one practice," that CRP is not just about "how to work with the Black and Brown kids," and

that no matter what a student's cultural similarities are, one approach may not work for every student from a particular racial group. She goes on to add,

Each kid has their own story and what they experience in the school is different too. I think about the racism in, I don't even know if racism is the right word, even in the same cultural group, there are so many things that happen within that cultural group, but we don't necessarily talk about that a lot. Especially working at two schools that are mostly Latino, there are a bunch of fights and things within that own community, but we don't talk about it. We're just like, "all the Brown and Latino kids are the same," But what are the differences between them?

Jordan brings up something that "we don't necessarily talk about a lot" as SSW, and that is interracial conflict within specific racial groups, and in this case, Latinx students. She describes that "what they experience in school is different too," meaning that for each student there are different factors that impact their experiences. Jordan alludes to prejudice between Latinx students, when she said, "I don't even think racism is the right word." She describes that "there are so many things that happen within that cultural group," and has been able to see this play out because she has worked at schools that are predominantly Latinx. The fact that Jordan explains how "each kid has their own story," made me think a lot about how we are trained as SSW, and as school practitioners, to think about generalized approaches to working with Students of Color. She asks such an important question, "But what are the differences between them?" Jordan's questions and

concern about how we often operate off assumptions and generalizations about Students of Color forced me to reflect on the approach SSW takes to provide interventions in schools. From Jordan's questions, I feel that reflecting on the impact our actions can have on Students of Color as practitioners is an important milestone for critical school social work. By asking ourselves important questions like how our interventions may actually be distancing ourselves from understanding the differences among students, particularly students who we most often serve as SSW, then I believe we can move closer toward true racial equity in practice.

As SSW, it is imperative that we consider how and when we approach colleagues who do not take time to reflect and dialogue about the impact racism, microaggressions and deficit frameworks have on students, particularly as POC who may experience them as well. Monique, for example, has experienced racial microaggressions from colleagues while working in schools and has also attempted to address these situations through administration to no avail. I chose not to include excerpts from this piece of our dialogue together as an effort to protect the identity of Monique or the identity of any colleagues and administrators we have worked with. However, we unpacked situations when we have experienced racial microaggressions from colleagues and administration as an SSW and learned that it is important for SSW to consider how to address these situations. I realized that an element of CSSW would need to acknowledge that POC are not immune to the deficit frameworks or racism impacting Students of Color on a daily basis. I believe this also applies to LGBTQ or BIPOC communities, who may experience

structural oppression as practitioners as well. Through our experiences, we have learned a lot about our needs as POC, and what we do from within the system navigate structural oppression.

Experiencing microaggressions and implicit biases as POC reveal practices that perpetuate structural oppression in schools, and a lack of structures in place to address these experiences. From talking with POC in this study, I believe that microaggressions and implicit biases are correlated with structural oppression and can be addressed in ways that lead to a greater awareness of what actions and behaviors impact students directly. Understanding the needs of POC is one start to unpacking what conditions we need in schools to sustain our practice. To explore the ways that POC navigate challenging situations where implicit biases or microaggressions impact our experiences, I asked Monique further how she implements CRP, and she replied,

I would say one thing is modeling, which I've found doesn't always work and one of the reasons why is that the other people you're modeling for doesn't even have an awareness that they need to change or have growth that needs to happen. The comments I receive are, 'you're so good, I could never...' and I'm just like, 'really? I'm showing you how to do it.' That's one thing. If people aren't even aware that you're modeling, they just think it's something you're supposed to do, not that everyone should be working that way."

Awareness is an important element of Monique's experiences as a POC, particularly due to her experiences in "modeling" for colleagues. She mentions that colleagues have told her, "you're so good, I could never..." which implies that because Monique is a POC, she is automatically "so good" at CRP, or was able to naturally model a genuine care for students. However, the implication of working with practitioners who feel they "could never" practice culturally responsive themselves, this shows a lack of awareness of cultural differences and a willingness to relate to a student who is different from them. Monique feels that she models for colleagues but realized sometimes "people aren't even aware that you're modeling," implying another level of awareness that has not been activated yet. In order to change the conditions of schools to be better equipped to address racial inequity, it is important to acknowledge the importance of creating awareness among all practitioners so that POC are not burdened with the role of "modeling," in Monique's case. This experience of having to model for colleagues reveals a lack of institutional structures supporting practitioners to increase their skills and confidence in building relationships with students who are different from them culturally. Understanding what structures could be created to support practitioners who do not feel equipped and ready to be culturally responsive is an urgent necessity for schools, and for the sustainability of POC already committed to CRP and racial equity overall.

Understanding what conditions are needed for POC to feel supported and sustained in schools is important because the conditions that impact POC may also be impacting students directly. To understand what POC may still need in order to feel that

school conditions are supportive of a mission to disrupt racial equity, I asked Monique what she defines as a necessity each school should have. She laughed slightly as she realized how important it is for her as a POC to work with colleagues who believe in the importance of caring for students, as she replied,

OK, don't laugh. But I really feel like I want to work with people who have a genuine, love, care, and concern, for children and their education. To me, that's Tier One. Because if you have a genuine, love, care, all those words that I just said, then you're going to go to work everyday and you're going to remember that these are children, not your children, right? Even though I feel like we're parenting them in some ways, we're still teaching them, but some of the ways that they treat children it's just like, "They're not yours!" You know? It's kind of offensive sometimes. Having just that basic, just care and concern, you know? Heart work."

The basic necessity Monique believes every school should have centers around this "heart work," which she defines as "genuine, love, care," for working with students. She asks me not to laugh because it seems straight forward to care for students. However, she mentions that "some of the ways that they treat children" is "kind of offensive," from her perspective. She believes that our work may feel like we're "parenting them in some ways" but the "care and concern" she comes back to is something that she may not see all the time, which is why she asks me not to judge her response in the first place. Learning from Monique's experiences as a SSW helped me understand how important it is to

consider school-wide structures that are in place to support all practitioners to feel able to be vulnerable, to be able to feel the “genuine, care, and love” Monique described.

Understanding how we can explore these conditions to make it about the love and care of students is where I would go next as a researcher in a future study, but for now, ending on Monique’s note of hope and honesty about the important base-line necessity for all practitioners to be surrounded with genuine love for the work is critical.

Engagement with Critical Practice

As I reflected on the themes that emerged from individual interviews with my colleagues, I analyzed my own field notes, reflexive journal entries, and data memos from professional development (PD) and racial equity-focused spaces and discovered ways that I have envisioned engagement in critical practice. The possibility of a critical school social work (CSSW) practice emerged from individual interviews with school social workers (SSW) in this study, which also resonated with reflective notes I made to myself to think more deeply about what it would look like to engage in this practice.

When I reviewed journal entries and notes from insights that I gained from many speakers, trainings, and readings that I participated in between fall 2019 and spring 2020, I found that there were four themes that illustrate an engagement in critical practice: 1) Engagement with self-reflection, 2) Exploration of positionality, 3) Exploration of power and privilege, and 4) Identifying needs and setting goals. These themes are reflective of many pieces of wisdom I have learned from others and do not represent a recently discovered process from myself isolated from others. Theory is important for

practitioners, but also the process through which we engage with theory in practical terms is even more important to me as a researcher. Therefore, combining both tenants of critical social work theory and the practice of engaging in dialogue, these four themes encompass a praxis through which practitioners can engage in critical practice focused on identifying systems and practices that perpetuate racial inequity in schools.

Engaging in Self-Reflection

When I think about self-reflection, I think about what Dr. Shawn Ginwright once said in a presentation to my doctorate program about the importance of constructing theory and feeling nurturance as a practitioner-researcher. Dr. Ginwright said, “If your humanity is not intact, we can’t construct theory.” Dr. Ginwright said this to make a point about how often we leave our hearts outside the room as researchers and forget to maintain our own humanity and nurturance as humans participating in this process of constructing theory. I believe that nurturance comes from self-reflection, because then we are able to take time to consider what our needs are as practitioners. By first engaging in self-reflection, practitioners can begin to understand themselves and their own individual experiences, finding the roots of many obstacles we may have faced in our journey to work within this system. It is important to engage in self-reflection because in order to construct theory about our practice, we need to spend some time exploring how to keep our humanity intact. Dr. Ginwright suggests a “holistic understanding” of our practice by starting with self-reflection, as he further reiterated that, “We’re given a lens, not a mirror.” Engaging in self-reflection means taking that mirror and asking ourselves critical

questions as practitioners that reveal how our own stories and experiences impact our practice. Once we are able to reflect and heal from these experiences, we can begin to “create a more beautiful struggle,” as Dr. Ginwright asks us to consider, on this path of critical practice.

Engaging in self-reflection allows us to consider ourselves in relation to those we work with, which closes the distance between our lived realities and our roles within school systems. This is critical to do because social toxins outside of our school systems are usually disconnected from how we teach and interact with students in schools. As I learned from Practitioners of Color (POC) in this study, what we are expected to do as POC does not always connect to the lived realities of our students. To close this distance, engaging in self-reflection and asking ourselves how we experienced school and when we felt success as a student can prompt more insight into whether our own needs were met as students and how this impacts us as practitioners. Many POC, including myself, reflect on how the sociopolitical contexts we navigated and continue to navigate impact how we think about the role of school in our lives. Thinking about our own experiences in schools can lead us to new understandings about the interventions we implement and how they align or do not align with alleviating structural oppression. Reflecting on how our own cultural identity was either cultivated or subtracted in schools is another critical element to this section. Because there is little time in a typical school day structured by mainstream curriculum and standardization, there is not often time for practitioners to self-reflect on how their own experiences impact their role within the institution.

However, once we understand our own experiences, perhaps even those practitioners who are not POC can begin to see disconnections and connections they may have to students. Ultimately that is the goal of critical practice, and to be able to connect this work to the impact it can have on our students is an area of research that is definitely needed for future studies.

Finally, self-reflection ultimately helps to guide us back to our intentions as practitioners in schools, which is particularly important for POC to consider because our intentions are often tied to our cultural identities and values. Because many of us unfortunately experience subtractive schooling, we need to take time to reflect on what our intentions are to remind ourselves of the skills, experiences, and strengths we bring to our work in schools. For those who do not identify as POC, engaging in self-reflection is critical to understanding intentions, given the cultural mismatch that often exists in classrooms. Being able to own up to our intentions as practitioners can develop a sense of vulnerability among colleagues who may not often connect on the level of intentions. For POC in this study, intentionality was a significant concern for us because we often interact with professional development (PD) facilitators or administrators who had not developed trust between us. Without this sense of trust, we become skeptical of intentions from those we interact with. When I think about how mental health and education overlap, this is one area I reflect on deeply: how trust is embedded in our institutions. I feel that self-reflection on intentionality can naturally lead to trust, if practitioners are given the time and space to engage in this practice. Once intentionality becomes a

forefront of our practice, we can learn from each other with a stable sense of trust built in because we did our own work of self-reflection to then engage with others genuinely and meaningfully.

Exploration of Positionality

Exploring our positionality within the education system is a necessary step to engage in critical practice because as school-based practitioners, we are not often encouraged to consider how our role in the system effectively disrupts or maintains structural oppression at a macro level. I believe this is where our growth as practitioners becomes stunted, because we do not often engage in processes or spaces that explore our positionality in relation to the students we work with. Much of the attention in the school system is on Students of Color, and the interventions that we need to implement as practitioners to close the gap between them and white students (Patel, 2016). We then only view our positionality in terms of racialized achievement gaps, instead of how we each cultivate or subtract the cultural identities of our students and ultimately, ourselves. To flip this deficit lens away from students, one central argument throughout this research is that we need to spend more time focusing on our own positionality within the system to deconstruct the systems and practices that continue to maintain those achievement gaps.

When I looked back at my journal entries, the theme of positionality came up not only in regard to my positionality as a researcher, but my positionality as a Practitioner of

Color (POC). Our cultural identity inspires our purpose as practitioners; our families, language, and values are intertwined in our practice. Each POC in this study shared from a place of love, a position of care and commitment to our communities and our solidarity with others. This positionality is not the same as our job description and professional expectations as practitioners, however, which can create a tension between our identity and role within the education system. This schism that is created because we are trained to think about the effectiveness of our interventions based on quantitative data and alignment with mainstream curriculum. If we are truly to come from a place of love, then that means being able to cultivate our cultural identities and the joy we feel from supporting our communities. However, the cultivation of joy and cultural identity is not always the priority as a school-based practitioner. Asking ourselves critical questions that incorporate our ability to cultivate joy and our own cultural identity, however that might mean to each of us, is an important element of critical practice. When we are able to feel joy in our work, then we are able to feel in community with others around us and model for students what restorative and healing justice feels like in schools.

As I asked each POC in this study to describe how they implement culturally responsive practices (CRP), they revealed the ways that they utilize their cultural capital to support Students of Color. Utilizing our cultural capital meant being able to connect to families on a cultural level, to understand the context our students are growing up in, and to make the learning in the classroom relevant to their lived experiences. I felt this was a unique quality of POC who often see the world through a racial equity lens naturally.

However, this is not the lens that we are often trained in to engage with our practice in schools. Asking ourselves how we activate our cultural capital can mean so many things to different practitioners but can all lead to a valuable outcome of critical practice: identifying our needs. When we are able to understand the ways that we connect to our practice on a cultural level or are suppressing our cultural capital to fit the mold of public education practitioners, then we are able to express our needs in healthier ways. The pacing of mainstream curriculum, the factory-model school schedule, and the segregation of schools all contribute to feelings of isolation from each other and our self. Each POC in this study referenced the inequity that is perpetuated through the construction of our schooling frameworks, down to the books we are expected to reach with students to the inability to cultivate a restorative classroom. Our inability, however, was not rooted in a lack of willingness or integrity. On the contrary, with myself included, our inability to cultivate a healing centered and critical practice was due to the lack of spaces that we were able to cultivate our own identity and learn from others around us to build community. Exploring our positionality as practitioners does not just mean differentiating our roles and meeting the standards that are placed on us by the institution. Exploring our positionality also relates to our own, individual self and whether we feel our identity is cultivated through our practice. If we do not feel whole, connected, and supported, then how does this inevitably impact our students?

Exploring our positionality is an important element of critical practice because once we feel connected to our work in schools on a cultural level, we can activate our

cultural capital to see the gaps in our practice and continue to grow as lifelong learners. The idea of positionality can be expanded to encompass our individual position within our self, our values and beliefs, our cultures. If we can find ways to cultivate the exploration of our positionality both as individuals and as school communities, we can begin to unpack the nature of trust, relationships, and healing. Positionality is a particular struggle within the education system because our identities as school social workers, teachers, even counselors, nurses, and psychologists, are trained to think in our profession's given framework. Most of the time this framework is individualized, decontextualized, and disconnected from our cultural identity. This is why it is important that positionality is not overlooked within schools because the way we view ourselves as practitioners impacts how our students view us as people in their life, particularly outside their families and communities. When we think about how our students view us, and how we view them, this is how we apply what we learn from implicit bias trainings and racial equity conversations. This is the exploration of positionality from a critical practice framework.

Exploring Power and Privilege

When we are asked to take on the task of disrupting racial inequity as practitioners, it is impossible to explore how power and privilege are woven throughout our narratives and experiences in schools. The structural stress of racial inequity weighs on the shoulders of Practitioners of Color (POC), in particular, who are burdened with constantly teaching others about institutionalized racism. The POC in this study referred

to many times being in professional development (PD) spaces where they had to assert themselves to disrupt particular narratives that reinforce white privilege and power without calling attention to it. The way that power and privilege is often maintained in the school system is through the inability to address it in the first place at a structural level. Although privilege is spoken about in many PD spaces and is something that practitioners are encouraged to acknowledge most of the time, it is often disconnected to conversations about power, which maintains the function of privilege. Exploring privilege and power as a structural mechanism that directly impacts our positionality within the education system is a significant gap in our research and dialogue in schools. Even as practitioners, we maintain a certain level of privilege and power over the families we seek to support and the communities we seek to connect with. We do not want to acknowledge this reality often because our reputations as professionals can be compromised. However, what we can do is to remain open to question our current practices and explore the impact of power and privilege over our decision-making as practitioners. Because of the trauma many POC face in disrupting racial inequity, taking time to understand how power and privilege perpetuate structural oppression is essential to the wellbeing of POC and of Students of Color.

It is important to explore power and privilege within a critical practice because this is how we activate our skills to disrupt racial inequity, through the ways we interact with one another and with students. I noticed that many of my journal reflections reflected my experiences in working with others, the level of trust that I felt with

colleagues, and my observations of how colleagues interacted with students I worked closest with. From these observations, I realized that we can begin exploring power and privilege by asking ourselves particular questions: How do our interventions incorporate the value of relationships and culture over evidence-based data and practices? Does the strength of our relationships with families override the need to collect quantitative data and establish standardized forms of achievement? How does our own identity impact the ways we respond to our students, families, and colleagues? Once we can get to a place where we are able to reflect on how our positionality impacts others or how our positionality is impacted by the institutions we work in, we can unpack power and privilege a lot easier than simply by defining them just as terms to acknowledge at a surface level. Avoiding the exploration of power and privilege and how these two impacts our relationships with others, the mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequity will not change. We can ask ourselves important questions that recenter relationships and decenters the privileging of certain ideas and identities.

An aspect of power and privilege that was prevalent in many of my reflective journal entries is how connected these two concepts are to our sustainability within the school system. As I looked back through my journal entries, I found that our relationships with our colleagues are often structured through power dynamics that go unaddressed and are innately seen as natural within schools. This is problematic because practitioners in schools are predominantly white and we are trying to understand the impact of power and privilege on racial inequity. When I think about how to illustrate the impact of power and

privilege, I think about the first time I was reprimanded by a superior whom had never introduced herself to me before when she told me I had disrupted the chain of command. This superior was a white woman who lived in the suburbs of the Bay Area who used her power to “put me in my place,” so to speak, in private and behind the building I worked in. Her private reprimanding stuck with me to this day and significantly impacted the way I interacted with administrators throughout my six years in this district. Throughout my six years, I had also been yelled at by two white female administrators, was intentionally isolated from colleagues in their school during my first year as a school social worker and was dismissed by another white administrator when I shared my experiences of institutionalized racism and implicit biases. In these situations, as a POC, I felt powerless, invisible, and marginalized due to the power dynamics that were perpetuated between my role and identity in relation to each of these administrators in my examples. It is important to understand power and privilege in terms of our relationships with each other as practitioners is a central element in critical practice because we often overlook how we are personally connected to it and depersonalize these terms. However, there are material impacts that they have on our students, which begs us to consider the ways that we perpetuate power and the privileging of certain identities and ideas as practitioners.

Identifying Needs and Setting Goals

When we are not provided space to deconstruct power and privilege in ways that connect directly to our experiences and encourage vulnerability and bravery, it is challenging to address structural oppression as practitioners in the education system.

Having space to deconstruct these two concepts and engage in self-reflection was a prevalent tension in many of my journal entries because the tension revealed unmet needs that I felt as a Practitioner of Color (POC) in this school district. I realized I needed community, validation, and connection to others who may be experiencing similar situations, or ways of learning what I should do to take care of myself and sustain my practice as a POC. Being able to identify the needs of practitioners is, if not, the most important morale of this entire research experience. Vicarious trauma that we experience from working in school climate that invalidate our experiences as POC and as practitioners committed to disrupting racial inequity pull us away from being able to identify our needs and create goals toward addressing these needs. It is important to engage in a critical practice through self-reflection, exploring positionality, and exploring power and privilege can all lead to the important process of identifying our needs and of those around us. When we are able to talk about our needs, we can potentially see the needs of our students in a more open, engaging, and positive way to avoid racialized generalizations, stereotypes, and implicit biases. Participating in this practice is what, inevitably, this research did for me and for the POC in this study. By simply asking what our experiences have been like, we open doors for dialogue and understanding about ourselves as humans within the institutions we work in each day.

Just as the literature on culturally responsive practices (CRP) tells us, being able to feel community in a classroom is important for students from backgrounds that are historically marginalized in the school system. The same, I feel, is true for practitioners.

Understanding what community means to each of us can inform a set of community agreements that each of us need in order to function and feel validated in any workplace environment. Asking ourselves what community feels like, looks like, and sounds like, reminds me of many socioemotional learning and school climate strategies I have been trained to consider when working with students in classrooms. However, how often do we engage in this practice of identifying needs of practitioners? How does avoiding this conversation actually impact students? I found myself reflecting a lot in my journal about what does not feel like community in practice but having guest speakers and lecturers talk about what community should feel like. I found this disheartening to see how my lived reality was not connecting or enacting on the insight that speakers tried to impart on us as practitioners and as student leaders. For example, I realized that needs were not being met, and that being able to articulate my needs was a challenge for me. I realized that this was probably going to be the most difficult theme of this research, and one that was not going to be answered in this study alone. However, it felt empowering to realize there was now a diving board through which someone can jump off of into a growing conversation of what critical practice looks like when needs are being met and healing is able to occur.

Identifying needs and setting goals came up a lot in my reflections throughout this study because institutional trust was not something I had experienced yet as a POC. It took me several years to realize that my experiences as a student were traumatizing even in higher education and I never thought about how these experiences impacted my

practice in schools. Asking ourselves what a community of practice would feel like helps everyone to engage their own self-reflection and their exploration of positionality, power, and privilege, to elicit feedback that can transform systems. This is a magnificent task that practitioners can take up in their practice, but institutions do not often secure time to engage in these very personal and brave processes. I believe this is where critical theory connects so meaningfully to the art of critical practice. It is a constantly changing practice, one that reiterates each level of this process of self-reflection and exploration of concepts we often see as external from our own experiences. When we can focus on how we are impacted by these very systems, and acknowledge these experiences, we can breathe vulnerably with one another and explore what it would look like to address needs unmet by the school system. What do we need to feel successful as practitioners? This is a question I explored with each POC in this study which elicited a lot of internal reflection on my own needs as I learned how diverse our experiences really were.

Understanding how valuable it is to be able to identify needs among practitioners is important because as practitioners, we are expected to establish goals for our students and families to be able to see growth or change over time. However, it is not often that we learn to identify our needs and establish goals for our practice as within the institutional structures we work in. When I think about our growth within the structures we work in, I think about the airplane analogy and the oxygen mask metaphor that reminds us to consider our capacity first before being able to help others in crisis. I also think about how often I have heard the analogy in schools that we are always building the

plane as we fly it. When you combine those two analogies, I wonder how possible it seems, then, to actually do our work effectively? This is why it is important when discussing structural oppression to not only consider how it perpetuates racialized achievement gaps, but how it impacts our positionality within the school system. Our positionality informs our practice and the structures we work within impact our wellbeing as practitioners in schools. From what I learned in this research and through my journal reflections, I realize that school systems do not often invest intentionally in the wellbeing of practitioners because student outcomes have become so standardized and prescribed through mainstream curriculum. However, we can begin to undo these structures by investing in time and space for practitioners to build community, exchange experiences to grow collectively and feel sustained in this practice.

Conclusion

In summary, hearing the experiences of SSW in this study led me to the possibility of a critical school social work practice, a theory that seeks to identify systems and structures in schools that perpetuate racial inequity and center on the wellbeing and sustainability of practitioners. As POC, it may be impossible to lead a district-wide mission to disrupt oppression and “end implicit biases” if we are also experiencing them ourselves. We need the structures around us to also transform if we are to transform practices in schools to cultivate a mission that calls for the elimination of structural oppression. Focusing on our experiences in professional development (PD) spaces revealed the importance of not only raising awareness about implicit biases, but also

putting into action applicable skills and dialogue that can help us grow as practitioners to learn from each other and from our students is. We need to transgress PD because the work of racial equity goes beyond a one-time conversation. We need constant conversations that cultivate our understanding of how structural oppression is perpetuated, what specific practices and actions have an impact on students, and what we need as practitioners to grow as leaders in a system that was not built for us. As POC, our experiences speak volumes to the kinds of structures we need in schools to truly drive a district-wide mission of disrupting oppression. We need spaces that create community amongst practitioners, across disciplines, to bring out the genuine care and love I am sure we all feel toward students, but often cannot express given the structures we currently work within. We need structures that humanize us as practitioners in schools. This is where SSW can come in, to look at the conditions in schools through a critical lens that seeks to address the structures we lack and the structures we need to sustain our practice in schools.

Chapter Six: Discussion

In educational research, we often overlook the power and importance of understanding the experiences of practitioners in schools as the first necessary step toward addressing racial inequity in schools. As researchers, we often jump quickly toward defining a new model of practice, a theory, or conceptual framework that future researchers can apply in their own studies. However, this is not a traditional dissertation, and not a traditional discussion chapter on what we each can take away from this study. To promote the voices of POC, this study seeks to uplift the experiences of POC to inform specific strategies of transforming practices in schools and define structural change from the perspective of practitioners. As a school social worker (SSW), I believe that my role within the education system is to uplift these experiences and shift our practice to support a district's vision of disrupting racial inequity. Although I do not believe it is possible for one school district to completely eliminate oppression, the tensions that arise from even attempting to challenge the structures that perpetuate oppression in the education system is an act that we should continue to unpack as practitioners interested in racial equity. This discussion will center on these tensions between what it means to support a district's vision for disrupting racial inequity and provide implications for multiple stakeholders to consider in their journey in schools.

My biggest hope for this research is to spark important dialogue among practitioners in any school or community-based context, to seek the root cause of structural oppression throughout our education system. Every school is different, every

community is different, every student is different. This was a message I heard loud and clear from POC in this study. Therefore, I found it challenging to propose one particular conceptual framework or model of practice that can cultivate the needs of all the differences we examined. But what it came down to was dialogue, reflection and community. Having the space to dialogue with one another, engage in self-reflection that can challenge how our practice is traditionally done, and create a sense of community that cultivates the cultural capital of both practitioners and students' school wide.

Following this chapter, I include a resource to structure ongoing dialogue between practitioners focused on unpacking racial equity and move toward specific strategies of disrupting inequity in any given school context. My hope is about sparking the dialogue that can either support spaces created to cultivate racial equity, or to encourage practitioners to create that space that was not there otherwise, to create community amongst one another and seek new answers and insights into what structures are impacting students. Transforming systems from within call on us to create these spaces where our experiences are cultivated, sustained, and uplifted, if we are to uplift the experiences of all students equitably.

The first section of this chapter will explore my process of reflection and transformation as a researcher and as a practitioner in schools. Because of how close I was to this research, its purpose and to the participants, I committed to an ongoing process of self-reflection in order to feel that I could focus on understanding experiences different from my own and validate different perspectives. I did so through healing

spaces for POC, critical friends, and ongoing peer dialogue with participants to reiterate findings and new insights. After transcribing interviews for this study, I realized that the pressure of measuring achievement can stunt our ability to self-reflect and question what we are doing each day in schools. Because we operate in standards-based school systems, the way schools are structured offer little room and space for reflection, preventing transformation from occurring from within. Our expectations of what it means to disrupt racial inequity and our expectations as practitioners become at odds with each other. This section will explore how my own process of reflection and learnings from the participants inspire a vision of racial equity in schools.

The second section of this chapter will discuss implications for practitioners including school administrators, professional development (PD) facilitators, school social workers (SSW), and Practitioners of Color (POC). Findings from this study inform what it would mean to transgress traditional PD formats within school districts and create spaces that cultivate dialogue, reflection, and community. First, in order to consider a transformation within PD spaces, the support of administrators is vital. Implications for administrators include creating structures of support for POC and steps they can take to cultivate a school climate that makes space for transformation. Implications for PD facilitators will explore conditions that can establish PD spaces ready to embrace experiences of practitioners and structures to respond to their needs, including moving beyond cultural competency models toward spaces for dialogue and reflection. Implications for school social workers (SSW) will include ways that we can support

practitioners around us to engage in the practice of applying theory to practice in ways that ground us in critical reflection of identity, power, and privilege. Finally, implications for POC will be explored, from an empowerment lens that affirms our experiences and paves new paths that future researchers and practitioners can take to create space where space is needed.

Reflection on Transformation

Before I started this study, I committed to participate in an iterative process of reflection and transformation, both for myself and as a researcher. Too often in the education system and academia, Communities of Color are talked about in deficit terms by researchers and administrators, as if they are not present in the conversation or lack autonomy and require intervention (Patel, 2016). Many times, interventions are created by white researchers and implemented by white administrators due to the overrepresentation of white practitioners in education. Although I am a POC, I did not want to perpetuate this power dynamic as a doctoral student focused on the experiences of other POC. I felt that it would be important for me to commit to reflecting on my positionality and what role I play in transforming the system from within.

To engage in this iterative process, I made sure I had my own outlets to reflect and transform my own practice along the journey, including transformation with my mental health and wellbeing. We do not often acknowledge our own health and mental health through the process of research. However, I knew that I would be listening to

stories of other POC and that my own experiences might surface. Just as Jordan reminds us to see each student as an individual with their own stories, our experiences as POC are also unique, individualized, and rooted in different values, beliefs and knowledge as practitioners. For that reason, I joined a community of practitioners called Root to Bloom that gave me structured space to reflect on my own journey to reconnect with my ancestry, lived experiences, and healing. The more I connected inward with myself, the more able I felt to stay open to understand the experiences of others. I believe transformation starts within ourselves, and then can trickle outward to the larger system we work within.

This study became a way for me to engage in my own healing and reconcile with many experiences I could not fully explain because there were not many POC around me to dialogue with. When I started working in this district in 2013, I only had white supervisors, administrators, and practitioners around me. This began to feel alienating and isolating as I also worked in schools that were predominantly white in affluent neighborhoods of the Bay Area. It was not until about 2016 that I began to see a shift in our demographics of school social workers (SSW) because myself and two other WOC developed a relationship with Human Resources to improve our hiring and recruitment practices within our department. A racial affinity space was able to form and became institutionalized during monthly staff meetings to hold space for POC. Although the development of affinity spaces does not come with a lack of challenges and learning curves, this was part of my journey as a POC in this district. Understanding what it takes

to create spaces for us to cultivate our own cultural identities, communities, and joy in this work truly transformed me.

My journey throughout this research led me to the realization that as a POC, I had needs that were not being met within the context of this district and that this study was here to guide my own practice and transformation. My objectivity as a researcher in this study became challenged by my experiences with structural oppression, tokenization, marginalization and the lack of institutional support for my wellbeing. At the time I began writing my findings chapters for this study, I begun to question what I needed as a POC while I dug deeper into the themes the data began to reveal. I was inspired by POC in this study who felt sustained in their practice because they worked in schools that were predominantly POC and felt part of a community that sustained their cultural identity. Of course, the structures that they worked within were not always equitable to students. However, they felt committed to their practice because they worked with others who supported them professionally, culturally, and emotionally. I realized these were missing links for me and began to explain the dissonance I felt within my role as a school social worker in an affluent school in the Bay Area. To be responsive to my own needs as a POC, I embraced the possibility of seeking a new experience as a practitioner and began seeking employment outside of the school system. By the time I started writing this final chapter, I transitioned to a new role as a community-based mental health clinician, to continue supporting students in schools from a position rooted in the community and deeply connected to family. I most likely would not have made this transition if it had not

been for conducting this research and practicing what POC in this study were teaching me about myself and about all of us collectively, as POC working in a Bay Area public school district.

Now that I have been able to step out of the context my research took place in, I realized how important it is for POC to find wells of support, communities that sustain our practice and commitment to racial equity as well as healing justice for our broader communities. Throughout this research, it was an empowering experience for me to meet other Women of Color (WOC) who are committed to the work of racial equity and who are willing to also be vulnerable and express the challenges they have faced. Hearing the ways POC understood and defined culturally responsive practices (CRP) was humbling because we often become familiar with CRP through PD spaces that can seem more “textbook” and less applicable to our practice in schools, as Salma had described. Salma reminds us that we need to move beyond CRP as an intervention and broaden our perspective and understandings of the sociopolitical experiences of Students of Color outside of school. Jordan’s insight into CRP transformed the way I thought about this research when she explained how CRP is often taught from “a white perspective” to cater to a majority white audience. These perspectives helped me to reframe my research from simply affirming CRP as an effective approach in schools to transgress the intellectualized version of CRP toward a vision of racial equity led by POC. I decided to focus on the actual practice in schools, to ask questions we are not often asked. POC in

this study revealed that there are many structures that impact our ability to implement CRP.

Although CRP is not meant to become an intervention (Hammond, 2015), there are curriculum structures and requirements that do not benefit Students of Color, including standardized tests and how Spanish immersion is taught to native Spanish-speaking students. POC have to activate their cultural capital to ensure what they are teaching in classrooms and interventions being provided for trauma-impacted students are culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining. This revealed that the structures we are professionalized as POC need to transform and one of the ways we can do so is by creating spaces to dialogue and reflect on our practices collectively. By strengthening our connections to each other, to validate our multiple and intersectional identities while doing this work, we can feel less distanced from our identities as POC and more closely connected to our practice in schools.

Implications for Practitioners

In this section, I will discuss implications for administrators, professional development (PD) facilitators, school social workers (SSW), and Practitioners of Color (POC), based on recommendations and concerns raised directly from the POC in this study. I integrate existing literature and previously cited literature only as needed. However, this section will emphasize the voices of POC, to continue the tradition of uplifting our voices to inform structural changes and disrupt racial inequity. From this

study, I have come to realize that centering our experiences and understanding contextual differences between our experiences can inform much-needed structural change to how POC are supported in schools. As an SSW, I view these implications through my critical lens, as a mental health provider and clinician for the sustainability of POC and culturally sustaining practices for students. These implications are grounded in a decolonial lens that seeks to unpack the structures, practices, and mechanisms that continue to perpetuate structural oppression in schools. To support these implications further, please see Appendix B of this dissertation for guiding questions that support ongoing dialogue and engagement in critical practice.

Implications for Administrators

It is not enough to simply increase our presence in schools without transforming the structures that impact Students of Color and ourselves when we were students in schools. For administrators, the work of recruitment, retention and development for POC should be explored further and identified as priorities within their practice. What we know about the current education system is that practitioners, specifically teachers, are pushed out of teaching programs with minimal preparation to address inequities in schools, which also impacts their capacity to be sustained in the work (Patel, 2016). This market-driven system in education creates a factory model for teacher preparation, which impacts the quality and sustainability of practitioners. When POC in this study talked about the challenges they face in being sustained in their practice, each POC mentioned administrators and their ineffectiveness with providing the adequate support they needed

to feel effective as POC. It is important for administrators to consider how they are supporting newer practitioners in their school site if recruitment is a priority identified by a school district. Administrators should be able to name structures that engage POC in the creation of retention and development strategies. This includes breaking down glass ceilings in school districts to increase the presence of POC in administrative positions throughout districts.

Engaging with POC within administrative decision-making spaces is an important element of racial equity in schools and can further support the needs of POC long term. Currently, our job descriptions as POC may confine us to our classrooms or the school-site and may not leave room for participating in decision-making spaces. Although there may be opportunities for practitioners to receive extended-pay, prop-supported funding for extra hours worked, or overtime pay, it is important for administrators to consider how to engage POC in district-level spaces to narrow the distance between school-sites and district administrators. Because many top-down district-level decisions directly impact the roles of POC in schools and impact how and when we are able to talk about racial equity, it is important for administrators to consider how to restructure the day-to-day expectations of practitioners to also engage in improving systems. Revising job descriptions for practitioners that include opportunities to engage in improving programs, restructuring and redesigning pathways for teachers and other practitioners would help to evolve our capacity as leaders within schools. Creating this flexibility in the roles of POC

to enable their participation in decision-making spaces is important to retain POC who are committed to disrupting racial inequity in schools.

To support the experiences of POC in schools, it is critical for administrators to consider their role in improving school climate through strengthening their relationships with practitioners at their respective school sites or throughout their departments. One of the most important roles administrators play in schools is creating a positive school climate that allows for collaboration across practitioners, which also strengthens their capacity to feel successful in their practice (Turan & Bektas, 2013). POC in this study had mentioned a lack of trust between POC and administrators, due to inconsistent expectations across staff, a lack of consistent communication with the whole school community, top-down decision making, and the lack of space cultivated to encourage collaboration across practitioners. One POC and I talked extensively about “chains of command” which create unnecessary power dynamics between administrators and practitioners. The hierarchy created in schools creates a distance between administrative duties and our needs as POC in schools. Strengthening the role of administrators to address the needs of practitioners is a significant implication for this study and can improve the relationships between administrators and POC. If we are to look at students through a strengths-based lens, it is important that administrators also view practitioners through the same lens. Seeing the strengths as well as the needs of practitioners is important for administrators to learn to do on a daily basis. Building and maintaining relationships with practitioners at their school sites should be a foundation of their school

climate because the validation practitioners feel trickle down to confidence in the classroom and in their practice working with students on a daily basis.

Another implication for administrators is their role in strengthening school climate by creating consistent spaces for practitioners to dialogue and collaborate with one another, outside of traditional professional development (PD) spaces. Ericka had mentioned that the lack of “constant conversations” between her school staff was a factor that impacted her ability to support teachers as a school social worker. She felt that without those “constant conversations” related to CRP and racial equity, we have a hard time being aligned in our practices and how we support students who are impacted by trauma outside of school. Luna raised concerns about the lack of collaboration and dialogue among school site staff and the impact it has on students, as she shared,

There wasn't enough community talk about, like I don't see it as a bad thing. I think more that keeping it a secret or only in the classroom is a bad thing because we're not all able to support them when we can. And I feel like I am a strong believer that it takes a village, it takes a school to be able to talk. For me, one of the biggest rules in the class is respect and I think as children and as a teacher, we should be able to respect the school, all the teachers, as well as all the children. But we also need to know about how different children work, and how different children think and process things so that we don't step in and mess it up or go 10 steps back rather than helping go forward.

Luna reflects on times that might have had a positive impact on her students if there were more “community talk” about how to support other teachers’ students, instead of “keep it a secret or only in the classroom.” This was impactful to me because it reminded me that we work best in communities, and so “it takes a village” to support students as Luna said, not as isolated practitioners in individualized classrooms. This is an implication for administrators to consider because creating space for practitioners to collaborate and build community across classrooms and students can strengthen school climate. Luna states, “we should be able to respect the school,” which brings back the idea of CRP as a school-wide value, not just as individual practitioners. It is important for administrators to consider how “community talk” can be cultivated in their school sites because if we know relationships are central to CRP, then building relationships across practitioners and students, as a whole school, is key to creating the conditions for racial equity to bloom.

It is important for administrators to consider how they provide and create space for practitioners to collaborate and create community amongst staff because collaboration and community can have a significant impact on the retention of POC (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Goings, Walker, & Cotignola-Pickens, 2018). When we feel part of a community that values each other’s students, not just our own, we feel supported as practitioners and able to breathe amidst the daily pressures to respond to the needs of all students. Luna shares her perspective about retention and the importance of creating community when she states,

And sometimes a teacher needs to tap out. I'd love to be walking the hallways like, "I got you." But if I don't know, I'm not gonna just pull the kid in, and he doesn't even know me, you know? We have a really good community school, it's one of the best communities I've ever felt. I just feel within our teaching structure, we need to kind of be more open and more how we respond and how certain children need to respond.

Luna expressed a need for teachers to be able to "tap out," and how it is important for her to understand how to work with other teachers' students because we can then support each other in sustaining our work in schools. Luna states that she's "not gonna just pull a kid in," meaning another teacher's student because she does not have that established relationship with them. However, it is important for Luna that "within our teaching structure" practitioners are able to share with each other the needs of our students, to create a more culturally sustaining school climate overall. This is a significant implication for administrators because providing this space for dialogue and "community talk" can help POC feel more supported and able to grow as culturally responsive practitioners.

In order to invest in both the recruitment and retention of POC in schools, it is important that administrators, both at school sites and in central offices, consider how to create capacity for POC to engage in meaningful decision-making spaces and create space for dialogue, community, and reflection at school sites. The pacing of the school system due to standards-based reform creates inequitable restraints and barriers for POC

to build community and to collaborate consistently to sustain their practice. It is important for administrators to consider their role in strengthening school climate for the retention and wellbeing of POC in schools. School climate can be strengthened by creating intentional spaces for practitioners to collaborate with one another, engage in “community-talk” and be able to build relationships with students even outside their classroom. When relationships are the center of school climate efforts, it seems this goes a long way toward sustaining the practice of POCs, as well as sustaining the cultural capital of students altogether.

Implications for Professional Development Facilitators

The purpose of the study was to understand the experiences of POC in elementary schools and how they disrupt racial inequity in their practice, which revealed the importance of professional development (PD) spaces in the experiences of POC. When I asked participants about culturally responsive practices (CRP) in particular, they would refer to PD spaces in their department or at their school site. POC talked about the importance of trust among facilitators when talking about CRP and feeling that their needs are being recognized. I also realized that CRP was synonymous with racial equity, and that the POC in this study felt they were mutually connected. This theme is especially important for PD facilitators who organize PD district-wide because developing a shared understanding of racial equity that aligns with the district’s overall mission to “eliminate oppression” is crucial. POC in this study did not feel PD at their school sites or in their department were effective to this end of aligning with a district’s larger mission to

identify systems that perpetuate oppression. They also acknowledged how challenging it was to feel that racial equity was being addressed because each school culture was uniquely different, with differing needs and climate concerns. Although this study was not an evaluation of PD, the POC felt PD spaces were important places where important work can be done to build trust among practitioners and develop a shared understanding of racial equity that can unite staff to challenge existing practices.

For PD facilitators who are reimagining their spaces and searching for more insight into how they can create effective PD spaces, it is important to consider how they are developing a shared understanding of concepts like racial equity and CRP and how the theory-to-practice gap is being addressed within these spaces. Oftentimes the POC in this study would refer to the theory-to-practice gap and explain how many different ways they have learned about CRP or racial equity. From the experiences of POC in this study, it seemed that they were accessing only fragments of PD that were repeated over time. I realized that PD is not just about content but also about creating a structure that connects theory-to-practice in a relevant way to different school sites. What we learn in PD spaces may not be directly applicable or retained when it comes to the actual practice in schools. Luna helped me understand this particular challenge when she shared,

I feel there's been a lot of introductions to this work (CRP), these cultural differences, lots of words, sentences, phrases, have been thrown out but I personally and maybe it was just one of those meetings where I just wasn't fully there, we all have those days. But personally, I don't feel like we've

gotten training in ways I think we need to get training. And not just as a teacher but school wide.

Luna refers to “a lot of introductions to this work,” referring to the many times she has been introduced to CRP as a teacher most likely in PD spaces. She describes CRP as “lots of words, sentences, phrases,” which makes me think of CRP as a fragmented concept that try to simplify something that is much larger and requires more context to be complete or understood. Luna did mention that CRP also includes “cultural differences,” which was an element of critical school social work (CSSW) I had learned about from the school social workers (SSW) in this study. The commonalities I heard between Luna as a teacher and the SSW were striking to me, as Luna had also mentioned, “I don’t feel like we’ve gotten training in ways I think we need to get training.” Luna emphasizes that this work has be done “school wide,” which raises concerns about how PD content resonates with an entire school community. This is particularly important for PD facilitators to consider because many POC feel the added burden of having to educate and support colleagues who may not know as much about racial equity or have not felt it is relevant to their practice. This is concerning because it alludes to the importance of creating PD spaces that cultivate trust and community as well as narrowing the theory-to-practice-gap.

The POC in this study spoke extensively about the theory-to-practice gap and the challenges that come with narrowing this gap when trust and community are not cultivated in PD spaces. This is a significant implication specifically for PD facilitators who tend to focus heavily on theory and less about the space through which they are

interacting with practitioners in. POC in this study experienced PD spaces where trust and community were not values the facilitator embodied, which led to the absence of dialogue on race and oppression. The absence of critical dialogue stemmed from the lack of trust participants felt with the facilitator and the space that they created. POC in this study felt lack of trust with PD facilitators due to times when facilitators expressed judgment, questioned their commitment to racial equity, and assumed that schools did not value racial equity because they were not participating in active dialogue about implicit biases as a staff. I began to see that there were structural barriers for POC to fully activate their cultural capital or knowledge around racial equity because it was not a shared value among their colleagues or among administrators. Trust became such an important implication in this study, and what it means to cultivate trust and community within spaces where practitioners are gathered for a singular purpose: to learn about racial equity. How these spaces are structured is critical to unpack, and how facilitators cultivate trust and community is especially important to supporting POC to feel seen, heard, and supported in their journey to disrupt racial inequity alongside them.

Another implication for PD facilitators to consider is how we create structures that provide ongoing support for practitioners at school sites, to narrow the theory-to-practice gap and sustain the practice of POC. Just as POC in this study mentioned, constant conversations are important for practitioners to engage in because it builds trust, community, and allows for self-reflection to lead to transformation. As POC, we recognize that we are all on a spectrum of comfort and confidence when it comes to

talking about racial equity. PD facilitators have to navigate participants that are all on different parts of this spectrum and find ways to meet the needs of everyone in one space, sometimes just once or several times with large gaps of contact in between. When I heard POC in this study mention the importance of engaging with each other more often, each day, through collaborative dialogue and self-reflection, I began to imagine a new structure of support. For PD facilitators, I wonder what it would look like to be in a position to visit practitioners at school sites more often, to immerse themselves in school contexts, to see practitioners in action more often. I wonder what it would look like to reimagine the role of facilitators, to become recognized more as field collaborators.

Although the idea of PD facilitators being able to support practitioners' long term, beyond a one-time or short series of PD, seems a bit out of reach, this is precisely the transgression or traditional practices in PD spaces that POC in this study discuss. The retention of POC is impacted by practitioners around us sharing the value of CRP and actively seeking to learn, be open to growth, and continue to transform practice for the best interest of our changing demographics in schools. Every POC in this study mentioned "that one resistant teacher," and that "teachers are the worst at change." When these practitioners were mentioned or alluded to in terms of barriers impacting our ability to fully support students in schools, they seemed to always mention PD spaces and how impactful they can be for those resistant few. It is important for PD facilitators to consider the audiences of PD, who needs this support, and how PD facilitation can focus on the growth mindset of practitioners, especially before growth mindset is adopted as a

lens practitioner are expected to support students through. If we expect students to make transformations and growth within the structures, we give them in a classroom, structures should also be implemented for practitioners to continue transforming and growing. PD facilitators have a lot of insight into the needs of practitioners across many school contexts, and should consider how PD district wide is aligned, whether it reinforces similar messages, and how practitioners are supported long term to reinforce these messages more than once.

The overall message I gathered from POC in this study is the importance of developing community within PD spaces, which leads to trust among practitioners, spaces for necessary dialogue, and an opportunity for growth through self-reflection. PD facilitators most likely experience the pressure of having to fit content and particular frameworks or theories into the limited time they gather with practitioners. This is why it is important for facilitators, as change agents in schools, to reimagine the structure of PD spaces, including the timeframe, space, and purpose. POC in this study spoke extensively about the importance of feeling trust with PD facilitators. Are there ways that PD facilitators can do this by immersing themselves within a particular school community? Are there ways that PD facilitators can collaborate with administrators to establish consistent, collaborative spaces for practitioners to engage with each other in, for support, accountability, and growth? There is infinite opportunity for imagination to propose a vision to transgress PD spaces in schools. Engaging with this imagination is the overall implication from this study and one that I hope facilitators engage with, with hope.

Implications for School Social Workers

For school social workers (SSW), it is urgent for us to consider how our interventions within school settings are culturally sustaining and how our interventions are addressing racial inequity systematically. This work of centering on racial equity has become a dilemma for many of us, as we navigate bureaucratic systems that are not often centered on the connection between mental health and learning, especially as mental health providers. SSW across the United States are working within unique district and school contexts and are often the very few available to provide services. The role of SSW varies between school contexts and our priorities depend on these contexts and our funding sources. From the seven years I spent as a SSW, I realized the way we are funded has a significant impact on the roles we play in schools. Sometimes the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) contributes to our salary at a school site, which impacts what our priorities are if the school is predominantly white, middle and upper class, and located in an affluent neighborhood. Sometimes we are funded through grants that guide the focus of our work to provide trauma-informed practices and utilize particular curriculum with our students. Because each school context is different, it has been challenging for the profession to “fit in time” for racial equity, which raises significant concerns for our who current interventions address racial inequity, if at all.

As SSW, an important implication for our practice is how we are identifying the barriers that practitioners face on a daily basis to sustain our practice. In particular, it is important to assess how interventions are implemented in schools and how practitioners feel implementing particular interventions. SSW in this study felt tensions with our existing interventions because we did not feel our practice was culturally sustaining, given the amount of trauma impacting students we work with and our lack of capacity in addressing their needs effectively and sustainably. We find ourselves constantly reflecting on how overwhelmed we feel with the amount of crisis prevention needed to support our school sites, and the level of trauma families we worked with faced outside of school. We find ourselves trying to rebuild trust between the family and the school, even when we did not trust the school ourselves. We find ourselves having to support teachers impacted by vicarious trauma each day, while maintaining relationships with each practitioner, student, and family we worked with. With segregated schools by race and class, it feels like impossible work to support the needs of an entire school that may be impacted by more strenuous conditions than for affluent, privileged schools not impacted by challenging sociopolitical contexts. An implication particularly for administrators guiding SSW, is to create systems of support for SSW to unpack the many barriers they confront as systems-level, school-wide practitioners. Supporting SSW to process the many complexities we confront in school systems is critical to our sustainability, particularly as POC navigating racial inequity on a daily basis.

It is important to create systems of support for SSW because we have a unique lens on the impact of structural oppression within the education system and often find ourselves frustrated with the level of disparities within school systems. For administrators and managers of SSW departments and practitioners, it is important to consider how these issues that social workers are trained to assess and identify particular obstacles to systems-level change to address systematic issues we are expected to address such as absenteeism, truancy, disciplinary practices, and socioemotional wellness. It is important for SSW to understand how these systematic issues are being addressed at the district-level and if priorities at the district level are aligned with the issues SSW see on a daily basis. This might mean advocating for desegregated schools, even at a time when districts claim that current systems work just fine. Breaking down the status quo will not be easy, but by first understanding the experiences of SSW implementing interventions in schools, district leaders and SSW administrators can begin to see whether or not our interventions are addressing the root cause of issues, or are perpetuating structural oppression and barriers to our practice and capacity as practitioners.

Another implication for SSW is being able to examine practitioner readiness and knowledge around racial equity, to understand what development SSW still need in order to understand how racial inequity functions in schools in the first place. This is important for SSW because how we perceive and define racial equity is all dependent on our individual experiences within schools, our levels of privilege, and our knowledge about structural oppression. To actually disrupt racial inequity as SSW, it will take more than

simply naming racial equity as a value in any given space of practitioners. Racial equity is more than a value; it is a way we practice. POC in this study felt a tension with our current practices because the narrative around racial equity within our professional development spaces does not move beyond acknowledging biases. SSW in this study also felt a tension with current interventions because the interventions we are expected to implement, such as behavior charts or socioemotional curriculums, do not focus on exploring a student's lived experiences as much as they expect student's to behave to particular standards. These issues speak to a structural issue on how SSW are trained, how we are developed, and how we engage in ongoing dialogue about furthering our understanding of structural oppression. We can start this work by asking ourselves critical questions: Are the interventions we implement centered on racial justice, on helping the student cultivate their cultural identity, on cultivating hope? From the lens of POC, implementing interventions that are scripted, by-the-book, and do not consider how the student's cultural identity and lived experiences are connected, all reinforce colonialism in social work. Continuing to understand how it feels to implement interventions, our experiences with them, and how we can reexamine our role within school sites to provide particular interventions is a critical implication for SSW nationally. This is not an intervention within itself; this is a call to action to step away from existing interventions, examine the source of where they come from, and if they are truly centered on racial equity and existing inequities across our intersectional identities.

It is important to continue understanding the experiences of SSW working in schools, specifically POC, to inform the broader profession at large what practices we need to replace and transform. Our unique lenses as POC who see and experience racial inequity can help unpack particular systems and structures that perpetuate structural oppression. Although understanding the experiences of POC may not seem like a direct solution to the issue of how SSW address racial equity in schools, this is actually a pivotal step school districts overlook: the importance of understanding the experiences of POC in schools. Districts are constantly looking for the next theory of practice, intervention, or model of practice that they can implement and purchase from researchers to narrow the racialized achievement gap and solve systemic issues like absenteeism and the overrepresentation of Students of Color in special education. However, there are many factors that contribute to these systemic issues, and a large part of the issue is not understanding how traditional practices impact these important racial equity concerns. This can look like administrators asking themselves how strong their relationship is with the POC who work in their schools or departments. Are there decision making spaces that include and activate the cultural capital of POC? Are POC cultivated as leaders in their work as practitioners who have an important insight into the needs of Students of Color? Are there administrators and district leaders who are People of Color? Are there disparities among these leaders that we can begin to address by building the leadership capacity of POC to support a district's mission in eliminating oppression? These are initial questions that come to mind that hopefully spark new implications for our practice,

simply by focusing on the experiences of POC and how much we invest in understanding their experiences on a daily basis in schools.

Asking critical questions that call out structural oppression and systems that perpetuate racial inequity is absolutely one of the most challenging tasks that POC often have to take up as SSW in schools. That is why an implication for SSW is seeing who we hire, how we hire, and if we create opportunities for POC to be hired for roles in our schools. The more diverse our workforce looks and sounds like, the more we are able to be accountable to the diversity among our students, and the growing populations of Students of Color who we are often not able to support effectively given our disparity of diverse and multi-lingual practitioners in schools. It is a reality that minimum qualifications for any practitioner in school settings are a significant socioeconomic barrier for POC because of the costs of higher education, having to work while in school, and the burden of having to pass culturally biased tests for the sake of admission to programs for professional credentials. The more SSW becomes reliant on requiring particular qualifications, the more the profession will perpetuate disparities between white practitioners and POC in schools.

Although it is important to hire qualified candidates for positions in schools, it is as equally important to consider how our education institutions create and sustain pathways to become practitioners, specifically for People of Color. Paying for current school employees to receive additional credentials to receive promotions, providing paid internships with transportation funding for students interested in working in schools,

creating diverse hiring committees with oversight by diverse leaders, and not requiring arbitrary assessments and standardized testing to hire diverse practitioners are just a few examples POC in this study provided. I believe that if school districts take up these implications and invest time in exploring how these could be made possible, long term transformation and racial equity could be addressed more meaningfully and sustainably. It starts with dialogue, self-reflection, and commitment to understanding the experiences of POC to unpack these implications.

Overall, it is important for SSW and SSW administrators to create structures that seek to understand the experiences of POC working in schools for racial equity to become more integrated in our practice as a broader profession. It is important to consider how the spaces practitioners gather in are structured to increase participation in critical dialogue and self-reflection so that all practitioners are engaging in the work of racial equity, not just POC. As I have said before, just increasing our presence in schools is not enough to claim that racial equity was reached. The structures and spaces that we work within have to also transform. For POC, this is particularly important because we work in a white-dominated profession, with colleagues who do not always feel comfortable engaging in dialogue about racial equity. The readiness of our colleagues to engage in dialogue about racial equity is stunted because of the lack of spaces we are able to gather in that center dialogue and self-reflection for personal and professional transformation. From this study, I learned that this is the work of racial equity: creating space for our own ongoing transformation. SSW can become integral leaders within

school sites or throughout departments by assessing the structures of meeting spaces such as staff meetings, trainings and professional development (PD), or committee meetings at school sites or in departments. Who is speaking on behalf of the issue of racial inequity in schools? Who is leading and facilitating the space? For practitioners who do not feel completely confident in addressing racial equity in their practice, whose job is it to support that practitioner? SSW work in such unique roles that can allow them to see the broader scope of the issue of racial equity throughout school districts. Because SSW are rooted in frameworks of social justice and equity, SSW can become important leaders in being leaders in spaces where practitioners are gathered and ask these critical questions that call out particular systems and structures that perpetuate structural oppression and inequity.

Implications for Practitioners of Color

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) to understand structural barriers that we face in our practice in schools, which leaves us at the most important question in this research: What is our role in disrupting racial inequity in schools? To answer this question, I believe that is important for POC to ask ourselves: what do I still need in order to thrive as a practitioner? Throughout this study, I considered the sustainability of POC in this study, and what was motivating them to continue in their roles. One group of POC, Luna, Mar, and Gloria, all work at the same school and spoke to the power of community. For each of them, they reflected on how they would not be able to do the work of a teacher if it were not for having a community

of Latinx and POC to work alongside with. Their experience reminded me that there are school sites that feel like community because majority of the staff are POC and are committed to racial equity. I wondered if there were other POC out there who feel they have also found community or feel they still need this to sustain their practice, whatever community might mean to them. Understanding what our needs, as POC, to sustain our practice is important because we are often burdened with extra work to carry the weight of racial inequity and be the role models we are expected to be for Students of Color. This extra weight is not carried lightly, so it is important to consider what we still need in order to stay in this work, and feel that we are surrounded with support, community, and hope that structural change is possible.

Another implication from this study for POC is being able to identify spaces where we can cultivate our needs to sustain our practice. Whether this looks like a racial affinity space, an equity committee, a leadership committee, or a culture and climate team, it is important to be able to plug into spaces for support, guidance, and advocacy. Feeling a sense of community and support is important for POC, particularly as they are often institutionally isolated from each other and not always surrounded by equity-minded colleagues in our school settings (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). The implication then becomes if we cannot identify a space at all, how can we create one given our needs as POC? Each context is unique and every POC has unique experiences working in schools and intersectional identities. Creating spaces for intersectional identities and experiences to exist is important for the sustainability of Students of Color and is

important for POC as well. It is the reality that within our school systems, POC continue to be minoritized in a white-dominant profession, for both teachers and school social workers. Creating and demanding space for affinity to exist, and working through the complexity of creating such places, is an act of resistance to the status quo in education. Being able to identify such spaces in education is an important implication for POC to consider, if it is needed in particular school contexts where the needs of POC need to be met and explored to sustain our practice.

Conclusion

From this study, I believe that in spaces where POC are able to explore our experiences, we learn so much more in community than we do in our individualized practice and can transform our practice when we do learn from each other. When I asked POC in this study about culturally responsive practices (CRP), for example, many of the POC in this study, mentioned how impactful it would be to be able to learn from each other more often. Whether this meant observing each other's practice, talking about our strategies to support diverse students, or sharing resources that we use to supplement mainstream curriculum to make the content relevant to the cultural experiences of our students. POC grow in community and grow when information and resources are shared as well as our experiences. Within a school system, we are taught to be individual practitioners that collaborate when it comes to providing interventions to individual or groups of students, usually grouped by race. What if we were taught to work together collaboratively, to talk about and learn about larger sociopolitical contexts our students

live in, and work with families collectively, instead of focusing narrowly on individual student scores and assessments? Ericka, a school social worker in this study, comes to mind when she described how a narrow focus on school-wide literacy leaves out space in staff meetings to talk about systemic, school-climate issues in meeting the needs of Black students at her school. What if we were trained to work collectively, to dialogue collectively, and talk about how literacy relates to cultural identity formation? POC do this naturally, as they examine how their own experiences in schools impact their identity as a POC. This work of reflecting on how our practices can transform can only happen in community, which is where true transformation for racial equity can also be cultivated, particularly for POC needing this community and space to heal and grow.

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Appendix A: Full Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol for Individual Interviews with Teachers

1. When you hear the term “culturally responsive practices,” what comes to mind?
 - a. How would you define CRP
 - b. Do you feel you implement CRP in your classroom? If so, how?
 - c. How do you feel CRP impacts minoritized students? Families?
2. In what ways has participating in CRP professional development impacted your practice?
 - a. Do you feel your practice has improved? If so, how?
 - b. Do you still have questions about CRP and how it relates to your practice?
 - c. Are there any barriers that limit your ability to implement CRP?
3. Moving forward, what do you still need in order to grow as a culturally responsive teacher?

Interview Protocol for Individual Interviews with School Social Workers

1. When you hear the term “culturally responsive practices,” what comes to mind?
 - a. How would you define CRP
 - b. Do you feel you implement CRP?
 - c. If so, how? If not, why?
 - d. How do you feel CRP impacts minoritized students? Families?
2. What does CRP look like in classrooms at your school site?
 - a. How have you supported teachers to implement CRP?
 - b. Do you feel your role as a school social worker aligns with your definition of CRP? (What you are required to do on a daily basis)
 - c. Are there barriers that limit your effectiveness as a culturally responsive practitioner?

Appendix B: Reflective Questions for Practitioners

Exploring the Implications for Transforming Systems from Within

Questions for Administrators:

1. What is the role of administrators in supporting the retention, recruitment, and development of POC?
2. What is the role of administrators in improving school climate?
3. How can administrators create more spaces for dialogue and collaboration between practitioners?

Questions for Professional Development (PD) Facilitators

1. How are shared understandings of racial equity developed across schools?
2. How can the experiences of Practitioners of Color (POC) reveal more about the theory to practice gap?
3. How can we create structures of support for POC beyond traditional PD spaces?

Questions for School Social Workers (SSW)

1. How do SSW identify and address barriers that practitioners face implementing interventions in schools?
2. How can SSW inform the larger school district of structural oppression?
3. How can SSW support practitioner readiness and knowledge around racial equity?

Implications for Practitioners of Color

1. What is our role in disrupting racial inequity?
2. What do we still need in order to thrive as practitioners?
3. How can we identify spaces that cultivate our needs and sustain our practice?
4. How do we cultivate joy in our work beyond the current frameworks we are given?