*“The protests made me feel so proud of us”:*

*Racial Literacies and Bearing Witness to the Movement for Black Lives*

Samuel Finesurrey, Guttman Community College, City University of New York

Arnaldo Rodriguez, School in the Square

Alondra Contreras, Facing History High School

Aidan Lam, Environmental Studies High School

Michelle Fine, The Graduate Center, CUNY

And the S2 Alumni Research Collective

Ashley Cruz, Alondra Contreras, Ariana Peña Ramírez, Brandon Mendoza, Joel Almonte, Aidan Lam, Siarra Savinon, Noah Campbell, Jesslin Hiraldo, Lauren Santos, Samantha Bruno, Alyssa Victoria, Noel Columna, Naomi Pabon, Mya Laporte, Sheylany Paulino and Nathan Boissier

In October of 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. addressed the middle school students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia with a speech called *Life’s Blueprint*: “Number one in your life’s blueprint should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your own worth and your own somebodiness. Don’t allow anybody to make you feel that you are nobody. Always feel that you count…” King knotted belief in self with the struggle for liberation. “Don’t allow anybody to cause you to lose your self-respect to the point that you do not struggle for justice. However young you are, you have a responsibility to seek to make your nation a better nation in which to live. You have a responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody. And so you must be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice.”(https://theblackdetour.com/martin-luther-king-jr-what-is-your-lifes-blueprint/).

Reflecting on King’s call, this chapter explores the extent to which public schools build a sense of self-respect, dignity, and somebodiness in young people, particularly in young people of color, and under what conditions students are encouraged to struggle for racial and economic justice. In a nation that typically teaches a white-washed history of race relations, dotted by “heroes” but not movements, highlighting “racist events” and “bad apples” but not systemic racism, modeling assimilation while suppressing critique and radical imagination, in this chapter we explore how anti-racist teaching, racial literacy and critical youth inquiry matter for reading the world, acting toward justice and articulating demands from those in power.

We are the School in the Square (S2) intergenerational participatory research collective. Our multi-racial, multi-generational research team includes twelve 10th graders, two 9th graders, a school counselor, and two CUNY professors. Launched in June 2019, just as the first class graduated from S2, we set out to document how we, and our peers, were navigating high school, across 37 schools, in New York City, a deeply segregated city. At S2 we students learned quite a bit about the history of race and racism in the United States, were encouraged to pursue our own inquiries, develop a critical voice and activist stance, and contributed to re-writing a middle school history textbook inserting critical racial and ethnic histories.

Now as youth researchers we are gathering oral histories, across five years, from our peers and building an archive to document how youth of color in Washington Heights, the Bronx and Harlem, have experienced the pandemic and racial uprisings of 2020 and 2021. We have workshopped how to conduct oral histories, generate questions, engage participants with dignity and respect, use ZOOM, pivot to COVID19 and the uprisings, record and transcribe, analyze the narratives, archive the material and present our findings to academics, as well as state and New York City government officials. Built into the very foundation of the project is a transition counselor, Arnaldo Rodriguez who supports 8th graders entering 9th grade (in a vast and dizzying “choice” system) and attends, with care to the academic, emotional, financial, cultural and personal issues confronted by students and alumni of S2. We do not want to simply document troubles, with police, ICE, schools, health, housing–we wanted to responsibly intervene (see Brown & Rodriguez, 2017; Drame & Irby, 2016; Fine, 2017; Outley and Blyth, 2020).

In that first year, we chronicled “transitions to high school” of the first graduating class. We completed more than 40 interviews and gathered more than 80 surveys from our peers. We have published a collaborative chapter on our “beginnings.” (see Finesurrey et al, 2020) In March 2020, when COVID19 hit and George Floyd was murdered, our project shifted. Now we are documenting history, in an even more unequal city, listening to youth of color (aged 14–16) as we survive the pandemic, make sense of the racial uprisings and negotiate online learning. In this chapter we draw from interviews held between April and September 2020, with the 14 youth researchers, focused specifically on the academic and activist implications of “racial literacies,” borrowing from Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2020). In this chapter we explore how culturally sustaining education and critical participatory inquiry carve paths to “somebodiness.”

**The Design**

School in the Square (S2) is a small, progressive charter school in Washington Heights, New York City, for grades 6-8. The school serves 300 students, all students of color, many of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants, mostly from the Dominican Republic, living in the Bronx, Harlem and Washington Heights. From the 95 oral histories collected by the research collective we can, without ambivalence, appreciate that S2 is an educational and cultural space where commitments to “voice,” “agency” and “dignity” are foundational–not just in the rhetoric of the school. We write not to glorify S2, but to understand how schools can take up the obligation to engage critical racial literacies, and how such an education enables youth activism (see Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006).

Dignity Affirming Education and Participatory Inquiry

The S2 youth researchers have enjoyed what one might call a *dignity affirming education* in a school where racial justice, linguistic diversity and immigration journeys are central to the curriculum and school culture. Students are encouraged to write, question, inquire, protest, challenge dominant stories and re-write history, including the racialized and classed journeys and struggles of our own families. The S2-CUNY participatory research project was borne with similar commitments, including the belief “No research about us, without us!” As a research collective we center youth perspectives, with a critical race and immigrant lens.

Critical Methods

Over the last two years we have gathered oral histories, participatory surveys, vlogs, letters to self, auto-ethnographies and identity maps; we have documented writing retreats, facilitated restorative circle conversations, hosted discussions about privacy and confidentiality and we have collaboratively produced a set of videos and publications to share the wisdom, struggles and desires of these students. We developed a process for participatory analysis and together we sketched a set of ethics for publishing/presenting our work, while still protecting the vulnerabilities of our peers and their families. (Fine, 2017)

Writing, Presenting and Advocating as a Research Collective

The publication process includes a zoom session to read the final draft aloud so we can edit collaboratively, discuss and debate our analytic frameworks, add names to quotes that were anonymous or remove our identifiers if, in retrospect, a quote is too revealing or sensitive about ourselves or our families. This is precisely what we did for this paper. Finally, together, we have decided that our research should have a use beyond the archive: we want our findings to impact school policy, feed our various organizing strategies (online and in person), uplift the experiences of youth of color from immigrant families and be shared with our educators and peers. When possible, we bring our findings to city government and state officials to convey the needs of young people in the Heights. Our commitments were not only to document inequity, but intentionally and lovingly to convert research into anti-racist action. (see Adams-Wiggins & Taylor-Garcia, 2020; Ginwright, S. and Cammarota, J. 2002; Mosley, Neville et al 2019; Othley & Blyth, 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2020). In the remainder of this chapter we focus on “racial literacies” as a road to “somebodiness,” exploring the critical elements of culturally sustaining education and the impact on young people’s commitment to critically conscious activism.

**Developing Racial Literacies: Learning to Read the World Critically**

From the beginning, but particularly during the summer of 2020, it was clear that S2 alumni embody and communicate quite sophisticated “racial literacies.” As articulated by Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (accessed 2020): “Racial literacy in schools includes the ability to read, write about, discuss and interrupt situations and events that are motivated and upheld by racial inequity and bias… [developing racial literacy is] an action-oriented process requiring love, humility, reflection, an understanding of history, and a commitment to working against racial injustice.”

In our oral histories conducted over the summer, the youth were asked, “Did anything about your S2 education help you make sense of the protests and the uprisings?” To a person, there was a resounding YES, followed by an elaboration of how their social studies classes contributed to their understandings of racial history, and protests, in this country. The youth researchers explained that the curriculum at S2 helped to equip them with the historical insights about racial (in)justice to appreciate, translate and grow the movement within their own social networks (Paris, Genishi & Alim, 2017).

Their sixth and eighth grade social studies teacher, Ms. Pfeifer, drew particular accolades for preparing students to critically engage at such a young age in anti-racist activism that has swept the nation. Noel explained, “Not only did [Ms. Pfeifer] teach me about history and like important things that happened...she also taught me...how to talk about them, how to think about them.” Jesslin elaborated further, “In my social studies class we talked about the Little Rock nine, all those different cases that involved the racism…. I feel like my teachers prepared me to speak about racism and encourage people to talk about it too.” Joel added, “That class was amazing, they taught us so many things. It was really one of the main classes that taught usabout the real world….. And we just learned a lot about racism, discrimination...police brutality. We just learned a lot about that in S2.” *“*It was a critical reflection on U.S. history,” Aidan explained “It wasn't like the typical American history where everyone's the good guy.”

Asked about the role their *high* schools have played during the racial uprisings, in terms of providing the space to air frustrations and grievances, Aidan was quite critical of structural silences in schools, doubling as complicity: “Some [high] schools remained silent [after George Floyd’s murder]... I think that's very wrong, especially…in high school in New York…. It's better to be open with your students.”Aidan noticed that many of his peers in high school were already ill equipped to place the protests in historic context and now were not being educated to understand the origins of the uprisings and thus were less prepared to understand the articulated demands for justice. Aidan and others listened, with concern, as high school classmates, and sometimes their own family members, blamed protestors for “violence” without historic context.

The impact and appreciation of a strong critical race history education could be heard across the narratives. From the perspective of students, S2 educators were, for the most part, committed to culturally sustaining pedagogy and to scaffolding youth understandings of U.S. racial history. Middle school students from diverse backgrounds were expected to inquire, study, and learn more about their own and others’ background, challenge dominant stories infused in traditional U.S. history. The alumni, both the 14 interviewers and the peers they interviewed, credit their middle school teachers for giving them a “lens” for naming and navigating racism, making sense of uprisings, challenging state violence and engaging in movements for racial justice. Racial and linguistic dignity, student inquiry and social activism were core to the curriculum.

**A Look Inside a Culturally Conscious History Class**

Struck by the frequency of “Ms. Pfeifer” as an answer to questions about racial consciousness, we decided to interview Maeve Pfeifer, on zoom, conveying to her the enormous impact her curriculum and pedagogy had on the youth researchers. In the teary/humble way that amazing educators always are surprised and thrilled to hear about their impact on students, she offered: “I love these kids. I still get texts about what they are doing, but I don’t get to hear how they connect that to our class. I got into teaching history…to combat institutional racism, from the ground up, to help young people see how our society is foundationally problematic.” It soon became clear that the activist ethos she inspired in so many of her students was intentional, “I wanted to work with kids and communities so they would have tools to protect themselves, empower themselves and empower others. They need to understand the importance of history…. The more the curtains are pulled open, the greater our ability to build stronger communities.”

Pfeifer explains how she organizes her classroom: “I structure my classes toward critical awareness and inquiry. First, I have to find out who is in the class and offer material drawing from their cultural or geographic origins. We start with an identity unit – and build a lexicon. We construct a vocabulary so we can name things that emerge again and again in history–like the notion of ‘progress.’” Students are encouraged to challenge dominant narratives about the past and present, but always with evidence. “As a white woman, I have to encourage this kind of deep critique and analysis.” Pfeifer continues, “We don’t use a textbook. We review a range of standard textbooks and critique them, through three analytic lens: is it critically conscious? Is it historically accurate? Is it boring or interesting to read?” For the final assignment, the students “create their own [history textbook].”

In a review of these student-created textbooks, we found discussions of World War I that broke from a traditional emphasis on President Wilson’s stated goal to “make the world safe for democracy” and looked instead at the colonial landscape in Asia and Africa that informed the ambitions and conduct of U.S. and European leaders during and after the war. Another set of student-created textbooks examined World War II by tracing the experience of Black soldiers fighting the Nazi’s White Supremacy abroad, while segregated within the armed forces of the United States.

By examining standardized textbooks and then creating their own, the critical lens deployed by these students contested white-washed celebratory narratives of U.S. history and empowered them to challenge the framing of the United States as consistently benevolent, at home and abroad. Students gained an appreciation of historic and contemporary movements, launched in opposition to continued miscarriages of justice by U.S. authorities. Ms. Pfeifer nurtured these youths to embrace their role as “somebodies,” learning with dignity to appreciate your own biographies, interrogate the dominant story they are encouraged to believe and organizing for a more just future by confronting historic and persistent wrongs (Paris, Genishi & Alim, 2017).

**Culturally Sustaining Education within a State Framework**

While Ms. Pfeifer’s curriculum and pedagogy may seem unusual and exemplary – and it is! - it is important to note that culturally responsive-sustaining education is a framework endorsed by the New York State Board of Regents. In January 2018, the New York State Board of Regents convened a panel of experts to develop, from the ground up, a framework for culturally responsive-sustaining education (CR-SE), to support students to be “socio-politically conscious and socio-culturally responsive” and equipped with “a critical lens through which they can challenge inequitable systems of access, power and privilege” (<http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>). New York City Department of Education is even more explicit: “Culturally responsive-sustaining education uses educational strategies that leverage the various aspects of students’ identities, including the rich cultural, racial, historical, linguistic characteristics of students to provide mirrors that reflect the greatness of who their people are and windows into the world that allow students to connect across cultures.” (<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education>) Of course, while CR-SE is aspirational throughout New York, as you can imagine, implementation is uneven.

In culturally sustaining schools and community settings, educators work to recognize and nourish the cultural/racial wisdoms held in their students. As Alondra notes: “Our education at S2 prepared us not only to become leaders, but also active listeners, for this moment. I personally learned how to have conversations with peers in persuasive ways using historical context that I learned, in large part, from my experience at S2 [and] from my work in the S2 research collective. I now know I was not alone.”

**Inquiry Moves to Action: Youth Researchers as Insurgent Policy Consultants**

During the summer of 2020, Michelle, a CUNY professor and member of the research collective was asked by New York City Deputy Mayor Philip Thompson if the S2-CUNY research collective might present our findings on “the impact of COVID19 and the racial protests on youth in immigrant communities.” On a zoom meeting in November, the youth researchers presented our work to representatives from the mayor’s office, the New York State Department of Education, the New York City Board of Education and the Regents. We presented qualitative material from the narratives on (a) mental health/stressors and family anxieties during COVID19, (2) the uneven landscape of remote learning and (3) the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogies to help students make sense of the racial uprisings. A month later we presented our findings to a newly emergent Ed.D. program on Community-Based Leadership at the College of Staten Island. In both contexts, the youth researchers narrated on their own experiences, presented as analysts of their generation and advanced a ground-up set of policy positions rooted in critical race theory. As the CUNY-S2 researchers, the youth researchers are growing comfortable as narrators of their own positions, as analysts of others’ narratives and as policy consultants. These presentations – excerpted below - are perhaps the most compelling evidence of how dignity affirming education moves under the skin, into the collective and into action (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012).

**Culturally Sustaining Education and Participatory Oral Histories:**

**Core Elements of Dignity Affirming Youth Development**

Aidan Lam (Environmental Studies High School, 15 years old and identifies as white) and Alondra Contreras (Facing History High School, 16 years old, identifies as “Biracial Black/white Dominican” and activist) took the lead on analyzing the narratives and presenting on how racial literacies are nurtured in schools, and then mobilized in youth activism. Aidan attended a predominantly white elementary school before enrolling in S2. The contrast made him particularly aware of how school culture – who attends, who teaches, what is taught and how– can silence, enhance and/or support critical racial consciousness. In a school culture that nourishes racial literacies, he argued, like S2, conversations between students and educators, and conversations among students–in school and online–are amplified through rich discussions of race and racism. Aidan offered: “I have a friend, Alondra, and...before this whole pandemic in eighth grade, she was very outspoken about these things…. She really taught me a lot. I went to like a predominantly white elementary school. And a lot of the stuff, it was pretty much general biased history…. She showed [me] how things are changed, perceptions are changed. And if you change the perspective of the narrative it becomes clear.” In schools and youth-led research projects, where racial literacies are the currency of analysis, peer wisdom - not only teacher knowledge -- can surface as a collective resource. Alyssa, another S2 alum credited Alondra for a peer to peer education in racial literacy online, continuing the conversation beyond the classroom, “Alondra, a person in our group, she says, really inspiring words and she educates me... And I'm like, thank you. Thank you for letting me in on that.”

The young people learned, at S2 and then beyond, the dangers of the single story; the fallacies and erasures of the dominant story; the power of telling one’s own story, and how U.S. history has been “whited-out”. They came to appreciate peers who were activist and learned from and with each other. Then, as researchers analyzing other young people’s narratives, they were not only able to clarify their own history and perspective, but also appreciate that their feelings and frustrations were not simply personal, but generational, shared by peers.

In his interview, and in the discussion with the Mayor’s office, Aidan stressed the importance of a critical race lens in the classroom: “most social studies classes in American history have had the same traditionalist perspective….white-washed history taught through the lens of white men is still present in some schools today.” Asked to unpack how critical race history affected students, Aidan elaborated: “The students of S2 had an awakening experience. This curriculum has changed many of our lives including my own. Going into 2020 and high school, we were prepared to deal with the problems that arose around us. From the interviews conducted by the S2 research collective, it became clear that culturally sustaining classes, particularly in History courses, prepared students to engage in conversations about systemic racism sparked after George Floyd’s murder… Not only did these conversations prepare us to think critically about race relations in U.S. history, but they empowered us to use that knowledge and engage in conversations about racial injustice taking place all around us.”

Noel recalled: “[Ms. Pfeifer] taught me about history and important things that happened...she also taught me...how to talk about them, how to think about them.” Brandon explained how a culturally critical education helped him deal with the dual crises of pandemic and protest: “[our education] prepared us to be really open to the world,”whileMya credited her history teacher with historicizing racial justice movements so she might understand and advocate on behalf of the movement for Black Lives: “We were always on top of it, like we always got educated on this stuff.” We turn now to consider how a culturally sustaining education supports the shift from critical consciousness to activism among young people of color, as if they heard King’s invocation: “You have a responsibility to seek to make life better for everybody. And so you must be involved in the struggle for freedom and justice.”

**Bearing Witness: Racial Uprising as Popular Education**

Bearing witness to the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement out of their windows, through social media or in the streets, the full set of young people we interviewed were mostly proud of their peers and communities. A number were surprised to see that “finally someone is standing up.” As one student expressed, “The protests made me feel so proud of us.” Watching, listening and engaging in the unfurling of rage and demands for racial justice “opened my eyes.” “We now have a voice” and “we know that people in our community” share these thoughts. Jesslin explained the power of “sharing stories”: “How George Floyd was killed, well murdered, was brutal. And people decided not to stay shut. [They began to] fight back and speak out on what they thought was right... My community [is] now sharing stories…. We now know that people in our community have the same thoughts.” Aidan considered the protests an “awakening”: “When you hear people speak about their past experiences, it's very awakening…. I feel like this is and this whole movement, generally, has really shown how prevalent racism is in our country….” The façade of calm collapsed in the wake of George Floyd’s murder as communities of color throughout the city increasingly shared experiences of negative encounters with police that emboldened the movement demanding change. And, as one young woman noted, “even white people are protesting.”

For these young people, the uprisings functioned as a form of popular education: strategic political theatre, on the streets, “out my window” and on social media. Siarra offered that the uprisings pierced the silences that surround systemic racism: “I know racism was a thing and it's always been a thing, but with all these protests happening, like, it really opened up my eyes and really realized what's going on in the world and how certain situations aren't being talked about and they should be talked about.”Learning from each other, these young people were sharpening their own lines of analysis, exposing “certain situations that weren’t being talked about and should be.” The young people realized now the collective – but largely unspoken - trauma that racist policing had inflicted on their neighbors, friends and loved ones.

As we read through the transcripts and heard over and over about the provocative and educational impact of the protests, Michelle introduced the group to W.E.B. DuBois’ pageantry genre, where Du Bois choreographed performances and pageants in public, in communities, to parade down the streets of Black communities. These pageants, like *The Star of Ethiopia*, were produced for the Black community in the early 1900’s, to teach Black history and make visible the collective Black experiences (see Du Bois & Aptheker, 1985). As if in historic resonance, Noel commented upon the pedagogical gift of the uprisings: “I feel like [for] some people who don't really know that much about black history…[the protests] really taught them the history of these protests.”

While a number of students referenced the protests on the street as popular education, others commented on social media as an information highway that allowed them to educate and be educated, in ways inaccessible to previous generations. Alyssa explained, “I feel like social media really brings the awareness and lets you know what's up. And I think that was my biggest source of…inspiration and that's what really inspired me to continue supporting Black Lives Matter. [Friends on Social Media] educate…and…reassure me.” Young people are not only learning (and teaching) but recognizing themselves as “somebody” within a youth-led community of struggle.

The protests, however, also re-ignited memories of past racist incidents faced by the S2 alum. Alyssa, whose family is Dominican, recalled that when she lived in Connecticut “it was like second grade and people used to call me Mexican. And I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I didn't say anything…. but they said, ‘you're Mexican, you should go get that Mexican guy….’ It bothers me…” Joel, another youth researcher recalled: “There would be times when some people like to talk bad about us because we're talking Spanish.” By stitching their own racialized wounds into a larger fabric of U.S. history and struggles for racial justice, these young people could see themselves as part of a movement growing down the block and around the nation. Aidan suggested that the uprisings have forced a national racial reckoning, “I feel like a lot of people were kind of, I mean, they probably knew about [structural racism], but just didn't really like face it. They didn't see, it was…in the back of their minds. But these protests have really drawn it out...”

In these interviews, we also heard quite a bit about policing, and more particularly over-policing in communities of color with implications that include a fear of police, lack of trust in police, and the loss of public safety. While one student observed: “There’s over policing in Brown communities and Black communities and I do see that…I don't have that much trust in police just because of experiences from other people...”, another added: “Honestly, when I see police, I feel scared. I feel scared because you never know what could happen, what they could do…..” The young people brought to the Mayor’s office meeting specific links for key policy reports by the NYCLU (<https://www.nyclu.org>), analyses in the New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/nyregion/new=york-schools-police.html>) and investigations by Popular Democracy to validate why young people of color are fearful when they see police in their neighborhoods.

Alondra told her own story with aggressive policing: “Before the pandemic, every morning I would pass through metal detectors. Sometimes I would have to take off my earrings and other accessories, which can take a lot of time. This would result in getting to class late. I would sometimes be patted down, which made me feel like a criminal. I just wanted to get to class and expand my education. I have noticed that in many schools with a demographic of predominantly white kids they do not go through metal detectors. Beacon [a selective, majority white school in same neighborhood] is a great example. It is close to my school and both buildings have about the same numbers of students. The only difference is that my building has 5 different schools while Beacon is the only school in that building. My school and Beacon are both public schools. If one public school has metal detectors all should. Every public school should get the same treatment. Why are Black and Brown children always criminalized? We have to deal with police in our schools and in our neighborhoods because we are seen as a threat to society due to our physical characteristics. When people like myself speak against over-policing in public schools, our arguments are always dismissed. People say things like we are preventing school shooting, to keep us safe, and stop fights. This is completely understandable, but every school shooter has been white. School safety agents are also able to use deadly force. That doesn't make me or other students feel safe. It makes us feel like criminals.”

In discussion with these public officials, Alondra modeled the analytic depth of her critical literacy skills. A gifted orator and organizer, she did her homework and brought in “evidence.” She introduced “reputable” citations for others to consider. She analyzed the majority-white school in her neighborhood both in terms of policing and metal detectors, and described how these policies live in her body—“I feel criminalized.” Finally, she noted the policy irony that carceral investment in schools does not seem to stop the violence and that the most prominent, deadly school-based mass murders have been committed by white boys while schools of color emerge as sites for the criminalization of students.

**From Witnessing to Engaging: The Struggle for Freedom and Justice**

At the end of the interviews, we asked about the youth researchers’ activism. Many replied as frustrated on-the-street activists not “allowed” to join protests on the streets, while others were keyboard warriors kept home by family members concerned about police escalations and contracting COVID19. Alyssa recalls, “My mom wouldn't let me protest. She's a party pooper.” Denied the ability to attend physical protests, these students used new tools to engage in anti-racist activism and found their voice on social media. Mya moved her frustrations and demands to social media: “I wasn’t allowed to go to the protests…. But social media, that's a really, really good platform to spread awareness. I feel like I think the biggest platform is TikTok, which that's kind of silly, but it actually is. And a lot of people bring awareness to…protests.” Mya continued on social media, “You can get educated, be educated….” Jesslin detailed her circles of online activism, “I feel like most of my friends and some of my family went on Instagram and they posted a lot of information on Black Lives Matter. On their bios they would put the George Floyd Go Fund Me…. They would post like the black screen with the caption Black Lives Matter with the different artist.” A ninth grader Sheylany explained she engaged by “sign[ing] petitions…and I've shared stuff on social media.” They were joining and building communities of “somebodies.”

While immersed in a political awakening and passionately embracing King’s call to justice, a number of the youth, however, met unexpected and difficult challenges from family members. A few alumni from immigrant households bristled at anti-Black comments now heard from parents, aunts, uncles or grandparents when discussing BLM. One young woman told us, “The people in our country [the Dominican Republic] originated from Africa.” Commenting on the Dominican immigrant community in NYC she continued, “I see that as Dominicans, they are…only Black when it’s needed. Like they’re only black when they want to say the N-word. I’m like, look at these protests. Like support something…say something.” This student explained, “My family don’t consider themselves people of color, like being Dominican. They’re like ‘I’m Spanish.’” Her friend being interviewed at the same time agreed, “I sit down thinking, like, Grandma, you're Black.” With a sense of history and empathy, Alondra summarized this intra-family dynamic for the mayoral staff: “Because S2 students received a culturally responsive education denied to our parents and grandparents, many of whom immigrated to this country, some tough conversations were taking place within households.”

**Becoming Somebodies, Building Toward Collective Well Being**

Our project has placed the perspectives of youth of color at the center of knowledge production and analysis. The youth researchers and their peers have been socialized, in middle school, to view history and the present through a critical race lens. Through education and participatory inquiry we have developed, individually and collectively, the courage to forge difficult conversations at home, in school and in our communities. Now, as researchers, we feel a responsibility to carry our own and others’ stories, with dignity, to new audiences.

These stories, nested in research, not only contribute to a sense of somebodiness as King hoped. Our education and research, our obligation to these stories, compel us to move our findings to action. We have presented our research and recommendations for culturally critical education, and the need for mental health supports in times of COVID19, to the Deputy Mayor of New York City and the State Department of Education in late November. We will be “guest lecturing” as a collective in a Community Leadership Ph.D. program at the College of Staten Island in January. We will be presenting our findings on youth activism, economic inequity and online learning at conferences on youth “voice” and a conference on oral history. More immediately, our data have been folded back into S2 for professional development, revising the curriculum, developing local internships and helping S2 students select high schools that are culturally sustaining, focused on student inquiry and deeply relational. For the “anniversary” of the lockdown, we are preparing a blog on “pandemics and protests” from youth in the Heights.

As students, activists and emergent scholars, the S2 researchers know we are “somebody”: knowledge producers with a responsibility for moving the precious stories gathered into action for social change. Racially conscious social analysts, we think critically about our own ethnic identities, with curiosity and solidarity about people with backgrounds different from themselves, and we engage action for justice. Many of us initiate hard conversations at home, in school, online, in community, willing to discuss, with respect and conviction, why solidarities matter for collective well-being. As the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. advocated more than 50 years ago, we need and deserve schools of dignity, where young people of color, and white students, learn about the long history of racial and economic injustice in the U.S. and about movements of resistance; schools where we are invited to conduct our own research, write our own textbooks, develop the skills of advocacy and build collective communities of “somebodies.”

**References**

Adams-Wiggins, K. and Taylor-Garcia, D. (2020) The Manichean division in children’s experience: Developmental psychology in an anti-Black world. *Theory and Psychology*, 30, 4, 485-506.

Antrop-Gonzalez, R. and De Jesus, A. (2006) Toward a theory of critical care in urban small school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies*, 19, 4, 409-433.

Brown, T. and Rodriguez, L. (Summer, 2017) Collaborating with urban youth in address gaps in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 75-92.

Drame, E. and Irby (ed) (2016) *Black participatory research: Power, identity and the struggle for justice inn education.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Du Bois, W.E.B. and H. Aptheker (1985) *Creative writings by W.E.B. Du Bois: A pageant, poems, short stories and playlets.* Millwood New York: Kraus International Publishers.

Fine, M. (2017) Just research: Expanding the methodological imagination in contentious times. New York: Teachers College Press.

Finesurrey, S., Fine, M., Lester, C. and King, S. (2021) *Just* inquiry rooted in critical care. In

Vasudevan, V., Gross, N., Nagarajan, P., Clonan-Roy, K. (editors) *Complicating Qualitative Research in School Settings in the United States:Critical Care-Based Methodologies*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

Ginwright, S. and Cammarota, J. (2002) New terrain in youth development: The promise of a social justice approach. *Social Justice*, 49, 4, 90, 82-95.

Guishard, M., Halkovics, A., Galletta, A. and Li, P. 2020 Toward epistemological ethics: Centering community and social justice in qualitative research. *Society for Qualitative Inquiry in psychology.* [www.sqip.com](http://www.sqip.com)

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/about-us/vision-and-mission/culturally-responsive-sustaining-education>

King, M. L. (<https://theblackdetour.com/martin-luther-king-jr-what-is-your-lifes-blueprint>) accessed January 2, 2021.

Kirshner, B and Ginwright, S. (2012) Youth organizing as a developmental context for African American and Latino adolescents. *Child development perspectives*, 6, 3, 288-294.

Mosley, D., Neville, H., Chavez-Dueñas, N., Adames, H., Lewis, J. and French, B. (2019) Radical hope in revolting times: Proposing a culturally relevant psychological framework. *Social Personality Psychology Compass*, 2019, 1 – 12.

Outley, C. and Blyth, D. (2020) Race, anti-racism and youth development. Journal of youth development, 15, 5.

Paris, J., Genishi, C. and Alim, H. (2017) *Culturally sustaining pedagogies*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sealey-Ruiz, Y. (2020) [www.yolandasealeyruiz.com](http://www.yolandasealeyruiz.com)