

#NormalNeverWorked: The Fight for Black Liberation in the Context of Education and COVID-19

Jacqueline Forbes, Nicholas Mitchell,
Gwendolyn Baxley, Ja'Dell Davis,
Gloria Rosario-Wallace, and
Christian Kochon

The impact of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) highlights familiar inequities across U.S. institutions that are integral to social well-being. While longing for a return to “normal” is expected in a time of unprecedented loss of human life and the relinquishing of routines and comforts, equity-minded individuals understand that “normal” has been and continues to be oppressive at its core. While the disproportionate impacts of everyday educational violence on Black students, educators, families, and communities continue to be overlooked, these educators offer hope and a way forward, one rooted in the humanizing love that CR-SE and Black liberatory practices offer.

We are interested in the ways that COVID-19 has disrupted the normalcy of oppression and inequity and the possibilities for Black liberation in this new context. We, The Black Liberation in Education and Society (BLESS) Research Collective, are a collective of researchers and practitioners who work collaboratively to generate data, uplift knowledge, and inform actions for school and community practitioners to reduce harm to Black students, center Black joy, and be steeped in liberatory and emancipatory practices. We believe that when teaching and learning is rooted in an emancipatory and liberating praxis, that educational spaces will become spaces of freedom for all in the community. As such, we work to highlight and uplift practices that are anti-racist, that decenter whiteness, that eradicate anti-Blackness, that uplift and center Black joy, that center Black students and families and embrace a decolonial pedagogy. The BLESS Collective is composed of six educators: four researchers and two practitioners who support school leaders in a large, urban school district. We are four Black women, one Black man, and one white man.

We sent an invitation out to members of a larger urban school district community in the northeastern United States in order to get a fair representation of different voices and perspectives. Invitations went out to school and district leaders, community-based organization (CBO) partners, alumni, and teachers. We had eight participants (see appendix) who responded and

participated, including 1 high school teacher, 4 district leaders, 2 young adults that were alumni of a district high school, and 1 CBO liaison who is also a former district leader. Participants represented diverse racial backgrounds, including 2 Black women, 1 Afro-Asian-Latinx woman, 1 Afro-latinx woman, 1 latinx man, 1 latinx woman, 1 white man, and 1 white woman.

The participants were then divided into two focus groups based on schedule availability of 3 and 5 and were asked to consider the urgency and possibility of now in the context of ongoing racial uprisings, persistent anti-Blackness, and the global impact of COVID-19. Using a semi-structured approach, we considered three broad questions: (1) “How can we think about what we must/can do now?”; (2) “How are we approaching self-care?”; (3) “What can we think about for the future?” Focus groups lasted 90 minutes. Five themes emerged from coding and data analysis of focus group transcripts: Black liberatory practices, whiteness, self-care, metacognition about practices, and culturally responsive-sustaining education. We highlight these themes below, pulling representative quotes that capture the essence and flow of the conversation. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the participants.

On Black Liberatory Practices:

Amaya (former school leader): We always started with a space of reflection and meditation and grounding ourselves in the

present moment. Sadly, for, I'd say about the last five years that I was a principal, we came back to the realities of Trayvon Martin, we came back to the reality of Charlottesville, we came back to the reality of systemic racism, the loss of Black life, right. And we still started there and always planted the seeds for us to engage in curriculum writing and creating structures that upheld Black and Brown joy, freedom, and liberation.

Brian (current high school teacher): Being Black has meant being under attack from our educational system, [and] from our government. And so, if you don't acknowledge that, and that doesn't inform the decisions you make in a classroom, then you shouldn't be a teacher and, you shouldn't be a teacher in *The District*, where most of the children staring back at you will be different. It will be People of Color.

Julian (current district leader): We understand that this COVID[-19 pandemic] has a long tail and a ripple effect. And you know, a lot of People of Color, a lot of my Black brothers and sisters and Spanish brothers and sisters from different communities, a neighbor could die, and it could hit their heart in a different way. And some educators don't understand, right? They want to know, did your mom die? Did your father die? But when you live in a community where everybody is auntie and everybody's uncle and everybody's cousin, we have to make sure that we are doing wellness checks and understanding not just how their nuclear family is doing, but how their communities [are] doing and also being an ambassador and liaison and bridge to support other sister agencies in supporting our families in most need.

Danielle (former district leader and current community based organization liaison): I've been trying to keep myself from like doing the Shock Doctrine thing with this in terms of changing schools, but at the same time, like the elimination of standardized tests that happened last year, I think is one of the most powerful transformative occurrences that could be built on to really create equitable schools that do not continue sort of the historical oppression of Black people in this country.

Like standardized testing, I could go on forever, but it is built on anti-Black racism. It has reinforced anti-Black racism for years and, it needs to be gone. And it was last year. And it illustrated, I think, the ways in which schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism because people were confused about what to do when the tests stop existing. And so I think that if the policymakers would take the step now to eliminate the standardized tests for this year, because we know that they will be even more inequitable than they ever were before, and allow schools to teach students and not standardized and not like standardized test curriculum. I think that that is a powerful, powerful idea that could move us forward in this work. I'll leave it at that.

Angela (school leadership coach and staff developer): And the second thing as I was listening to you guys speak is in the connection for me is our Indigenous practices are based on rituals, and we learned rituals from grieving to celebrations. And because even grieving is a celebration of something that was but no longer is. We all know transitions are a part of life. It's not like it begins here and ends there. So all that I think that in that process are by creating the new normal by creating a new way of being by creating these possibilities that Amaya spoke about; we need to create something that grounds it. And we are traditionally grounded on rituals. That's how we know things. That's what is Indigenous. It has been taken away from us. But I think replaced by other rituals that are made not necessarily now are what we need. We need to return to that ancestry that and don't put the elders to guide us there. And even in that, in itself is part of the liberatory practices. That's how I somehow afford it.

Amaya (former school leader): The thing I want to say, it's a focus on collectivism. And more collectivism, less individualistic thinking that's rooted in white supremacy. I think honoring ancestors and elders celebrate, you know, embracing rituals that center those who we serve. And I also want to say examining who gets to lead, and who determines what it means to like

be a leader, right. And so as principal, I looked at our leadership committee that had students, parent coordinators, assistant principals, parents, you know, and so like a really holistic representation of who makes up that community. And it wasn't based on your title, whether or not you were a leader or saw yourself as a leader. And so developing and investing in developing Indigenous leadership is a personal passion of mine.

As Brian noted above, “being Black has meant being under attack” and “schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism.” Our participants noted the ways in which anti-Blackness is present in schools and the oppression that students of color, and in particular, Black students and families, face. In order to combat anti-Black racism, practitioners must adopt Black liberatory practices. Participants described how Black liberatory practices include practitioners starting from a place of acknowledging the historic disregard for and attack of Black life within and outside of schools. Black liberation also encompasses combating harmful practices, such as standardized testing, and affirming Black joy, freedom, rituals, community and ancestry. Amaya, provides a way forward through centering the voices and perspectives of Black and Brown people within the school, “We always started with a space of reflection and meditation and grounding ourselves in the present moment”. Are we centering the joy of Black students and families? Are we adopting indigenous practices that center community over individualism? Are we dismantling the structures that continue to oppress Black and Brown students? These are the approaches that schools and practitioners need to adopt.

On Whiteness:

Danielle (former district leader and current community-based organization liaison): So I'm thinking about one particular principal that I've been talking to a lot. He's a white man. His faculty is predominantly white women; his student population, a vast majority of Black and Latinx students. And he has been struggling because he's trying to figure out how to decenter whiteness in the reopening conversation. And it's hard

because the people in his most immediate sphere are all white people. And he can see from survey information that, say half of his families are interested in having their students come back into the school building at least partially in the fall. But half of his teachers are definitely not. So we've been holding town halls and a whole bunch of procedures to decenter the whiteness of the teachers that was driving this conversation, but it has been extraordinarily challenging for him. And like, you know, I've been trying to help him through this and I don't at all feel like I'm an expert in how to do this either, but it is something that has come up in our conversations over and over again. How, as a white man, can you navigate that and how he can be really centering the voices of the Black families of his school in this conversation. And their needs. And their worries. And their hopes. And their fears as part of the conversation about reopening

Amaya (former school leader): I too sat in a town hall meeting for a school. It was mainly the teachers, right. And one thing that I found to be really bothersome, and will get me to then like you know, where we may want to go, was that part of the town hall was a predominantly white teaching staff and school leadership staff wanting to have to create student-led town halls, or student town halls in some form, that aimed to repair the relationships between the school safety agents and police and students. Without acknowledging or interrogating where those relationships have been detrimental and harmful in the communities where that school lives, right, and particularly like, you know, for all of us. And so, we're going into a school year, where once again, we're experiencing another person--Jacob Blake, always say their names-- who was shot seven times by police officers. We're also witnessing an act of white supremacy that's being protected by the powers that be. And it's not being named, and it's not being called out. Right. So you have a 17-year-old white supremacist who shoots two people at a rally in a protest. And so, if we are not examining and interrogating policies, and practices and historical harms, and the dynamics of white supremacy and the way in which it lives within our school systems, the ways in which it lives within

our policing, then we are doing harm. And so for me, when I imagine a reopening, it is an examination of the dynamics of power, of positionality. It is looking at our policies and our structures and it is also as much as it is about hearing and creating spaces to hear the voices of Black and Brown staff members and students and community members, it is also about white folks doing their own work because we cannot be tapped on the shoulder and asked every time. What happened in the town hall I was in was that I was being asked to condone this wonderful plan that was, you know, to examine and repair the harm between safety agents and students, they; mean no harm. And I was, you know, I was very truthful and honest, in saying that power dynamics are also happening within classrooms and that you too are causing harm. Right. And so let's be clear that it goes beyond the metal detector. It goes beyond that safety agent, and it walks into the curriculum where we are not represented in ways that are empowering, when we are not acknowledging the hurt, when we are not acknowledging that this dress code policy is harmful, when we're not acknowledging that metal detectors are harmful. Right? And so I'm wondering if schools are planning to scan students for temperature as they enter, and a temperature check and a metal detector? And then will you be penalized if you're late? Will you miss the class and then fail? And so what are the ways that I will continue to push this thinking and really push school leaders, particularly white folks, which is the majority of the system, The District and teaching staff, to really do your work with your folks, get your sister, get your cousin, get your friends, get your homies, get your aunts, and figure some stuff out? And allow us to like heal and not be the person that you're going to every single time. And we are going to be traumatized time and time and time again.

Amaya (former school leader): I think I see the racial dynamics playing out as we move forward in predominantly white staff schools, particularly folks, you know, you have your liberal progressives and your allies who are going to also want to tell Black and Brown people, what's the right way to protest, what's the right way to engage, what's the right way.

And I think it will serve as an opportunity for if we don't stop it, and if we're not vocal about it, and if we're not planning for it, to further indoctrinate students right and to create more harm. I'm saying, do things the right way, and you'll get what you want to do things the right way and you too can be successful versus step back and analyze what's been happening historically and what's still lingers today. Right, step back, and then step in with real concrete actions that you will implement to dismantle what has been harming us for so many years and what will undo and then dismantling, but it's also rebuilt, right? And so for me, there's that combination of the two. But I have some serious concerns about this. Yes, COVID [-19] and the racial tensions that we are experiencing, and I wonder how many students will be further harmed by the racial, not by the racial tensions, but by the ways in which teachers and administrators will try to shift their perception. And so make them blame themselves and their community members versus having them understand why these conditions were here and created, to begin with.

Amaya (former school leader): Yeah, I think I've been in several conversations with the summer remote with school staff who are really much more invested in having students and community members behave and act in a more civilized way, if you will, right, so that their needs are met. And to really further police our thinking, our actions, and what we do. And so for me, it further perpetuates harm. Because those of us who are hurting and have been engaged in this work for years, and those of us who are just starting to come to levels of consciousness around what's happening, are then being silenced and in a very profound way, by not including us in the conversation, or by not including us in the curriculum, or ... where schools are focusing on. And so right now, there's a huge emphasis on trauma-informed learning, which is really important and social-emotional learning, which I always understood to be on par and equally as important as academic and intellectual development, social-emotional development. However, when it is rooted in the present, in the status quo, and what we've learned and engaged in these days when nothing shifts

and changes, I think it's Dr. Dena Simmons who calls it white supremacy with a hug.

Whiteness is shorthand for systemic and structural white supremacy and the particular way it impacts an organization's culture, policies, practices, and beliefs. As Amaya explained during the focus group, *"and so let's be clear that it goes beyond the metal detector. It goes beyond that safety agent, and it walks into the curriculum where we are not represented in ways that are empowering, when we are not acknowledging the hurt, when we are not acknowledging that this dress code policy is harmful, when we're not acknowledging that metal detectors are harmful."* The act of decentering whiteness asks a community to recognize the harmful practices that exist and instead to center the voices and insight of Black families. White dominant culture is the default, and if you are not aware of it, you can't decenter it. There is a tension that arises when you have a predominantly black and brown student body with a largely predominant white teaching force. Whose voices are being centered? Whose experiences are being valued? *White supremacy with a hug* is still white supremacy. There has to be intentionality in examining your practices, policies and beliefs. Schools need to be explicit in their decentering. Participants also described the need for white practitioners to not police Black youth and families and hold white practitioners accountable for harmful actions and practices.

On Self-Care:

Brian (current high school teacher): And then in terms of self-work, I think it has to do with like, you know, my wife and I have gotten a lot more active in you know, going to spaces to support like Black trans lives; we started marching and started going to events that you know-- and that used to make me feel uneasy. Just something I never did before. And this summer really brought that out in terms of like the books I'm reading, the media that I'm consuming, so, you know, that's sort of a long-winded version of what those two things are.

Danielle (former district leader and current community-based organization liaison): Just the idea that I do not judge myself and I

do not judge other parents for the decisions that they are making for their kids has been the most important thing. Even when I'm feeling like other people are judging me, like I just don't. Like I've just decided, like, I'm not going to judge myself...So I think that has been the most, I'm not trying to convince anybody of anything. And I'm gonna, I believe really, that everyone, every parent [at] this time really is making a decision, a very hard decision with the best interests of their kids at heart. So that's been ...my self-care. Other than that, like, I also bought a treadmill.

Monica (Alumna of district high school, current college student): And that was the moment I realized I was like, what are things that make me happy? What are things that make me feel good about myself? What are things that make me just, what just sparks joy in my mind and my heart?

Gabriella: If I'm completely honest, like, I'm still struggling to find like ways to self-care. Because similar to Monica, I've always been like; I need to help someone. So I'm big on help. Like, what do you need? And I come last. And so I think that I've been like socialized and brought up like, okay, you take care of your siblings growing up when they were little, you take care of your cousins. And most of my family never went to college, I'm first-generation and so I'm that person that if they need something - it could be my aunt, my grandma, they call me like, Oh, I need to do this, I need you to call this.

Rose (former teacher, current school leadership coach): Something that Monica said stuck out to me and the concept of saying no, right? Something I'm trying to lean into, like, no is a complete sentence. Because I'm like you Monica. Yeah, yes, yes, yes. I'll do it. I've always been a giver. And someone that's always like, okay, I'll do it. Sure. Like, even if I know it's like, you know, for my own, like, you know, to my own detriment. So learning to say no, and just saying no, and letting that be the end of the sentence.

Amaya (former school leader): I think these are really tumultuous times, right? And

so, on any given day, I can go from feeling like incredible moments of gratitude and reflection to feeling really broken and sad and dissolution in life, right? And so it's a combination of reading I think, you know, similar to like, I guess [like] most of us here, right, ... reading brings me joy and particularly reading writings by Black and Indigenous women. Taking walks with my children, and you know, eating and just honestly for me, the most important thing has been slowing down.

The participants' reflection on self-care moves the conversation past the superficial symbolism that is often highlighted and hashtagged but lacks complexity and depth. There are a number of self-care challenges that this current moment brings, including the rollercoaster of emotions amid these distressing times and negotiating balancing caring for one's self and others at the same time. While some participants grappled with these challenges, others have emphasized being graceful with themselves and others during these times, learning to say "no" when at capacity, slowing down and centering the things that bring joy. As Monica explains, "what are things that make me happy? What are things that make me feel good about myself? What are things that make me just, what just sparks joy in my mind and my heart?". How can practitioners and families keep joy and self-care at the center amid our uncertain and trying times?

On Metacognition about Practices:

Brian (current high school teacher): And so, you know, I don't have like a big beautiful answer so much as like, we got to communicate better, right? Like, I hope you all will go to more families and we'll go to more people from all parts of this, you know, this discussion, to just see like, what is not working, what is working, and what could we dream of, what's the world we dream about?. And so I believe it comes a lot with sharing information and it comes a lot with putting people in positions where they can, you know, build relationships across schools and across districts and, honoring that.

Rose (former teacher, current school leadership coach): I think for me, I'm trying to come from, like center myself, to be able

to be open to hearing the different concerns and perspectives of those who are in positions other than mine. Because that's the heart of equity work right is to be able to understand so that way we don't perpetuate those systems that oppress and harm.

Amaya (former school leader): You know, my heart breaks for principals this year. I think being a principal is what was, for me was the most challenging position ever, right? And it gave as much as it took away from you. And this year, with the level of uncertainty and the level of tension and particularly for Black and Brown school leaders who are committed to liberation, this is really traumatizing times. And so one I've heard from many principals is that they feel as though no one cares about them and whether or not they live or die. And so it is on them to care for themselves because they know that they are responsible for three hundred or two thousand young people. And there's a lot of hurt and trauma, but no one has stopped, right? And folks are still showing up to lead the work and stay engage and to hold themselves accountable. And so that's what I'm getting. And I'm getting a sense of real exhaustion. And so I always find it, that it's my place to sort of hold up a light of like possibility. Yes, this is true. And, here's what we can do. So how do we hold space for one another?

School communities are living through an experience they weren't prepared for; this particular school district isn't alone in stumbling to find a solution. School leaders, families, faculty, and staff found themselves wondering what the ramifications of their decisions would be in the short and long term. Brian grappled with his school's decisions, and wondered what voices were missing, "Like, I hope you all will go to more families and we'll go to more people from all parts of this, you know, this discussion, to just see like, what is not working, what is working, and what could we dream of, what's the world we dream about?" Amaya reflected on the particular tension of holding space for and leading a school community, while feeling that no one is thinking about you, "And so one I've heard from many principals is that they feel as though no one cares about them and whether or not they live or die. And so it is on them to care for themselves because they know that

they are responsible for three hundred or two thousand young people.” How can a community reflect on the decisions they are making when they are under duress? Have we created the conditions to make good, thoughtful choices that center our most vulnerable children and young people?

On CR-SE:

Brian (current high school teacher): I’m a department leader at my school and the conversations were really about the amount and the extent of work to assign and what is reasonable. It was a shift away from grades being something that is punitive. But the conversation really was, it felt like a conversation about the soul of our school. If our students are experiencing trauma, how could we ever say that they failed to do an assignment? Or that they didn’t show mastery? Like, if they’re in a traumatic situation, how could we ever, with clear eyes put [failure] on a government document that lives with that young person for the rest of their life? And so there was an internal struggle at our school about what that means. And I think that that’s deeply linked to COVID [-19] and deeply linked to issues around you know, practices that help liberate people.

Julian (current district leader): Um, I think one of the things is not to minimize any of the parents’ decisions, right. And we’re gonna have some parents who, due to economic situations, employment situations, they have to send their kids to school. And we’re gonna have some parents who have the means and the outside family support to say that, you know, we’re going to be cautious, this is very dangerous. And we’re gonna have some strong opinions. And I just think that we need to provide space for grace, that no matter what kind of vibration tone, no matter, you know, where they [are] coming from, whether they believe that this is a conspiracy, whether they believe this leader is doing a good job, a bad job, but what they need to do, we need to come for a place where they’re not just tolerated, but they’re celebrated and supported. As you know, sometimes we can come with a lecturing tone, and just projecting our views of the zeitgeist and our views of what the school should be doing.

And those opinions leak, and sometimes they provide confusion for these parents. So one of the things I tell my parent coordinators is that you know, whatever decision that parents are making, we have to support and we have to back them up 100%. So it’s 100% remote, we got to make sure that these children have all the supplies they need, they have the bandwidth they need, they have the technology they need. And if it’s blended, we have to make sure they have the metro card. And, you know, they have all the supplies and the PPE, and how [to] advocate for themselves. But no matter what [the] choices ... that we have, we have to help the families understand that we have their back 100%.

Amaya (former school leader): I made a commitment to myself to ground myself in my truth and love, right? And so always grounding myself in that space and in getting ready for school reopenings whatever that is, or will be, for me it’s being and actions that are also rooted in love and in a belief in the young people that we will engage with.

Julian (current district leader): Yeah, I think the school could be more of a place of education but also a place of healing. For a lot of people of color, school is not a pleasant place, right? And teachers can’t wrap their head[s] around why they don’t like school, because most teachers grew up liking school. School was a place where they were celebrated. It was a place where they felt safe. And you know, me, I got kicked out of school, right? I like being in the football field; I like being in the park. I’d rather be in a barbecue all night, regardless of shootouts or not. I duck and I come back and I eat more hotdogs, right? And that’s how I grew up, right. And I rather be in a place where there is [a] community. I rather be in a place where there is bonding. I rather be in a place where even we’re matching our pain. And we realize that like, oh, you’re dealing with that, and oh I’m dealing with that, and we’re supporting each other...And, so if schools could just be a lighthouse, and schools to understand that the body keeps score. And this, you know, trauma and epigenetic scaring and all this stuff that that’s in the prefrontal cortex of everybody’s mind now because of this tragedy and because of this election, I think if we can

leverage that and make that part of our new ethos make that part of our new norms. I think more families will come in. And once more families come in, and once that school begins to be a third place, where a family has a job, a family has a home and, a family's comfortable in visiting a child's school. I think; we'll see more...more achievement and more Black and Brown students feeling more comfortable in school and realizing that this is a good place. This is not a place they have to be at, but this is a place they get to be at.

Amaya (former school leader): I think honestly, the most culturally responsive thing that anyone can do in reopening plans is to step back and listen to [the] community and listen to students. And listen and do. So get your nose out of chapter three of Ibram Kendi's book and start doing. Stop reading. Stop quoting how many researchers you've read, and let me see that in action... We at the office are working with principals, teachers, folks who have been doing this for years, right? So stop asking me what to read. You know how to Google something, go Google it. Let me send you this, and stop asking me how to do it. I will do it because it is my job and my responsibility. But first and foremost, I'm here to serve Black and Brown communities, and that's in educators and school leaders. That being said, the most culturally responsive-sustaining thing you can do is step back, listen to community, examine and interrogate your beliefs, examine, interrogate what beliefs are existing within your policies and your school practices, and your curriculum. That's my biggest thing, the most culturally responsive thing you can do. Listen and center, Black and Brown voices. Stop reading and start doing.

Gabriella: Like I said before, like I personally just see conversations around it. I've yet to see any actual action. Given the climate now, a lot of people are talking about it. I don't know if it's genuine, I don't know if it's because you have to, I don't know what it is, but I have yet to see it in action. And I think that once this school year starts, I'll definitely be looking out for that. Because I'd love to see it.

Amaya (former school leader): I think in my experience, I see it really inconsistently. I'd love to say yes, it's happening, you know, it's happening all over and at large, but it's not. I think it's being approached like education jargon. And so like the next new thing. In most places, I'd say. I think in some places, some schools and school communities are grappling and trying to figure out what it really means to bring those practices to life in a classroom. What does it mean in practice? What does it mean in pedagogy? What does it mean in policy?... When I think about culture responsive-sustaining education, I think about humanity and how is education humanizing, right? And so if I remove the CR-SE as the acronym and I just say, education that is liberatory and humanizing, and I look at Monica and Gabriela around Sankofa process that allows me to understand who I am, where I come from, and where I can go from a space of empowerment, then how am I creating opportunities for students and communities to participate in what is taught and learned and happens in a school community consistently? And so, that'd be like a dream for me is to see that in action throughout. But I can't honestly sit here and say that it is happening. It feels more like a buzzword that people want to get to, but are not there yet. And have a very simplified checklist [of] understanding of it.

The concept of schools as a place of healing speaks to the essence that is Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education. Imagine schools become this third place that Julian speaks of, imagine the possibilities. CR-SE brings forth the futurities of not just Black liberation and Black life, but also Black joy. And yet at the same time, we see that CR-SE risks becoming another buzzword, co-opted and set up to fail. Gabriella highlights how discourses around CR-SE should not detract from action and implementation around CR-SE while Amaya highlights the infrequency that schools and districts truly adopt its practices. Amaya also points the way for many educators who may feel stuck: *That being said, the most culturally responsive-sustaining thing you can do is step back, listen to community, examine and interrogate your beliefs, examine, interrogate what beliefs are existing within your policies and your school practices, and your curriculum. That's my biggest thing, the most culturally responsive thing you can do.*

Listen and center, Black and Brown voices. Stop reading and start doing. For those truly looking for a place to start—listen, and center Black and Brown voices.

Conclusion

As Danielle highlighted above, “schools organize themselves around structures that ensure the persistence of anti-Black racism.” Pedagogical practices that center whiteness, stigmatize students of color, reproduce systemic racial inequities, and tacitly legitimize white supremacy as an educational approach are normal school practices (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CR-SE), a viable counter to deficit-centered pedagogy, is primarily concerned with embracing the countless resources that emerge from communities of color and positioning those resources as assets within the multicultural context of US education. CR-SE, while critical to elucidating the impact of similar patterns of white supremacy across racial and ethnic contexts, is ultimately limited in its usefulness in interrogating the specificity of Black life, conditions, and Black liberatory practices in education (Dumas & ross, 2016). Educators, school and district leaders misunderstand it, view it as a checklist, or refuse to engage with it outright. This failure to engage fully with CR-SE, to name white supremacy and anti-Black racism, to explicitly center students in our schools, echo across generations and throughout the focus groups used in this study. As a result, the disproportionate impacts of everyday educational violence on Black students, educators, families, and communities continue to be overlooked. However, the educators here offer hope and a way forward, one rooted in the humanizing love that CR-SE and Black liberatory practices offer, if only schools would fully invest and commit to them.

Suggested Next Steps:

For educators, school leaders, students, and families this conversation may have affirmed aspects of their experience in schools, brought forth new information to consider, and caused the reader to ask, “now what?” We ask you to consider the following next steps:

- Strategically center Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and POC voices and experiences within your

personal and professional community. This can occur within the current meeting structure, the texts and readings that are used as touchstone texts, and by including and affirming BIPOC members of your community.

- Utilize an Equity Team, a collective of diverse voices and perspectives, that come together to critically and thoroughly examine your team’s, school’s, or community’s policies, practices, and beliefs. An equity team wonders what changes need to be made to center Black liberation within these structures and innovate interventions to align systems towards this goal.
- Lean into the discomfort of talking about racism and Anti-Blackness with curiosity as opposed to avoidance, academic doublespeak, and inauthenticity.
- Critically and thoroughly examine your community for anti-Black policies, practices, and beliefs. Through thoughtful examination, harmful structural practices, such as the over policing of Black people, standardized testing, and biased dress codes, can become more equitable and affirming to all people, but most importantly, the most vulnerable populations.
- Center the audacity to dream. Too often equity work centers on the damage and targeted harm which occurs to Black and Brown people, particularly children and young adults in a school community. However, if we were to envision a community without these barriers, where freedom was possible, what would that look and feel like? How can Black joy be systemically and strategically centered?

A Place to Start:

- Dr. Bettina Love’s Abolitionist Teaching Network, <https://abolitionistteachingnetwork.org/>
- Dr. Eddie Fergus’ Collaborative Equity Solutions, <https://collabequitysolutions.org/>

Appendix

Table 1. Participant Information

Name	Race	Sex	Role
Brian	White	Male	Current high school teacher
Julian	Latinx	Male	Current district leader
Danielle	White	Female	Former district leader Current community-based organization liaison
Angela	Afro-Asian-Latinx	Female	School leadership coach and staff developer
Amaya	Afro-Latinx	Female	Former school leader
Rose	Black	Female	Former teacher Current school leadership coach
Monica	Black	Female	Current college student Alumna of district high school
Gabrielle	Latinx	Female	Current college student Alumna of district high school

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Gwendolyn Baxley (She/her) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at University at Buffalo, SUNY, who explores educational spaces in which Black youth and families survive, thrive and navigate and the role of race and AntiBlackness within these contexts. Gwen can be reached via email at gsbaxley@buffalo.edu.

Christian Kochon is an education practitioner and researcher and brings a critically conscious and anti-oppressive lens to his work, which has allowed him to parse the broader structural support systems of the education ecosystem. He can be reached via email at cjkochon@protonmail.com.

Ja'Dell Davis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, whose research focuses on race-ethnicity in education, particularly the experiences of youth and practitioners in Out-of-School Time and Afterschool education, the

transition from high school to post-secondary education, and race discourse in educational contexts. Ja'Dell can be reached via email at: jdavis26@wisc.edu.

Gloria Rosario Wallace, EdD, (She/Her/Ella) is an Afro-Dominicana educator-scholar-activist committed to supporting racially conscious, human-centered, school and organizational leadership. Gloria and be reached via email at: grosariowallace@gmail.com.

Jacqueline M. Forbes is a PhD candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who studies the experiences of Black students in predominantly Black schools. She can be reached via email at: forbes3@wisc.edu.

Nicholas Mitchell is a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who studies principal leadership and racial equity approaches in schools. Nicholas can be reached via email at: nmitchell4@wisc.edu.