Lessons to Learn from Teacher Activists Organizing for Systemic Change Through A Community-Based Coalition

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Lessons to Learn from Teacher Activists Organizing for Systemic Change Through A
Community-Based Coalition

A Dissertation Presented

by

Cynthia Roy

Submitted to the Graduate School of Education
Lesley University
in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of

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Ph.D. Educational Studies
Educational Leadership Specialization
Lessons to Learn from Teacher Activists Organizing for Systemic Change Through A
Community-Based Coalition

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Corporate education reformers say they want excellent education for all students, yet scholars have documented the failure of corporate, neoliberal education reform. Educational organizing offers a powerful alternative to education reform. The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers in a community-based coalition made up of workers, educators, students, parents, guardians, grandparents, elected officials, and community leaders organized for equitable, systemic school change. This critical, feminist, activist ethnographic study included six participants and involved field observations, formal and informal interviews, and artifacts collected over six months. The instruments used to collect data were a demographic survey, a field observation tool, and interview questions. Guiding Research Questions included: (a) What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness? (b) What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change? (c) What factors and conditions do K-12 teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations? Coding methods combined Descriptive Coding, Values Coding, and Emotion Coding. Six themes emerged and informed the Guiding Research Questions. Findings from question one indicated that the development of critical consciousness consisted of three components: personal experiences of oppression, education on systems of oppression, and activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression. Findings from question two indicated that educator-activists of the coalition organized with a Freirean toolkit for racial and economic justice. Findings from question three indicated that there were numerous conditions and factors that inhibited and promoted educator-activism and organizing for equitable systemic change. As a result of this study, there is greater insight into the development of critical consciousness in teachers as well as factors and conditions that inhibit
and promote educator-activism and organizing. Additionally, the coalition’s culture (leadership philosophy, organizational structure, and organizing process) provides a framework for other educational organizing groups aiming to transform schools and society.

Keywords: grassroots educational leadership; educator activism; educational organizing
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Emerson. It is my hope that you understand my commitment to this pursuit. It is my wish that you live your life with passion and purpose, believe in your ability to make change, and use your power and privilege to fight for justice.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge and thank my family, committee members, coalition members, and my cohort at Lesley who have supported me throughout my doctoral studies.

For half of my child’s life, I have been engrossed in PhD work. To my husband, James, thank you for caring for us. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for taking care of the domestic labor. People always ask me how I manage to do what I do. It is because of you. It is because of the coffee made by you, the dinners cooked by you, the hugs and kisses given by you, and the endless words of encouragement. I love you.

To my mom, sister, and brother, thank you for being my inspiration. Mom, thank you for modeling service, compassion, and generosity. Alicia, thank you for modeling creativity and possibility. James, thank you for modeling justice and kindness. Thank you all for modeling bravery. To the rest of my family, especially my aunts, thank you for filling Emerson up with so much love and light. I am able to do this work because of all of the people around me who love and care for him.

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To the coalition, especially study participants, Ricardo, and Bryan, thank you for everything. I began my PhD program at the same time that I joined the coalition. Emerson was a few years old and he often came to meetings. I was so touched and moved by the warmth that you showed us and everyone else. There aren’t many spaces where mothers are able to fully exist. For me, you provided a space that I could be a mother, educator, and community member.
A space where I could explore my passions and unite with others to make change. Over the past four years you have all become my friends, my family. You are there for me to bounce ideas off of, to challenge me, and to support me, James, and Emerson. To Ricardo, thank you for being the best partner I could have ever imagined. Your brilliance, dedication, love, and kindness are deeply appreciated. I learned so much about leadership from your example. To Jose, I can only hope that we have all made you proud. Thank you for always having my back. Thank you for your passion. Rest in Power, Jose.

Lastly, to the 2018 cohort, thank you for your support. Thank you for listening to stories about the coalition for years! Thank you for providing a community where I could explore my interests and deepen my knowledge and skills. To Robin, your support has meant a lot. Thank you for checking in on me, cheering me on, holding me accountable through Zoom writing dates, and for being an absolute joy. I will never forget the dozens of cocktail photos that got me through the final days of writing this dissertation. I now know the perfect celebratory cocktail for graduation!

As difficult as pursuing doctoral work is, you all made it enjoyable. I loved this journey and will forever be grateful. Thank you.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The invitation was to the community center in a public housing development. When I pulled in, I reflected on how different the place looked from my childhood. It wasn’t that it no longer seemed so big or that it took on a less fictional form, as one would expect revisiting a place as an adult, but exactly the opposite. The buildings were much taller and painted in bright hues of orange, blue, and yellow. The apartment units were stacked upon each other like Legos put together by a child, varying in color and orientation. The landscaping and pathways curled like Candy Land. Still, I felt uncomfortable walking in—just as uncomfortable as I did in my youth. Just as uncomfortable as I did when the housing “projects” were washed in gray with rusty broken fences that surrounded it saying, “keep out.”

I grew up in this neighborhood and attended the school across the street. Many of my childhood friends had lived in the projects, although I had never been inside until now. When I entered the community center, I was greeted by a man whom I had met once before and recognized as an employee of the National Education Association (NEA). I was surprised that he was at this community meeting in a low-income public housing development.

I settled into my seat, feeling like an outsider, especially because I was one of the few White women there. Outside of briefly living in Jamaica as a Peace Corps volunteer, I was not used to being in the minority in this way. But, as we went around the room introducing ourselves, I felt less alone. We were city residents and we either attended or worked in the local school district. We were there because we cared deeply about strengthening our schools and protecting public education from privatization efforts and, specifically, a charter school expansion that involved the transfer of public property to a privately-run charter and involved the establishment of a legislative precedent in Massachusetts that would automatically enroll
students within a school zone into charter schools as opposed to their neighborhood public schools.

There is no way to adequately capture the impact that this particular meeting of the coalition and the subsequent meetings of the coalition had on me as an educator. It was the first time as a teacher that I had sat with the community to discuss public education. It was the first time that I had witnessed and experienced what I had only read about in educational leadership journals regarding authentic community and parent engagement.

The coalition is a grassroots organization primarily made up of families, students, and educators in a city in southeastern Massachusetts. The coalition also includes community leaders, local and statewide union leaders, and elected officials, such as school committee members, city councilors, and state representatives. The coalition is committed to protecting public education and strengthening our schools and our community by building a leader-full movement and effective campaigns. The mission was developed by the coalition and is to create caring schools that work to support the physical, social, and emotional development of all students so that they become creative, compassionate participants who are capable and willing to transform society in the direction of equity.

The compassion, inclusiveness, and commitment to equity of the coalition was nurtured by the two co-chairs at the time: Jose Soler del Valle and Dr. Ricardo Rosa. Jose was a former teacher in Puerto Rico and the Director of the Labor Education Center at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, a union and community organizer, and an award-winning labor photographic journalist. Sadly, Jose passed away on April 20, 2020. His interests included the role of people of color in the United States Labor Movement. Ricardo is also a community organizer and activist, as well as an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the University of
Massachusetts Dartmouth with a doctoral degree in Education. Although I am not sure how they would identify, I would describe them both as feminists for a plethora of reasons, but, put simply, because of their inclusiveness, commitment to equity, and the way in which they related to me – a woman – as an equal. In fact, they were both the first male feminists that I had ever worked with.

The most meaningful, engaging, and transformative work I have been involved in as an educator and a woman has been through the coalition. The coalition has provided an opportunity to work with two incredible men who never made me feel subordinate (which was a breath a fresh air, to be honest), an opportunity to work with the Massachusetts Teachers Association in new and powerful ways, and most importantly an opportunity to work toward an emancipatory agenda with others who feel oppressed too, like many of our students and families in the city. I have come to firmly believe that it is this sort of collaboration and educational organizing among educators and the community and teachers unions and the community that will “save our schools” and move schools and society in the direction of equity and justice.

In 2019, the coalition was awarded the Richard Fontera Award by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Dubin Labor Education Center for fighting governmental efforts to consign an entire neighborhood to privatized education and preventing a dangerous legislative precedent. In an email correspondence, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education, Diane Ravitch (2019), stated: “Your story is a great story of successful resistance!” In 2020, the coalition was awarded the Kathleen Roberts Creative Leadership Award by the Massachusetts Teachers Association Human Relations Committee for members and others who demonstrate selfless contributions through political action, community organizing and mentoring and have made substantial contributions in support of human and civil rights.
Today, the coalition is made up of over 150 members who are engaged in direct action to save our schools from privatization and build quality public schools. The membership represents the city well: It is multigenerational, multiethnic, and multilingual. The coalition offers parents, youth, educators, and community leaders various opportunities to engage and transform schools, including, but not limited to, facilitating: community Action Dialogues around educational social and economic justice issues; the youth academy/union dedicated to building political agency in youth; professional development for educators; and political candidate support. After the murder of George Floyd, coalition members initiated a group to unite with other organizations and individuals to support the Black Lives Matter movement and organize against structural and systemic racism locally. In addition to successfully resisting charter expansion, the coalition has been instrumental in numerous wins for the local school district, including additional funding, increased pay and a contract for food service workers, greater community-school engagement and responsiveness, and much more.

I am a mother, partner, lifelong resident of the city, and high school science teacher. I have been a science educator for 14 years and have experience in diverse settings: vocational and traditional; elementary and secondary; urban and suburban. I am a community organizer and now the co-chair of the coalition along with Dr. Ricardo Rosa. I am a unionist: I am on the Executive Board in my local, Bristol Plymouth Technical Association; a Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) delegate to the annual meetings; a National Education Association delegate to the annual representative assembly; and recently ran a campaign and was elected to the MTA Executive Committee (EC). The EC is made up of the MTA President, Vice President, Executive Director-Treasurer, and eleven elected leaders: eight Regional, as well as a Statewide Retired, At-Large Ethnic Minority, and At-Large Education Support Professional.
include hiring and evaluating the Executive Director of the MTA, managing the MTA budget, various MTA divisions, and grievances and contract disputes with employees, and debating and voting on nearly everything that comes out of MTA — policy, messaging, and so on. Executive Committee members are also ex-officio members of the Board of Directors. More specifically, as the Regional Leader, it is my duty to support locals by working with MTA staff, Board Directors, local union officers, and members. Within my region are nearly 50 local associations (approximately 35 school districts) that I am responsible for representing. Outside of union work, I have a strong history of community volunteerism and providing assistance in the development of community-based non-profit organizations. I am also a PhD candidate in Educational Leadership at Lesley University.

According to an MTA organizer, the coalition is engaged in the most progressive and effective racial justice educational organizing work in Massachusetts and MTA looks to us regarding how to engage and organize educators, families, and students in antiracism work (Gangemi, 2020, personal communication).

It is important to emphasize that it is through my experiences with the coalition and MTA coupled with my experience in Lesley’s Educational Leadership program that I find myself here engaged in critical, feminist, activist ethnographic research — research about educator-activism and community organizing for equitable systemic change.

Chapter One includes the following sections: (a) Statement of the Problem, including a description of the context, historical foundations, factors and conditions contributing to the problem, and possible consequences if left unaddressed; (b) Purpose of the Study, including the Guiding Research Questions for this study; (c) Expected Contributions, including implications for educational leadership; (d) Definition of Terms; (e) Overview of the Literature, including a
description of the bodies of literature, chief scholars, and seminal texts that explore the context, controversies, factors and conditions contributing to the problem; (f) Overview of the Method, including the study participants, site, and rationale for the study design, instruments and data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and coding, participant confidentiality, research bias, and delimitations of the study; and (g) Chapter Outline of the dissertation.

**Statement of the Problem**

Decades of research indicates that the default position of schools is to circulate dominant ideology through policy, curriculum, and instruction and to transmit it through organizational behavior (Apple, 1990; Au, 2018; Bartolome, 2008; Chomsky, 2004; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2016; Ravitch, 2013; Watkins, 2012). Indeed, in the seminal text, *Ideology and Curriculum*, Michael Apple (1990) noted that “institutions of cultural preservation and distribution like schools create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination” (p. 3).

Patriarchy, White supremacy, heteronormativity, heterosexism, abled-bodied hegemony, and the glorification of capitalism (and, by extension, imperialism) through seductive discourses, such as our gratifying life within an exceptional meritocratic society, are all seamlessly disseminated through schooling.

In fact, capitalist neoliberalism is so pervasive that we seldom recognize it as ideology or think about its impact on education and the teaching profession. Neoliberalism includes policies and processes “whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (McChesney, 1998, p. 7). Martinez and Garcia (2000) divide five tenets of neoliberalism: (1) the rule of the market, (2) cutting public expenditures for social services, (3) deregulation, (4) privatization, and (5) the
elimination of the concept of “the public good” or “community.” Proponents of neoliberalism aim for total freedom of movement for capital, goods, and services at any social cost and are opposed to government regulation that might diminish profits. Proponents of neoliberalism are for selling public goods and services to private investors, often in the name of increased efficiency. Education is a key target of the neoliberal agenda because of market size and its capability of creating critical citizens for a democratic society which is a potential threat to corporate globalization (Kuehn, 1999).

Neoliberal education reform, or corporate education reform, is responsible for standardized curriculums, scripted lessons, high-stakes testing, complex teacher evaluation systems, corporate educational leadership models, and the attack on teachers’ unions. This condition is problematic for a number of reasons. Standardized curriculums are often crafted by third party vendors who are not professional educators, but all too often venture capitalists (De Lissovoy, 2015; Saltman in Watkins, 2012, p. 57; Watkins, 2012, pp. 25, 26), have stripped teachers of their autonomy and authority and reduced them to technicians (Giroux, 2016). The standardized testing regime has effectively worked “to make schools look bad” (Kohn in Watkins, 2012, pp. 83, 85) and low test scores have been used to justify the privatization of schools. The system has paved the way for more charters and vouchers, draining our public schools financially (Ravitch, 2014). The national average teacher salary has decreased 4.5 percent over the past decade (National Education Association, 2019). Mainstream narratives now present the picture that public schools are failing, public school teachers are incompetent, parents are lazy, students are entitled, and unions are greedy bullies. Leadership models developed by the business sector dominate teacher preparatory programs and educational leadership programs, reinforcing the message that schools are failing because of mismanagement and that teachers and
students need to be measured for quality control (Saltman in Watkins, 2012, p. 59). Public sector unions have been under attack for years and most recently with the *Janus* legal assault on public workers. Peterson (2020) asserts

*Janus* has been championed by a powerful network of right-wing billionaires and foundations. They have augmented the Janus case and other legal challenges against public sector unions by funding candidates, organizations, and think tanks that promote two other major goals of the right wing: to privatize public education and other public programs like Social Security and to roll back the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, especially voting rights. (para. 14)

The “public” is being taken out of public education and the ability for workers to join collectively behind a unified voice is threatened as capitalist, corporate neoliberal education reform leads the way (Ravitch, 2013; Higgins, 2018).

All of this is possible, of course, because of the historic roots of institutional and systemic racism in schools (e.g., Native American boarding schools, school segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*, English-only instruction, etc.) and the historic roots of sexism in the teaching profession in the United States (Love, 2019). Teaching is a workforce of women. Patriarchy, White supremacy, and heteronormativity have largely influenced the U.S.’s first middle-class profession for women (Hoffman, 2003) and neoliberal ideology and corporate education reform perpetuates the oppressive experiences of teachers today (Watkins, 2012). U.S. teachers are exhausted in every sense as they are expected to do more and more with less and less. The expectation of teachers is to be selfless, to give generously even at their own expense. The expectation of teachers is to be compliant, to agree and obey rules, especially to an excessive degree. The unreasonable (and too often unattainable) expectations and demands, as well as the
corresponding scrutiny, condescension, and blame that comes along with it, leaves teachers feeling inadequate and powerless. Public awareness of the demoralization that teachers experience has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. This climate impacts students as well, for as the adage goes, “a teacher’s working conditions are a student’s learning conditions.” Teachers functioning as technicians (Giroux, 2016) or depositors of knowledge (Freire, 1993) do not promote critical thinking and serve students well. Teachers reinforcing beliefs that knowledge can be deposited, measured, and controlled, as well as modeling conformity, subservience, and compliance does not serve students well. Some researchers have asserted that neoliberal education reform is an assault on Black and Brown students (MacLeod, 2009; Watkins, 2012); however, education reform is also an assault on women (i.e., our teachers).

If K-12 educators do not resist corporate neoliberal education reform and actively engage in the struggle for liberation with the community, schools will continue to circulate dominant ideology, effectively maintaining the power and privilege status quo.

**Purpose of the Study**

Although the research on neoliberalism and schools is deeply illuminating, what this research seeks to explore is how teachers, particularly female teachers (but not female exclusively), are compelled to action and what tactics/strategies they use to disrupt or rupture dominant ideologies (even if only partly). That is, how do they, despite the intricate circulation of oppressive ideologies and the current culture of demoralization and deprofessionalization, refuse to be a servant to power, refuse to be submissive, complacent, and compliant and work towards their own and collective liberation? Most importantly, how do these educators without formal positions of authority exercise agency and pursue counterhegemonic praxis and
community organizing, despite the heavy constraints on time and the possibility of institutional retribution?

Grassroots educational leadership and organizing has the potential to effectively challenge the power and privilege status quo and transform schools and society. The purpose of this study is to better understand how educators, particularly White female K-12 teachers, organize for equitable systemic school change through a grassroots community-based coalition.

**Guiding Research Questions**

- What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness?
- What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change?
- What factors and conditions do K-12 teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations?

**Expected Contributions**

Information gleaned from this study may help historically oppressed groups/targets of oppression (i.e., women, workers, and people of color) and allies understand effective strategies for dismantling negative power relations to use in their own organizing contexts. These organizing strategies may assist educators in building collective power and solidarity with national progressive campaigns and movements for social justice, such as the Red for Ed movement and Black Lives Matter Movement, as well as local grassroots campaigns. The organizing culture of the coalition may suggest ways to overcome the current patriarchal socialization process, develop/nurture educator critical consciousness, provide insight into the campaigns and issues that resonate with K-12 educators, and aid in identity formation as educator-activists or intersectional-feminists.
There are implications for educational leadership preparatory programs, as well. Information gleaned through this research may provide an anti-patriarchal (i.e., critical feminist) educational leadership and management framework for sustainable, equitable school reform.

**Implications for Educational Leadership**

Social movements are an expansion and formalization of grassroots leadership (Kezar, 2012). Grassroots organizations and progressive movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, offer examples of anti-patriarchal forms of leadership for equitable systemic changemaking and differ greatly from mainstream educational leadership styles and models that are taught in educational leadership preparatory programs and widely adopted in public schools today.

Perhaps the most widely known and adopted framework and model for bottom-up, grassroots leadership within educational institutions is distributed or shared leadership which helps organizations function by distributing the workload and increasing employee ownership and accountability (Kezar, 2012). Researchers, however, have identified limitations of distributed leadership models and there is some disagreement whether distributed leadership models are genuinely empowering for employees (Kezar, 2012). Are these models merely symbolic or, even worse, are they models of coercive control which simply serve to lessen the burden of administrators, for instance? Conversely, grassroots leadership and organizing practices of progressive movements enable the most vulnerable and marginalized to participate in driving organizations (Ransby, 2015). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on what grassroots leadership of progressive movements can teach us about school leadership (Ehrich & English, 2012), on grassroots leadership in educational institutions (Kezar, 2012), and on grassroots educational organizing for school reform (Renne & McAlister, 2011).
This study can help further develop grassroots educational leadership models for equitable systemic change. As stated, it may provide an anti-patriarchal educational leadership and management framework for sustainable, equitable school reform for educator preparation programs and educational leadership programs that deeply contrast with widely adopted neoliberal educational leadership models.

**Definition of Terms**

Included in this section are definitions of all terms that are contained in the title, problem statement, purpose of the study or guiding questions that might be open to interpretation and need clarification and reinforcement so that the reader understands the meaning intended by the writer.

**Anti-patriarchal**

Resisting White supremacy and other forms of oppression through intersectional feminism. Anti-patriarchal is both feminist and antiracist.

**Community-Based Coalition**

An alliance between stakeholders (i.e., educators, students, and parents) in a community that act locally.

**Demoralization**

Occurs when we are no longer able to experience moral rewards such as making meaningful connections with people and being able to use our knowledge and skills/talents because of oppressive conditions. Demoralization results in a loss of sense of purpose, sadness, and hopelessness (Santoro, 2012).

**Teacher-Activist/Educator-Activist**
An educator who works to bring about political, economic, or social change (Catone, 2017); a grassroots educational leader.

**Educational Organizing**

Community organizing around educational issues (Renne & McAlister, 2011).

**Equitable**

Ensuring that resources are distributed in a way that creates equal benefits to all people (Renne & McAlister, 2011).

**Grassroots Educational Leadership**

Leadership exercised by an educator without a formal position of authority to affect change (Kezar, 2012).

**Intersectional Feminism**

The complex, cumulative manner in which the effects of different forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect, such as racism, classism, and sexism, for instance (Crenshaw, 1991).

**Organizing for Systemic Change**

A democratic strategy to unite people to change policies, practices, and belief systems.

**Reflexivity**

Involves the researcher acknowledging and critically reflecting upon their experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that will influence the research process (Craven & Davis, 2016; Hawkesworth, 2014).

**Teacher**

A K-12 classroom educator as opposed to a school administrator or education support professional.
Overview of the Literature

In this section, a description of the bodies of literature to be examined that help define and describe the problem, context for the solution, and ideas foundational to the study are provided. This is a summary of the literature and not a complete review. A complete review is provided in Chapter Two.

The following bodies of literature will be explored in Chapter Two:

- A historical analysis of the feminization of the teaching profession (Griffiths, 2006; Grumet, 1988; Hoffman, 2003; Rury, 1991 & 2009; Sedlack & Schlossman, 1987; Strober & Lanford, 1986)
- The role of educators as change agents for educational justice and the dual function of schools to both circulate dominant ideology to maintain the power and privilege status quo and to produce critical thinkers and participatory citizens who are capable of transforming (Apple, 1990; Au, 2018; Bartoleme, 2004, 2008; Catone, 2017; Chomsky, 2004; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2016, 2020; Kuehn, 1999; MacLeod, 2009; Picower, 2012; Watkins, 2012)
- The existing literature on grassroots educational leadership and community organizing for equitable systemic school change (more specifically, the emerging literature on grassroots educational leadership and grassroots community organizing for education reform, also known as educational organizing) (Alinsky, 1971; Anderson, 2009; Borregard, 2019; Boylan, 2016; Catone, 2017; Charney et al., 2021; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Erich & English, 2012; Fullan, 2003; Griffiths, 2006; Heifetz, 1996; Kezar, 2012; Leonder-Wright, 2014; Mediratta et al., 2009;
Meyerson, 2004; Welton & Freelon, 2017; Renne & McAlister, 2011; Shirley, 1997; Su, 2009; Zachary & olatoye, 2001)

- Grassroots leadership and organizing of anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist progressive grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s & 1960s, Black Lives Matter Movement, and Red for Ed Movement (Boyer & Morais, 1997; Carson, 1987 & 1994; Charney et al., 2021; Taylor, 2016; Harris, 2006; Honey, 1993; Huggins, 1987; Leistyna, 2014; Mouton, 2019; Platt & Fraser, 1998; Ransby, 2015, 2018; Taylor, 2016; Ostrich & Eidlin, 2019)

These bodies of literature explore where K-12 educators have been and where they are headed and inform contemplation of the role of educators in a democratic society. These bodies of literature also provide insight into the power and potential of grassroots educational organizing for equitable systemic change and how to engage teachers in the collective struggle for liberation.

**Overview of Methods**

In this section, a summary of the methods is provided, including: (a) a description and rationale for the type of design strategy the researcher used and an explanation of how and why the participants were selected as well as a description of the site; (b) a summary of the instruments used and data collection procedures; (c) a description of the procedures used to guide data analysis; (d) a description of confidentiality efforts; (e) an explanation of how one’s sociocultural perspective may influence attitudes and/or biases toward participants and impact data analysis; and (f) a description of the delimitations of the study.
Participants, Site, and Rationale for Design

A critical, feminist, activist ethnographic qualitative method was chosen to understand the culture of the coalition through the lens of 6 K-12 teachers. Ethnographers analyze the “shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language” of a culture-sharing group (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164) and feminist ethnographers center women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014). While ethnographers do enter communities as outsiders to study culture sharing groups, anti-colonial, critical ethnographic researchers do study groups as insiders who are part of the community they are studying. Although critiqued by positivist researchers, being an insider is not viewed as a deficit, but, rather, a strength and opportunity to collect rich, authentic data (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). Studying a culture-sharing group as a cultural insider is also viewed as an ethical approach to ethnographic research (Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015).

The participants in this study were K-12 public school teachers who lived in the city and were members of the coalition. They were chosen because of their commitment to activism and organizing for education justice. The study consisted of sites where participants were engaged in organizing, including coalition membership meetings, protests, Action Dialogues (described further in the dissertation), etc.

The type of design strategy chosen enabled the researcher to continue her work as a community activist while studying the culture of the coalition and complemented the work of the coalition as opposed to being in contradiction with it. Meaning, critical, feminist, activist research should also challenge normative structures and be an extension of counterhegemonic praxis. Counterhegemonic praxis meaning resistance through discourse and other actions to challenge dominant beliefs, policies, and practices about or related to race, gender, economic
arrangements of the society etc. that dominant groups proffer to further their own interest (Chisholm, 2015; Manojan, 2019). In this study, the researcher intentionally diverges from the dominant positivist view of qualitative research.

**Instruments and Data Collection Procedures**

The instruments used to collect data included a demographic survey, a field observation tool to collect ethnographic observations in the field, and interview questions to guide formal and informal interviews. Public artifacts (social media posts, photos, articles written, quotes in paper, etc.) related to the activism and organizing of participants were also collected by the researcher. Interview questions (topics of conversation) were developed around themes related to the Guiding Research Questions. Interviews resembled natural conversations between coalition members with semi-structured, open ended questions. Although, the field observation was developed, the researcher rarely took notes in the field so as to not interfere with coalition work. Rather, the researcher jotted down quotes and short phrases to recall encounters later. This way, the researcher was fully present with participants in meetings and actions. Google Forms was used to create the demographic survey and Google Docs for the observation protocol.

**Data Analysis Procedures and Coding**

Data analysis was done by looking for cultural themes and categorizing and describing how the culture-sharing group worked (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 322-323). To develop themes, the following strategies were used: (a) memoing; (b) highlighting noteworthy quotes; (c) using a combination of coding methods; (d) creating diagrams representing relationships between codes; and (e) drafting summary statements of recurrences or outliers in the data (Saldana, 2016).

Three coding methods were utilized: Descriptive Coding, Emotion Coding, and Values Coding. Descriptive Coding is a process where researchers assigns short, descriptive labels to
passages (Saldana, 2016, p. 292). Emotion Coding is a process where the researcher labels the emotions recalled and/or experienced and Values Coding involves labeling values, attitudes, or beliefs experienced by participant (Saldana, 2016). According to Saldana (2016), both Values Coding and Emotional Coding provides insight into the participants’ perspectives and worldviews (p. 293; p. 298).

**Participant Confidentiality**

Because confidentiality and anonymity of participants is essential, ethnographers in particular should always consider the safety of the participants. Consent forms were obtained from subjects who wished to participate in the study. Data, including transcriptions of interviews, observation notes, video or audio records were kept in a personal computer (protected by a firewall software and passwords) and/or secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. The audio/video recordings were destroyed after interviews were transcribed and coded. Steps to confidentiality were disclosed in the consent form. Although the researcher assigned pseudonyms to all participants, doing so is not a sufficient protective mechanism for participant privacy. In instances where the identity of an individual was difficult to conceal due to details of personal circumstances, explicit consent was sought prior to publication. The researcher informed subjects that they could terminate their involvement in the study at any time. Lastly, the researcher will share the study document with participants/subjects before publication in a book or academic journal.

**Researcher Bias**

Critical feminist ethnographers challenge notions of neutrality and objectivity, asserting that it is a fallacy. In other words, critical ethnographers believe that it is not possible to be unbiased when collecting and analyzing data since everyone makes sense of the world from a
historically and culturally situated standpoint. In this study, the researcher speaks from a standpoint of a K-12 educator, White Christian, able-bodied woman, and member of the coalition. Aware that the researcher’s bias could be overly positive and influence data analysis (Chavez, 2008), the researcher engaged in reflexivity and provided an honest and transparent account and examination of the assumptions/experiences/beliefs that she brought to the topic (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). The researcher’s reflexivity is witnessed in narratives throughout the dissertation and a summary of her reflexive journaling is provided in Chapter Five.

**Delimitations**

Participants were primarily women, members of the coalition, and K-12 educators/teachers in the city. Other delimitations included choosing one community organizing group to examine, exploring educational organizing from the perspective of teacher-members in the coalition only, and the Guiding Research Questions which served to limit the scope of the study.

**Chapter Outline**

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION includes a further elaboration of the following sections: (a) Statement of the Problem; (b) Purpose of the Study, including the Guiding Research Questions for this study; (c) Expected Contributions; (d) Definition of Terms; (e) Overview of the Literature; (f) Overview of the Method, including the study participants, site, and rationale for the study design, instruments and data collection procedures, data analysis procedures and coding, participant confidentiality, researcher bias, and delimitations of the study; and (g) Chapter Outline of the dissertation.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE includes a literature review including seminal texts and other relevant scholarly literature on educator activism and educational organizing for equitable systemic change.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD includes a detailed description of the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS include a presentation of the data correlated to the three guiding research questions and the Findings for each.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH includes a brief summary of the first four chapters, a synthesis and deep discussion of the Findings and their implications, possible areas for further research and reflections on the doctoral experience, the takeaways and a call to action.

Summary

Chapter One included a description of all the subsections relevant to the dissertation and presented an overview of what the reader can expect to find in Chapters 2-5.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this Literature Review is to establish familiarity with the existing research and literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change. Chapter Two includes the following sections: (a) How the Experience of Teachers Became What It is Today, including the history of the feminization of teaching and the dual function of schools to both circulate dominant ideology and to produce critical thinkers and participatory citizens; (b) Educational Leadership Frameworks, including the tempered radicals framework and systems leadership frameworks; (c) Educational Organizing Frameworks, including community organizing group structures, educational organizing cultures, and social justice unionism; (d) Lessons on Anti-Patriarchal Leadership and Organizing from Progressive Grassroots Movements, such as the Black liberation movement and modern labor movement.

Lessons on grassroots leadership and organizing from anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist progressive grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/1960s, Black Lives Matter Movement, and Red for Ed Movement are helpful because of the dearth of literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing. Finally, the Literature Review concludes with a summary of the chapter, gaps in the literature, and areas in need of further research.

How the Experience of Teachers Became What It Is Today

How did the teaching profession come to this? Why do public school teachers have such little respect in the United States? A historical analysis of the feminization of the teaching profession is included to help readers understand why teaching in public schools is an oppressive experience and to help readers understand current patriarchal education reform, policy, and practice. It is important to examine the relationship between the radicalization of teachers and the
backlash of the patriarchy (i.e., the assault on teachers and public education) to maintain control and power. Lastly, the dual function of schools to both circulate dominant ideology and to produce critical thinkers and participatory citizens is discussed.

Feminization of Teaching in America

When we think of schools and teachers, it is hard not to imagine a wholesome looking, (probably White) woman standing before a chalkboard at the front of the classroom. In fact, if you “google” an Internet search of the word “teacher,” this is what you will find in Google Images. But, despite our strong association with women and teaching, women have only been working as professional paid educators for the past 150 years. Previously, teaching was a profession of men (Hoffman, 2003).

In colonial America, teaching was an occupation for young, White, well-educated men (Hoffman, 2003; Rury, 2009, p. 32). Schooling was informal, although churches did operate schools for the poor for the purposes of moral and Christian instruction. Schooling was unregulated and sporadic, lasting only months at a time throughout the year (Hoffman, 2003, p. 12; Rury, 2009, p. 31). This enabled young men to simultaneously pursue other professions, such as law (Hoffman, 2003, p. 2). Women were excluded from the profession because of their lack of education, given that men were twice as likely as women to be literate (Lockridge, as cited in Strober & Lanford, 1986, p. 216).

In the early 1800s, there were various social and organizational reform efforts that enabled girls to attend schools, although they were physically separated from boys within the classroom, and that influenced White female literacy. As a result, women began to play a larger role in primary education (Strober & Lanford, 1986, p. 216-217). Teaching was a way for women to work outside of their households while still providing examples of purity (Grumet,
1988) and fulfilling their duties to nurture and pass down religious and moral values to children (Rury, 2009). As a result of western expansion, immigration, and industrialization, both primary and secondary education became a woman’s occupation by the late 1800s (Hoffman, 2003, p. 6). There was a greater demand for teachers due to immigration and the increase of students, but the expanding economy provided more attractive and lucrative job options for men (Hoffman, 2003, p. 35; Grumet, 1988, p. 37). Because schools could hire two females for the price of one male and the fact that men were in short supply, the feminization of the teaching workforce began (Hoffman, 2003).

During most of the 19th century, women had few job options. They “could be domestic servants, governesses in private service, laundresses, mill workers in some regions, and teachers almost everywhere” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 7). Despite the low pay, teaching enabled women “to engage in intellectual activity in the public world” (p. 8). Their work was largely unregulated and there was little national concern about the philosophy of education. This condition afforded teachers’ autonomy and enabled women to both engage in and promote critical thinking and active citizenship (p.13). They formed their own theories of learning and many helped ex-slaves “transition to freedom” (p. 120). By 1870, five years after the Civil War had ended, “some five thousand teachers were instructing about 150,000 students, a modest proportion of the former slave population” (p. 121). White female teachers became leaders of the abolitionist and suffrage movements—they were anti-slavery activists. They spoke boldly in the public sphere (p. 137) and believed that education was a tool of liberation from oppression and a “route to agency” (p. 121). For White female teachers during this period, their own agency developed in teaching (p. 46). And whether their work was a “divine calling” (p. 123) and religious or secular, “reasons (to support ex-slaves) were framed in terms of a transition to full personhood” (p. 127).
In the late 1800s as women began to contend for power, an elite, powerful group of men assembled “to address the purpose of education” and to establish a national curriculum (Hoffman, 2003, p. 15). It is important to note that, during this time (1870s), Ku Klux Klan activity heightened (p. 137). Racism and White supremacy were woven too deeply into the fabric of society (p. 139) as described previously, and, therefore, the actions of teachers angered the patriarchy, and so began the bureaucratization of schooling. Teaching moved away from a system in which the teacher “was the curriculum” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 15) and “part of her student’s communities” (p. 229). The small, but powerful elite group, which consisted of White men from Harvard University (a university that profited from slavery and related industries (Ellis & Smith, 2017)), dictated the American curriculum—a curriculum that promoted American values (Hoffman, 2003, p. 232) and depicted American history through the eyes of privilege and, arguably, White supremacy (Grumet, 1988). Sometime thereafter, to regulate the performance of teachers and keep the product (educated children) good quality, state and federal governments began playing a greater role in regulating schools (Hoffman, 2003, p. 230). With the formalization of schooling, teachers lost control of curriculum and classrooms, yet the demand for greater teaching credentials increased (Strober & Lanford, 1986). During this time, working conditions for female teachers declined, as well. They worked 8 hours a day with 40 to 80 students in “dark, uncomfortable” classrooms (Hoffman, 2003, p. 233). Men took roles as principals and superintendents and were largely in charge of discipline, as they were believed to be superior disciplinarians (Grumet, 1988). Teaching did not mean more power for women. In fact, teachers were now under the supervision of increasingly authoritative male administrators (Grumet, 1988; Strober & Lanford, 1986). According to Hoffman (2003), one woman testified in a National Education Association hearing, “I am so worn out from teaching sixty pupils that
most of my money goes for medicine and trips for my health (p. 21). Teaching was no longer the profession that it had been when men were educators. Now, “the ideal of the teacher was one who could control the children and be controlled by her superiors” (Grumet, 1988, p. 43). And if she could not maintain the idealized view of a teacher, “she became the school marm, the spinster, the shrewish disciplinarian, an asexual figure, and the butt of humor” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 4). To advocate for better learning and working conditions and to fight against elite control of White men or “corporate greed,” female educators began to unionize in 1897 (Hoffman, 2003, p. 245). Some worried, however, about “maintaining the respect of the upper classes, and not inclined to support militancy except on their own bread-and-butter issues” (Hoffman, 2003, p. 249).

Although the concerns and experiences of teachers in the late 1800s are relatable to teachers today, the teaching profession began to more closely resemble education as we have come to know it by 1950. According to Sedlack and Schlossman (1987), career opportunities expanded for women as clerical and office-based positions opened to women, and the “baby boom” in the 1950s increased demand for teachers. Unions were growing stronger and modest salary increases and improved working conditions made teaching more attractive to men. The profession de-feminized to a degree during this period, and by the 1970s, nearly 30% of teachers were men—the highest percent since the early 1800s (Sedlack & Schlossman, 1987, p. 27).

In short, the feminization of teaching occurred because teaching became less attractive to men and hiring women became more affordable for school districts (Grumet, 1988; Strober & Lanford, 1986). As the gender ratio of teachers changed, so did the pay and prestige of the profession. As women began to exercise agency and engage in liberatory praxis, a national philosophy of the purpose of education was established by the patriarchy and the
bureaucratization and standardization of schooling began. The issue of gender and sexism (as well as racism), greatly influenced the development of the first middle-class profession for women (Hoffman, 2003, p. 2), the public’s perception of the profession, and the experience of women as educators (Grumet, 1988).

Then and now, education reform appears to function as a means to limit teacher agency and power, and it seems like the more teachers push boundaries, the more the patriarchy exerts control. As discussed previously, the “bureaucratization” of teaching of the nineteenth century was largely a result of female teachers exercising agency, promoting liberatory pedagogy and praxis, and aiming to effect social change (Hoffman, 2003, p. 13). The impact that new, stringent policies had on teachers infuriated them (Hoffman, 2003). Geraldine Clifford asserted that the bureaucratization of teaching by the patriarchy radicalized women (as cited in Hoffman, 2003, pp. 6-11). Clifford argued that “teaching was a seedbed of feminism” and asserted that female teachers fought back by organizing unions and becoming “the left wing” of feminist movements of the later nineteenth and twentieth century (as cited in Hoffman, 2003, pp. 5, 11). Despite, however, a number of educator activists fighting for educational justice, neoliberal capitalist education reform of the 20th century demobilized the movement (Lipman as cited in Watkins, 2012, p. 42), “whipping us into conformity” (Watkins, 2012, p. 15). The 1980s brought “a new social order” of free-market ideology—the rise of neoliberalism as both political philosophy and economics. A new social order where the “richest 1% of adults own 40% of the world’s assets,” “the richest 10% of adults own 85% of the world’s assets” (Watkins, 2012, pp. 10-13). In 2019, among all children under 18 years old in the U.S., 38 percent live in low-income families and 17 percent (one in five) are poor (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019).
Public education is not where it needs to be, but is it because “defenders of public education lack the vision or courage to endorse meaningful change” (Kohn in Watkins, 2012, p. 79)? Or is it because of a system rooted in White supremacy and oppression designed to work against historically marginalized groups? Ravitch (2013) wrote, “Poverty persists not because schools are bad and teachers don’t care but because society neglects its root cause. Concentrated poverty and racial segregation are social problems, not school problems” (p. 224).

The Dual Function of Schools and Counterhegemony

Today, educators are witnessing the deportation of immigrant families and extrajudicial murders of Black men, women, and children (their students) by law enforcement. They are being forced to work in unsafe school buildings to provide custodial care for parents so that they can go to work, and work to survive not thrive. The push to work is about sustaining an economy that only the wealthiest benefit from.

The backlash against educators teaching and organizing for equity and justice in the 19th century presaged the backlash educators are experiencing today as they struggle to work/teach during the COVID-19 pandemic and to engage in anti-racist work inside and outside of the classroom, including engaging in conversations about Critical Race Theory (CRT) which critiques how power is maintained over centuries through laws that support capitalism and racism while promising equity (Love, 2019). We are witnessing the relationship between the radicalization of teachers and the backlash of the patriarchy (i.e., the assault on teachers and public education) to maintain control and power in the 21st century.

The dual purpose and function of schools to both maintain the power and privilege status quo and nurture critical thinkers who are capable of disrupting the oppressive systems has always existed (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 2016, 2020; Watkins, 2012). Despite the intricate circulation of
oppressive ideologies and the current culture of demoralization and deprofessionalization, many K-12 educators without formal positions of authority do refuse to be servants to power, refuse to be submissive, complacent, and compliant and work towards their own and collective liberation. While some educators engage in counterhegemonic praxis within educational institutions, others disrupt negative power relations through labor organizing and community organizing groups (Catone, 2017).

Counterhegemonic praxis is resistance through discourse and other actions to challenge dominant beliefs, policies, and practices about or related to race, gender, economic arrangements of the society, etc. that dominant groups proffer to further their own interest (Chisholm, 2015; Manojan, 2019). Critical consciousness is defined as gaining knowledge about the systems and structures that create and sustain inequity, developing a sense of power or capability, and ultimately committing to take action against oppressive conditions (Freire, 1970; Bartolome, 2008, p. 16). Critical theorists argue that educators must develop critical consciousness or political and ideological clarity to transform oppressive practices/systems and create equitable learning conditions for students. Political clarity refers to the understanding of the socio-political and economic realities that shape their lives and their student’s lives and the capacity to transform those conditions. Ideological clarity refers to the understanding of one’s own experiences and explanations and how they might reflect those of the dominant society.

Critical pedagogy, according to Giroux (2020), involves engaging in “projects” that address real social needs (needs that extend beyond school walls) and that expand critical consciousness and civic capacity to challenge moral and political problems. Critical pedagogy means thinking politically and learning about power by interrogating meaning through robust debate, deep ongoing reflection, and engagement in struggle. In short, critical theorists examine
how critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, and counter-hegemonic resistance can transform public education (Bartolome, 2004, p. 98; Giroux, 2020). A critical pedagogical approach to education and organizing is needed to equip K-12 teachers with a framework for understanding social, political, and economic arrangements that function to dominate and oppress and a framework for engaging with power (Schutz, 2011, p. 507; Giroux, 2020).

Attempts to critique and dismantle hegemonic power occurs in schools, in classrooms, by educators every day across the nation. Picower (2012) asserted that the most effective educator activists are the ones who are active both inside and outside of the classroom; however, there are immense institutional barriers, limitations, and difficulties to this work, especially within schools.

**Educational Leadership Frameworks (In-School Context)**

Leadership can be exercised by educators without formal positions of authority. Individuals can and do engage in counterhegemonic resistance within school walls or in an in-school context. As stated, however, there are significant institutional barriers and limitations to individual advocacy and even collective action by educators working and organizing within educational institutions (Kezar, 2012).

In this section, frameworks within the educational literature are explored to better understand grassroots leadership within educational institutions: the distributed leadership, tempered radicals, adaptive leadership, and advocacy leadership. Grassroots educational leadership or the ability for individuals without formal positions of authority to make change and take on leadership roles is an underexplored topic (Kezar, 2012).
Distributed Leadership

Perhaps the most widely known and adopted framework and model for bottom-up, grassroots leadership within educational institutions is distributed or shared leadership (Kezar, 2012). Shared leadership models are a result of research on “total quality management and responsibility centered budgeting” within business settings. According to Kezar (2012, p. 731), distributed leadership models are a result of the application of shared leadership to educational settings. Among other benefits, distributed/shared leadership helps organizational functioning by distributing the workload and increasing employee ownership and accountability (Kezar, 2012, p. 731; Spillane, 2006). Despite “sharing” the “leadership,” however, distributed leadership is still a top-down approach and researchers have identified numerous limitations, such as “lack of cognitive complexity in developing solutions, lack of buy-in, and risk of putting all authority in a small number of people” (Kezar, 2012, p. 726). Distributed leadership involves leaders with formal positions of authority getting “followers” within the organization to work on change initiatives and assumes that top-down and bottom-up “change agents” have shared interests (Collins, 1998 in Kezar, 2012, p. 731). There is some disagreement about whether distributed/shared leadership models are genuinely empowering for employees. Are these models merely symbolic, or, even worse, are they models of coercive control which simply serve to lessen the burden of administrators, for instance? Either way, they maintain traditional power relations.

Tempered Radicals

According to Kezar (2012), the tempered radicals framework “applies social movement theory to organizational settings” and asserts that grassroots leadership takes on a different form when participants are working within organizations and “want to keep their job(s)” (p. 727).
Kezar (2012) stated that the term “tempered radicals” came out of Meyerson’s (2001) study on the application of social movement theory to corporate settings. The tempered radicals model provides employees with a framework to push their companies to be socially responsible (Meyerson, 2004) by describing strategies for employees to make organizational change from the bottom-up and without formal positions of authority (Kezar, 2012, p. 728-729). Some of the notable strategies involve “resisting quietly,” organizing collective action, and “rely on the cumulative effect of incremental actions to create change” (p. 729). According to Meyerson (2004), tempered radicals are found within every organization, fighting “small battles,” slowly making a difference, and staying off the radar as “rebels” (p. 16). Meyerson’s framework is also helpful to explain why shared interests between top-down and bottom-up leaders are uncommon and to understand the challenges and tensions of convergence (Kezar, 2012, p. 732).

Like social movement theory, Kezar (2012) asserts that Meyerson sees convergence between bottom-up and top-down leadership as problematic and believes that convergence is an oppressive experience for grassroots leaders. As a result, Kezar states that the tempered radicals framework is limited in its ability to analyze and detail the convergence of top-down and bottom-up leadership (p. 732). The development of the framework in a corporate setting is also problematic, as experiences in educational settings are certainly different than corporate, business settings. Additionally, context differs between public and private educational settings or unionized and nonunionized educational settings.

Recognizing the gaps in the literature regarding grassroots educational leadership, Kezar (2012) conducted a case study using five higher education institutions to better understand bottom-up leadership. Kezar focused on change efforts, strategies for changemaking, conditions that hindered or promoted grassroots leadership, “strategies for maintaining resilience,
navigating power, and internal conflicts” (p. 735) and developed a framework for top-down, bottom-up convergence called kaleidoscope convergence. Kezar concluded that change efforts can be compromised when bottom-up and top-down leaders converge and have negative outcomes – ones that even “undo” the effort and work of bottom-up leaders. Accordingly, Kezar states that grassroots educational leaders need to think carefully about how to engage in convergence (p. 753) and offers strategies, such as: considering timing of engagement, learning the language of those with authority, “sensitizing those in power to the change initiative,” security positions on committees, using negotiation skills, partnering with other initiatives, and remaining cautious and skeptical of shared interests (pp. 747-753).

Working off of Kezar’s research, Borregard (2019) conducted a study to explore the “experiences, motivation, and resilience” of grassroots leaders in a community college in Kentucky. From the eight interviews conducted, Borregard identified five themes among the grassroots educational leaders: “(a) a passion for an ethical issue, (b) transparency, (c) gathering data, (d) raising awareness, and (e) resilience” (p. 109). Borregard asserted that grassroots leaders are motivated by ethical issues and are rarely motivated by a pursuit of their own self-interests (p. 111). In other words, grassroots leaders persist despite little recognition and aim for social change (p. 112). “Grassroots leaders must engage in constant reflection to retain the consciousness and adherence to personal values” (Bettencourt et al., 1996 as cited in Borregard, 2019, p. 112). As such, moral reflection plays a role in grassroots leadership development.

Systems Leadership

As a result of neoliberal education reform, there exists a school culture of “managerialism” that is “hegemonic, individualistic, competitive, performative, calculative, and hierarchical” (Griffiths, 2006, p. 21) and Fullan (2003) asserts that educational standards have
had “minor leverage” on systems change (p. 91). School transformation requires changes in attitudes, habits, and behaviors (Heifetz, 1996). According to Boylan (2016), systems leadership is relatively new to educational leadership, and there are various definitions and scopes of systems leadership, including meso, micro, and macro aspects. Systems leadership can occur both within and beyond individual schools. In fact, “the boundaries of what constitutes a system are fluid” (Boylan, 2016, p. 60). Systems leadership is complex and demands sophisticated leadership—the more sophisticated the system, the more sophisticated the leader (Fullan, 2003). In this section, systems thinking and leadership, with a focus on two forms of systems leadership, adaptive leadership and advocacy leadership, is discussed, as well as deepened.

**Adaptive Leadership**

Heifetz (1996) asserts that systems change requires changes in attitudes, habits, and behaviors and that this presents an “adaptive challenge” with no ready answers. Hence, leaders cannot treat adaptive challenges like technical problems and provide technical fixes. Adaptive leaders help stakeholders learn how to adapt by challenging the status-quo and focusing on values rather than past practice. In order to do this, Heifetz urges systems leaders to enroll stakeholders in exploring values and making change. If given the space, members of organizations can “test their views,” develop a contextual understanding of the organization’s problems, and negotiate constructs together (p. 25). The process helps members identify a problem or problems to be addressed, clarify values, change perspectives, and develop new approaches. Boylan (2016) asserts that school leaders must identify shared values and collectively determine a focus for systems change. The sustainability of the system depends on building up the capacity of members, bringing in members, adding leadership at all levels, and assuring leaders are moving in the same direction (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).
Such processes do not come without growing pains. Heifetz (1996) acknowledges potential “disequilibrium” in a social system as members engage in a transformative process, for the challenge may sometimes exceed the adaptive capacity of members (p. 35-37). Hence, sophisticated adaptive leaders must be able to mediate conflicting perspectives and reduce friction. According to Fullan (2003), effective systems leaders must have great emotional intelligence, including personal competence, self-awareness, self-management, social competence, and relationship management (pp. 93-94). Fullan asserts that leaders must have the capacity to be flexible, adaptive and empathetic in order to work with people who have opposing views, facilitate teamwork, and keep discomfort within a tolerable range (pp. 95, 101). Heifetz (1996) asserts that problems sometimes cannot be worked through slowly through a participative decision-making process: adaptive leaders must be able to rely on their judgment to assess the resilience of the organization/social system, the severity of the problem, and the time frame for taking action when deciding which democratic process for change making is appropriate (p. 121).

Still, Heifetz (1996), maintains that participative processes are ideal for systems transformation and sustainability (p. 121). Solutions must be carried out by the people with the problem; people must own the solution (Fullan, 2003, p. 99). The sophistication of adaptive leadership lies in giving the work to stakeholders at a rate they can tolerate and staying “on the balcony” while protecting vulnerable voices in the organization (p. 128). Fullan (2003) asserted that leadership needs to exist at all levels of the organization and creates conditions for sustainability because “conditions and capacity for continuous improvement are built in” (p. 91).

The sentiment of systems thinking shares commonalities with social movement theory. “Social movements are heterogeneous networks bound by participant’s shared moral purpose”
Boylan, 2016, p. 66). Heifetz (1996) cites examples of grassroots leadership and social movements of the 1950s and 1960s as adaptive leadership, because, similarly, the process involves giving the work back to the stakeholders, encouraging members of the organization to take responsibility for the challenges that face them, and believing that solutions reside in the collective intelligence of stakeholders at all levels. Heifetz is also critical of the Great Man brand of leadership because of the developing dependency of and limiting capacity of stakeholders/members/participants (pp. 17, 247) and believes that leadership is not exclusive to those with formal positions of authority (p. 185). Lastly, Heifetz cites grassroots leadership of the civil rights movement as an example of adaptive leadership because adaptive work often comes with risk, loss, and pain (p. 236).

Prominent advocates of modern mainstream models of systems thinking and leadership, like those described by Fullan (2003) are met with skepticism by critical scholars despite attempts by systems scholars to play down accountability in favor of capacity building. The track record of business reform or the application of managerial and corporate strategies to schools has not been good. If the goal was to create quality public schools that educated all children well, then one would think we would have achieved the goal or made progress towards it (Anderson, 2009). Critical scholars view systems thinking/leadership in a slightly different way. One example is advocacy leadership.

**Advocacy Leadership**

Systems leaders are often motivated to engage in systems thinking or adaptive leadership in order to straddle different systems, including private and public sectors. Neoliberal education reform initiatives use democratic-sounding language and discourses of inclusion strategically. Anderson (2009) wrote, “What is often missed is that under the discourse of autonomy and
participation, a tighter iron cage is often created for school professionals and school communities, leading to fewer, not more authentic structures for participation” (p. 112). According to Anderson, such reform initiatives may promote symbolic forms of participation, or, even worse, sophisticated systems of control.

Advocacy leaders are motivated by advocacy for students and their communities and engage vulnerable and marginalized stakeholders. The focus is not necessarily on changing the minds of parents and students but on changing the minds of those with power and privilege. The objective of an advocacy leader, therefore, may be very different from an adaptive leader.

Anderson (2009) outlines a framework for authentic participation and advocacy-oriented systems leadership. Drawing on Dewey, Anderson writes, “the future of democracy depends on the existence of local social spaces which human actors can learn and exercise the skills of dialogue and debate necessary for the development of a democratic citizenry” (p. 116). Views about what this space looks like, however, differ and fear exists that inauthentic participation and systems change frameworks developed by the private sector are means to privatize or marketize social and public spaces (p. 117). Anderson asks essential questions to guide an authentic process of participation and product of participation: (a) who participates and under what conditions? and (b) what is meant to be accomplished? While end goals are typically that of increasing student achievement, Anderson argues that it should be “the constitution of a democratic citizenry and redistributive justice for disenfranchised groups” (p. 117). The issues playing out in schools are a reality of larger structures and policies of inequality. Educational leaders must “hone their authenticity barometer” to recognize when participation is not authentic and in the service of vulnerable populations (p. 118).
Unfortunately, all too often participative processes take the form of one-way communication, such as surveys and newsletters, or are limited to dialogue within PTA/PTOs. These processes of concertive control arguably serve to legitimate the purposes of those with power, such as the superintendent (Anderson, 2009, p. 119). “Organizational members ‘buy into’ goals that are determined elsewhere, are the products of a leader’s ‘vision’” (p. 122). In other words, participation is limited and co-opted and members are manipulated (p. 123). Authentic participation requires broader community participation of parents/guardians and students, coherence between means and ends of participation, and a focus on broader structural inequalities (p.125-127).

Broader, genuine participation of all members of the school community or “leader-full” organizations are sustainable and capable of deeper and more transformational change that is much less productivity-minded and much more equity-minded. Systems leaders should not determine educator, student, or community values on their own and cannot develop a vision in isolation and then expect members of an organization to implement it. While adaptive leadership is a good start, systems leaders must remain critical if the end goal is truly to educate, empower, and liberate.

In conclusion, grassroots educational leaders are motivated by a passion for ethical issues (Borregrad, 2019) and systems leadership offers insight on how best to transform educational institutions. However, despite educator commitment and passion, there are significant institutional limitations and barriers to grassroots educational leaders in schools to engage in counterhegemonic work and organize for equitable systemic change.
Grassroots Educational Organizing (Out-of-School Context)

Community organizing as a way to effect school change is an effective strategy as it restores a healthy balance of power (Renee & McAlister, 2011; Zachary and Olatoye, 2001). Community organizing around educational issues offers an alternative to traditional school reform (Mediratta et al., 2009; Renee & McAlister, 2011; Shirley, 1997; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Here, grassroots educational organizing refers to community organizing around school issues. According to Renee & McAlister (2011) in a comprehensive report through the Annenberg Institute suggested that community organizing as an education reform strategy is a successful approach to school reform because it situates schools within a larger socioeconomic context and, therefore, enables stakeholders to identify and work on issues that matter most to school improvement (p. 2). Educational organizing also aims and works to effectively challenge negative power relations within organizations and beyond, distributes and shares power through genuine distributed leadership within organizations, and involves recruiting and working with people who are most impacted by current conditions and reform. Instead of outsiders shaping schools, people within the system are able to come together, think about problems, and develop solutions (Renee & McAlister, 2011).

The failure of neoliberal education reform and the ability of community organizations to effectively make equitable systemic school change are largely a result of the cultural differences between community organizing groups and schools. According to Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009), school systems are hierarchical giving those with formal positions of authority the ability to make decisions oriented toward compliance management, whereas community organizing groups are democratic involving those who bear the most social cost and oriented towards inclusive problem-solving (p. 178).
There are differences between labor organizing and community organizing. American organizer Saul Alinsky’s take on labor organizing in the 1970s is still relatively true today: locals remain preoccupied with organizing around bread and butter issues that are in isolation from community issues and local leadership reproduces the negative oppressive power structure of schools and society. Alinsky (1971) asserts that “communities are not economic organizations like labor unions, with specific economic issues; they are complex as life itself” (p. 120). There are differences between community organizing of youth and families and community organizing of youth and families with educators, as well. Coalitions made up of educators (unionized and nonunionized), students, families, and other community stakeholders (e.g., government officials, faith leaders, business leaders, civil rights activists/leaders, etc.) are the most under-researched type of educational organizing group. There is little known about educational organizing through community-based coalitions from the perspective of K-12 teachers in particular.

In this section, a summary of educational organizing and educator activism is provided. More specifically, the following is discussed: the difference between institutional membership and direct membership community organizing groups; “old school,” time-tested organizing strategies utilized by community organizing groups; and the differences between the Alinskyite versus Freirean organizing toolkit. Lastly, it concludes with a brief summary of a small body of emerging literature of educational organizing in a union context, educator activism and social justice unionism.

Institutional Membership and Direct Membership

Community organizing groups primarily fall under two membership structures: institutional membership structures and direct membership structures (Mediratta et al., 2009). Institutional membership groups rely on existing leadership structures and work to unite these
existing community leaders and organizations to build a large network of people. In other words, bringing together existing leaders to dialogue, “find a basis for cooperative action,” and build a sense of shared responsibility (p. 23). Direct membership groups don’t rely on existing leadership structures and focus on recruiting community members into the organization around a shared concern. Direct membership developed in the 1960s and drew inspiration from groups like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the National Welfare Rights Organization. Recruitment of members involves canvassing, house parties, and leafleting; in other words, going out into the community to connect with ordinary people that may or may not be affiliated with an existing leadership structure to ask them what their concerns are. Direct membership groups initially draw people in through self-interest but help members build power and learn about collective action through the processes of developing campaigns to address shared problems. Some organizations incorporate aspects of both institutional and direct membership. Both membership structures prioritize developing leaders within the organization (Mediratta et al., 2009). Developing a large base of members and developing grassroots leaders is arguably the essential function of community organizing groups which is described in the following section.

Old-School Organizing Strategies

The literature on community organizing details “old school” tried-and-true organizing strategies. Old school does not imply outdated, ineffective, or irrelevant but simply that they are traditional organizing practices. Here old school strategies to develop grassroots leadership skills, networking and recruiting members, developing campaigns, and traditional direct actions are outlined.

Traditionally, building grassroots leaders involves expanding civic engagement skills primarily through expert organizers training members. Developing leadership is a primary
function of community organizing. Civic engagement skills include public speaking, facilitating meetings, facilitating community problem solving, researching, writing communications materials from press releases to testimony for public hearings/meetings, doing media interviews, lobbying, negotiating, campaign development, relationship building, etc. (Mediratta et al., 2009).

Traditionally, building membership involves networking and recruiting and is largely guided by whether or not the community organizing group has an institutional or direct membership structure and process described previously (Mediratta et al., 2009). It is important to understand class differences in approaches to building membership bases and class differences that hamper movement building. According to Leonder-Wright (2014), “‘class’ is a concept shrouded in fog in our supposedly classless society” (p. 4). While well intentioned, the Occupy movement’s slogan “we are the 99 percent” only views class from a macroeconomic lens and does not account for the diverse experiences of people within the 99 percent, particularly along race and gender lines. A lack of class awareness hurts organizing and movement building and can result in low turnout, inactive members, etc. Class can be defined as a cluster of a number of social indicators, including income, education, occupation, social status, and beyond. Leonder-Wright (2014) asserts that, among progressive activists, education and occupation are weighted most heavily and that income is actually a weaker class indicator (Leonder-Wright, 2014, p. 33). Leonder-Wright (2014) also notes differences among class cultures, including differences not only in organizing approaches between classes but also between people who have always belonged to a class culture versus “straddlers” who have “risen in class” since childhood (p. 39). Some significant findings for working-class people included: organizing around issues that people were personally affected by; the importance of food in meetings or other material incentives; establishing short-term, winnable campaigns; the organization offering concrete
“mutual aid” services to assist people with problems; and one-on-one bonds with leaders of the organization. The middle class, by contrast, became involved through “moral discovery” and lifelong commitments, for example, and not through being personally affected by problems. Additionally, middle-class folk have fewer unmet needs and, therefore, “mutual aid doesn’t occur to them as a means of building group cohesion” (p. 103). In short, awareness of class cultural differences in recruitment, developing campaigns, and building relationships is essential to building mutual respect that is necessary to unite members, build a strong sense of community and, ultimately, organize (Leonder-Wright, 2014).

Community organizing groups frame issues as injustices that cannot be tolerated and demand action. According to Mediratta et al. (2009), framing theory suggests that how an issue is framed or presented determines what people think about an issue and how they react to it. Education, educational issues, and education reform have been framed through a White supremacist, capitalist, neoliberal, patriarchal lens that effectively reinforces injustice (Watkins, 2012). Community organizing groups and movements develop alternative frames. Some framing methods involve centering the experiences of community members directly impacted by educational injustice. According to Michna (2009), story circles are an effective method that community organizing groups can use to shape campaigns. Story circles involve a group of people sitting in a circle telling stories about a particular topic. As people share, new perspectives emerge and stories take on different forms. I did not come across literature on K-12 teachers (primarily White, educated women) and framing theory.

Lastly, traditional, time-tested organizing tactics involve canvassing, phone banking, workshops, community forums, and direct actions, such as demonstrations and protests.

Alinskyite Versus Freirean Organizing Toolkit
All community organizing, essentially, requires an analysis of power dynamics and a cooperative constructing of knowledge. Good community organizing involves being equity-minded and accessible to the public so that those who bear the most social cost are able to participate in dialogue and decision making (Mediratta et al., 2009). For meetings to be accessible, childcare, translation, and other services should be offered (Mediratta et al., 2009; Renee & McAlister, 2011; Shirley, 1997; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). However similar educational community organizing groups are, there are underlying cultural practices within educational community organizing groups that lead to differences in approaches and practices. Through research on grassroots educational organizing in the Bronx, Su (2009) categorized organizing groups into two categories: groups that worked with an Alinskyite tool kit and groups that worked with a Freirean tool kit. These distinctions meant that their organizational culture was made up of practices associated with American organizer Saul Alinsky or Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. A toolkit consisted of a set of cultural practices used by leaders and member organizers. Toolkits included how members became leaders, how members interacted with professional organizers, and what activities organizers spent most of their time and energy on (Su, 2009).

The Alinskyite toolkit was marked by an emphasis on the development of the organization as opposed to the development of the individual members/leaders. Activities included recruiting members and building campaigns through the traditional old-school methods described previously. Leaders developed with professional organizers as teachers (more accurately described as trainers). Alinskyite groups placed greater emphasis on “readily winnable” campaigns (Su, 2009, p. 19). Su (2009) noted that it was common for these groups to
have dues systems and bylaws. And, while they made good use of self-interest or organizing around issues the community raised, there was little room for reflection and individual growth.

Alternatively, the Freirean toolkit was marked by an emphasis on the development of individuals or personal transformation. Leaders developed with professional organizers as partners. The pursuit of personal transformation involved members being able to pursue personal interests and engage in emotional exchanges with other members. Activities went beyond traditional organizing work and included book clubs, yoga, music events, and hanging out. It wasn’t out of the norm for members to exchange kisses and hugs, and personal family issues were not considered off topic. Indeed, members even said, “I love you” (p. 76). Relationships often resembled friendships. Campaigns were developed with critical reflection, and Freirean groups were adept at addressing racial injustice and campaigns focused on discriminatory practices and inequities in education. They wished not to perpetuate structures of inequity and named the root causes of failing schools (e.g., racism). As such, they envisioned a radically different school system and society. Freirean groups demanded new educational policies and dynamics in relationships. A downside: these cultural practices took longer to implement.

**Educator Activism and Social Justice Unionism**

Mediratta et al. (2009) asserted that teachers are fearful of engaging in community organizing. According to Catone (2017), educator activism primarily occurs within a union context. In this section, modern social justice unionism and Catone’s framework on the pedagogy of teacher activism are described.

Through unions, “teachers have long been in positions of political significance and engaged in activist efforts to effect social change” (Catone, 2017, p. 10). There has been, however, an ebb and flow in education unions’ commitment to social justice (Catone, 2017;
Charney et al., 2021). Education labor historians describe a surge in social justice unionism from 1920 to 1940 and a decrease in social justice unionism from 1950 to 1970. Education unions were able to make connections between teacher interests and those of their students and the communities they served; however, this commonality unraveled in the face of post-World War II anti-unionism. The New York City teacher strikes in which a primarily White teaching force in 1968 struck over Black community control over schools “serves as a lasting symbol of decay of trust and partnership” between educators and communities of color (Catone, 2017, p. 11). Over the last decade, however, the tides have begun to turn. Education unions have regrown and renewed their commitments to social justice. In 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike and demanded smaller class sizes, nurses and counselors in every school, fair resources for schools that serve Black and Brown students, sanctuary schools for immigrants, and restorative justice practices. In 2015, Seattle teachers went on strike over issues including standardized testing, recess, and a number of other student-centered demands (Catone, 2017; Charney, et. al, 2021). In 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, 52 Massachusetts teachers refused to administer the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) exam, a high-stakes standardized test to students. These “conscientious objectors” aimed to cancel MCAS and believed it was wrong to administer the exam to students during a pandemic (Levine, 2021; Najimy, 2021).

Some approaches to social justice unionism include creating broad membership engagement by promoting dialogue and debate among members, building strong relationships/alliances with students and families in the community, adopting antiracist and anti-oppression values and teaching practices, and resisting school privatization efforts to protect public schools and a public good. Social justice unionism includes bargaining for the common
good as opposed to only bread and butter issues, such as salary and working conditions. Social justice unionism solves problems through organizing and collective action (Charney, et. al, 2021).

According to Charney et al. (2021), part of labor’s decline has been that unions, particularly education unions, have neglected to organize. Education unions mobilize and advocate, but, all too often, fail to organize. Mobilizing is described as activating members who are already engaged to take action. Advocacy is described as the work of creating change through the action of those with professional expertise or formal positions of authority through closed-door negotiations, as opposed to engaging ordinary members in public collective direct action.

The experiences of educational organizing from an educator’s perspective remains a significantly under researched topic, but Catone’s (2017) work illuminates why and how teachers become engaged in activism and organizing. Catone (2017) explored the life histories of educators engaged in a critical pedagogical approach to school change and learned that educator activists “were not born ready to do the work that they do” (p. 130). Catone developed an analytical framework on the pedagogy of teacher activism consisting of three components: purpose, power, and possibility.

Participants in Catone’s (2017) study all had experiences that exposed them to injustice and oppression in schools and society. These experiences were a result of their identity as queer, woman, mother, person of color, or immigrant. Catone asserted that “collectively, teacher activists draw their sense of purpose from deeply personal experiences that render a political consciousness about their role as teachers being tied to effecting change” (p. 134). The personal experiences were “moral shocks” that the “world [was] not as it should be” (p. 134) and drove
them to be change agents. To fulfill their purpose and make change, teacher activists worked to disrupt negative power relations. They did this through three forms of agency: creative, resistive, and relational. In other words, these activists created new spaces where people can experience their own power, resist dominant structures in place, and build meaningful relationships with students and families to fulfill their purpose. Lastly, Catone asserted that hope, that possibility, was needed to sustain teacher activism (Catone, 2017).

To recap, this section began with the emerging literature on grassroots educational leadership and then covered the emerging literature on grassroots community organizing for education reform, including a brief summary of social justice unionism. In short, the research on educational leadership and organizing provides a framework for sustainable, equitable school reform (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister 2009; Renee and McAlister, 2011). Because the literature on grassroots educational leadership, activism, and organizing is emerging, we look to broader progressive movements for progressive leadership and organizing lessons.

**Lessons on Anti-Patriarchal Leadership and Organizing From Progressive Grassroots Movements**

Because the bodies of literature on grassroots educational leadership and educational community organizing for equitable systemic school change are emerging, it is helpful to look at the literature on social movement theory and practice of progressive grassroots movements to learn more about grassroots leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change. Alinsky (1971) asserted that significant equitable systemic changes in history have been made by revolution or, in other words, mass movements which seizes power and gives it to the people. In this section, lessons on grassroots leadership and organizing from anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist progressive grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/1960s, Black
Lives Matter Movement, and Red for Ed Movement are included. These movements are highly relevant to educational justice leadership and organizing because they are anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist. Educators can’t solve neoliberal capitalist problems with neoliberal capitalist solutions.

Black Lives Matter is an anti-capitalist movement, but so was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Ransby, 2018; Taylor, 2016). The Civil Rights Movement brought consciousness to the source of Black oppression in America: capitalism (Taylor, 2016, p. 43, 50). Both Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panther Party identified systemic and institutional racism as a problem and linked the oppression of people of color to capitalist exploitation (p. 43-44). Among the Black Panther Party’s list of demands to undo the damage of and redress the harms caused by American capitalism were employing, housing, and educating Black people (p. 45). Federally funded social programs, or the welfare state, was expanded because of the Black freedom movement (Taylor, 2016, p. 39). “Black struggle pushed mainstream politics to the left” (Taylor, 2016, p. 45).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a threat to the power and privilege status quo, and the “business class” responded with a “counteroffensive” to restore order. The attack affected all Americans who benefited from the welfare state, not just people of color (Taylor, 2016, p. 54) and impacted all workers, including White women. The recognition of the influence of capitalism on oppression of people of color and women as well as the backlash from the patriarchy radicalized workers and shaped labor organizing (Taylor, 2016, p. 167).

Ever since the middle of the 19th century, the patriarchy had attempted to thwart labor’s efforts by framing abolitionists as communists as Un-American “foreign agents” and by
leverage America’s deeply entrenched White supremacy (Boyer & Morais, 1955, p. 15, 210; Boyer & Morais, 1955, p. 177). According to Congress for Industrial Organization organizer Morton Davis, “communism equaled nigger lover to most people in the South” and Southern journalist, Wilber Cash, “labor unions + strikes = communists + atheism + social equality with the Negro” (Honey, 1993, p. 128). Any organizing for liberation was equated with communism and framed as dangerous. Red-baiting had proved “effective in intimidating liberals” (p. 129) and hindering progress toward a more equitable society. Nevertheless, the attack proved to be a catalyst for White women and public-sector workers to demand fair wages and demand dignity (p. 57). “It was no coincidence that this strike wave (mid-1960s to mid-1970s) coincided with the most militant phase of the Black insurgency—and it affected the entire workforce, not just Black workers” (Taylor, 2016, p. 59). There have been waves of solidarity between Black and White working class throughout U.S. history. The patriarchy has skillfully succeeded in pitting workers against one another and, therefore, fragmenting workers (Boyer & Morais, 1955; Honey, 1993; Taylor, 2016).

Today, solidarity between White and non-White workers is not as strong as it could be but looks as though it is on an upward trajectory (Charney et al., 2021). Taylor (2016) asks an important question: “If white working-class people do not benefit from capitalist exploitation, then why do they allow racism to cloud their ability to unite with nonwhite workers for the greater good of all working people?” (p. 209). Perhaps this is explained by Alinsky’s (1971) concept of class distinctions. Alinsky asserted that there are three classes: the Haves, the Have-Nots, and the Have-a-Little, Want Mores. The Haves and Have-Nots is a familiar concept, whereby the Haves make up a small percent of the population and hold the wealth and power in society. But Alinsky explains that between the Haves and Have-Nots exist the middle class who
are torn between maintaining the power and privilege status quo to protect what they have while also desiring more. With this, they become “split personalities,” Alinsky explains (p. 19).

To be clear, although both women and people of color are dominated, oppressed, and exploited, their experiences are not the same. In her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Bettina Love (2019) stated, “I am certain that dark people have never truly mattered in this country except as property and labor” (p. 7). The experiences between White women educators and the families of color which they serve are not the same. The ability for White workers to abstain from creating friction and collective action for change is a privilege (Alinsky, 1971). Still, when both White and non-White workers are exploited and living in poverty while the one percent live comfortably, there is some basis for solidarity (Taylor, 2016, p. 214). Americans, especially American K-12 teachers, should understand cultural hegemony (Giroux, 2020) used by ruling elites to maintain power and the birth and genealogy of the modern civil rights/Black liberation movement, Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM), in order to better understand and learn about grassroots leadership and organizing, but also to be able to see/understand class cultures and identify and build solidarity with the movement. Both BLMM and the Red for Ed Movement are essential to understanding the relationship between capitalism and the exploitation of workers. Black liberation movements, from the Civil Rights Movement to BLMM and the Labor Movement, help us understand why we must avoid reproducing models and systems of oppression and adopt anti-patriarchal leadership, grassroots organizing, and progressive movement building (anti-patriarchal leadership which is anti-sexist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist). K-12 teachers can learn from those who have the greatest experience and wisdom regarding fighting White supremacy or the patriarchy.
Black Liberation Movement

This section is an exploration of lessons from the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s as well as the current #blacklivesmatter movement/Black Lives Matter Movement/BLMM on grassroots leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change. Particular attention is paid to the leadership of BLM as this is a critical feminist study and BLM offers inspiration for the coalition’s leadership structure and philosophy prior to this study.

*Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement*

Social movement literature of the Civil Rights Movement provides insight on anti-patriarchal leadership and solidarity building with movements for collective action. More specifically, this literature explains the charismatic Great Man brand of leadership, group centered and leader-full organizations and movements, and factors that connected White people to the struggle for racial justice during the Civil Rights Movement.

It is hard to imagine a movement more central to the fight for liberation and equity in the United States than the civil rights movement, and even harder to imagine the civil rights movement without the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. (Dr. King) – a movement without his eloquent words, without his powerful voice, and without his guiding hand. Children in the United States learn from an early age of Dr. King’s leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. His portraits hang on school walls, his speeches are recited by students and teachers alike, and his birthdate is celebrated as a federal holiday. While King is certainly a person to be honored and recognized for his participation in the Civil Rights Movement, focusing primarily on the greatness of one man overshadows the leadership of and organizing by the young people and women of the Civil Rights Movement and inaccurately portrays the structure, leadership, and process of progressive grassroots movements. It also limits the ability of Americans to
conceive that ordinary people, like themselves, can collectively improve lives, make systemic change, and, therefore, transform the nation (Carson, 1987).

This is not a critique of King, but of the way leadership of the Civil Rights Movement has been framed and misconceptions of leadership have been perpetuated. Despite how leadership of the Civil Rights Movement has been framed, the Civil Rights Movement did not hinge on the work of men alone (Taylor, 2016, p. 165) and King’s exceptional leadership (Carson, 1987, p. 30). Throughout history, there has been a tendency to portray leaders—particularly male leaders—as “charismatic” and who “by the force of their personal abilities are capable of having profound and extraordinary effects on followers” (Tourish in Mouton, 2019, p. 82). Today, this bias remains. “Scholars…place their faith in the heroic, transcendental leader who could achieve almost impossible organizational feats” (Ford et al., in Mouton, 2019, p. 82). In other words, credit for momentous change is too often attributed to the extraordinary ability of Great Men to engage and control followers and attributes their leadership alone for momentous organizational change. Despite being depicted as both strong and smart, King’s ideas were not merely a result of his personal intellect and formal education, but his experiences with activists of the movement (Mouton, 2019, pp. 82-83). History has not been driven strictly by a handful of Great Men. As with the Civil Rights Movement, women, particularly Black women, have played a significant role (e.g., Fanie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker, Diane Nash, etc.) and ideas disseminated from the bottom up as well as from the top down (Taylor, 2016, p. 165; Carson, 1987, p. 32).

According to Carson (1987), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), worked to resist feelings of dependency on Great Men and instill “confidence that they (referring to the Black community) could lead their own struggles” (p. 28). “What happened in the 1960s had more to do with … the wave of young and old people who were willing to put their bodies
on the line than with personality and oratory” (Huggins, 1984, p. 478). The Civil Rights Movement was not made up of passive, conforming, dependent followers of a charismatic Great Man, but, rather, numerous self-reliant leaders (Carson, 1987, p. 29).

“Proponents of the Great Man theory always point the beam at leaders and leave everything else in the dark” (Mouton, 2019, p. 95). Despite what students are taught in K-12 schools, progressive movements teach us that the American people lift their leaders up, not the other way around: “It is not the leader who magnetizes the followers,” but, rather, the active participants in an organization that thrust up and make the leader (Mouton, 2019, p. 83). Participants drive systemic change.

Falling for the Great Man leadership theory tricks Americans into situating themselves in a hierarchical structure where they are at the bottom and a powerful leader is at the top and tricks them into believing that they need the guidance of a Great Man and that only he can save them. Such thinking reinforces biases and drives narratives about men, leadership, and systemic change (Mouton, 2019, p. 96-99). Waiting for a great man to save us is, in fact, dangerous, leaving Americans waiting for a charismatic leader for a movement to be “reborn” (Huggins, 1984, p. 478).

Lastly, although King was “a controversial leader who challenged authority” (Carson, 1987, p. 28), Martin Luther King Jr. is painted in a way that offends no one, always speaking of love and inclusion (Huggins, 1987, p. 481). Being defensive and offensive is sometimes necessary – “As if proper behavior and politeness have ever protected Black people from discrimination or racial violence” (Ransby, 2018, p. 69). Being a “good apple” enables one to remain in the good graces of those in power, but does it actually serve them well? Militancy is sometimes necessary and is discussed further along in this paper.
The progress of the Civil Rights Movement was a result of grassroots organizing and building confidence in people about their collective ability to make change. The legacy of the freedom struggle, in particular, is about organizing group centered, leader-full movements (Ransby, 2015).

Ella Baker stated, “strong people don’t need a strong leader” (Ransby, 2015, para 9). Baker, however, an African American, civil rights and Black liberation “shero” and participant of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was not implying that leadership is unimportant or that organizing efforts and progressive movements are leaderless. Baker promoted “leader-full” movements involving the integration of all into the leadership process or the activation of all to be participatory in the leadership process. Flattened hierarchical structures, such as this, mean power is not concentrated at the top and in the hands of a few, but dispersed amongst participants. It means leadership is not in a title, every participant has leadership potential, and leadership moves around within organizations (Ransby, 2015, 2018).

Despite the promulgation of the Great Man theory, the Civil Rights Movement did not exactly respond to directions from above (Carson, 1994, p. 2). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) previously mentioned and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) are two organizations that best characterized a structure which enabled people to participate who would have otherwise been left out from political decision making (p. 6). These organizations enabled the most vulnerable and marginalized to set priorities and even initiate mass mobilizations, such as the student-led lunch counter “sit-ins” of the 1960s (Carson, 1994, p. 3). Whereas hierarchical structures serve the privileged, group centered, leader-full movements
empower the oppressed by allowing “ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solutions” and experience their collective power as they organize and take action (Ransby, 2015, para. 12).

The conditions that lead to collective action or elements that add up to collective action are numerous, but social identity is a critical component. Events and movement doctrine need to resonate with participants (Platt & Fraser, 1998). The research on social identity, solidarity, and collective action of the American Civil Rights Movement is useful for understanding the evolution of progressive movements today and, specifically, useful for understanding social identity on an individual and collective basis as well as the active nature of sensemaking and framing.

A number of significant historical events of the 1950s and 1960s come to mind when thinking about the Civil Rights Movement: the Scottsboro trials; the murders of Emmett Till, Medgar Everes, Viola Liuzzo, and the three Mississippi civil rights workers; the Montgomery bus boycott; the Brown decision; the March on Washington; the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama; and the passage of the Civil Rights Act. These events were both products of the movement and fuel for the movement. In fact, many of these events served as symbols of defiance against White supremacy or, according to Harris (2006), as collective memories which fueled collective action of the 1950s and 1960s.

Public opinion and attitude shape the way we interpret the political world (Harris, 2006). Harris (2006) examined the impact that significant historical events, such as the ones mentioned previously, had on the collective action of the American Civil Rights Movement. In his research, he considered “both positive and negative events on black activism” (p. 20). He asserted that traumatic events were sometimes suppressed individually or collectively by groups, particularly
oppressed groups, and that troublesome events were sometimes clouded by dominant discourse, as well. The sensemaking of events or psychological construction of memories is critical—not all events positively contributed to collective action. In fact, some discouraged it (p. 20). Harris (2006) stated about social appropriation and collective action that “social appropriation is a causal mechanism that allows challengers to employ information to interpret whether environmental conditions pose either an opportunity or threat to collective action” (p. 22). The sensemaking or framing of events becomes critical to movement building. The right meaning attached to events can turn threats into inspirations (Harris, 2006, p. 23, 38).

What was it about the events of the Civil Rights Movement that individual participants identified with and how exactly does framing occur? Platt and Fraser (1998) asserted that movement “doctrine” must resonate with participants and that identifying with events or movements has much to do with one’s experiences and cultural background (p. 161). They also asserted that participants are active in constructing movement frames (Platt & Fraser, 1998, p. 176).

Platt and Fraser (1998) studied letters written to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by participants of the Civil Rights Movement to understand how participants framed the movement and created “solidarity” with it. Not surprisingly, Platt and Fraser found that race, gender, and circumstance were influential factors. Black correspondents identified with “instrumental aspects” of the civil rights movement doctrine, such as voting and jobs, as well as “principled aspects,” such as achieving equality, justice, and freedom, and that White correspondents also identified with principled aspects. They found that White correspondents, however, identified with “religious aspects,” much more so than Black correspondents (Platt & Fraser, 1998, p. 170). Gender also revealed differences in the way participants identified with movement doctrine.
Women identified with instrumental and religious aspects and men identified with principled and nonviolence aspects. The authors asserted that these aspects “shaped their interpretations of the movement and moved them to act in the name of what was right, fair, and just” (Platt & Fraser, 1998, p. 171). Platt and Fraser examined how participants networked with the Civil Rights Movement, as well, such as through external connections (mail solicitations for funds, articles, etc.), institutional ties (churches, etc.), and personal relations (friends, family, workplace, etc). They found that women connected to the movement through personal relationships and men through institutional ties (p. 172). Lastly, Platt and Fraser examined messages correspondents sent to King which provided insight into how they framed the Civil Rights Movement. Black correspondents offered King advice and assistance, whereas White correspondents offered King encouragement, thanks, and shared common doctrinal ground. Platt and Fraser (1998) asserted: “White correspondents employed strategies that related them to the movement as occurring for the benefit of all races and not for Blacks alone” (p. 174). In other words, White correspondents had a “shared interest” in the movement’s success.

The research reveals that participants are active in the process of movement framing and supports theories “that movement identity exists at several levels; for them it is individual, collective, and public” (Platt & Fraser, 1998, p. 176). Platt and Fraser concluded that “diverse commitments tie supporters and participants to the movement by way of separate and overlapping frames and conceptions of solidarity” and “by engaging in movement activities they make its public identity visible” (p. 177).

There are many lessons we can learn from the Civil Rights Movement. For one, people do not need a charismatic Great Man to lead them. Ordinary people are capable of defining problems and solutions. Instead, people should work to build group centered, leader-full
organizations and movements. Additionally, social identity should be taken into consideration when developing campaigns. For instance, race, gender, and religion play a role in sensemaking and framing events for collective action.

**Lessons from the Black Lives Matter Movement**

Social movement literature of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) provides insight on anti-patriarchal leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change. BLMM is the modern civil rights movement with a critical, radical, Black feminist perspective and organizing philosophy and approach. This section includes the genealogy of the movement, leadership of the movement, and a modern, intersectional, leader-full organizing approach.

According to Ransby (2018, p. 29), the racial profiling and murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black youth in Sanford, Florida, in 2012 and Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 provided the fuel for the #blacklivesmatter movement (BLMM). A description and contextualization of these tragic events as well as the leadership and organizing strategies of the movement may help teachers build solidarity with the movement and to learn about non-patriarchal (anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist) leadership. Like many organizers today, #blacklivesmatter leadership has embraced group centered, leader-full organizing. They also offer a particularly strong Black feminist perspective on leadership and organizing (Ransby, 2015, para. 17).

Trayvon Martin was a Black 17-year-old wearing a hoodie on his way to a convenience store when he was racially profiled and shot dead on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida. In response to the injustice, various groups organized protests and marches across the country and on March 21, 2012, 5,000 people marched on Union Square in New York City alone (Ransby, 2018, p. 30). Michael Brown was an unarmed Black 18-year-old who was shot dead and left in
the streets for hours on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri. The officer who shot him testified that Brown “looked like a demon,” a prejudice revealed by an investigation of the department to be consistent among White Ferguson police officers (Ransby, 2018, p. 48). The remark about Brown combined with the fact that his body was left in the streets for crowds to view represented the dehumanizing experiences of Black Americans and symbolized that Black lives truly do not matter (Ransby, 2018, p. 48).

In 2013, in response to George Zimmerman’s acquittal in the Trayvon Martin case, Alicia Garza had written “a love letter to Black people” on Facebook and ended it with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. Her Facebook friend, Opal Tometi, recognized the power of the slogan and began a social media campaign which has evolved into the globally recognized #blacklivesmatter movement (BLMM: Black Lives Matter Movement) (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Ayo Tometi (formerly Opal Tometi) are the co-founders of #blacklivesmatter. None were strangers to organizing and social justice work prior to the conception of the BLMM (Ransby, 2018; Black Lives Matter, 2020).

Alicia Garza is an Oakland-based queer Black organizer, activist, published writer, public speaker, and the Special Projects Director for the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Garza asserted, “In order to truly understand how devastating and widespread this type of violence is in Black America, we must view this epidemic through a lens of race, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity” (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Ayo Tometi was born in Arizona and is a New York-based Nigerian-American, transnational feminist organizer, political strategist, published writer, and the Executive Director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (BAJI). As mentioned, Tometi is credited with initiating the social media strategy. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and a Masters of Arts degree in Communication and Advocacy and has
worked with various domestic and international organizations advocating for the rights of Black immigrants for over a decade. As a result of her experience and expertise, she has presented at the United Nations and participated with the UN’s Global Forum on Migration and Commission on the Status of Women. She has been featured in the Smithsonian’s new National Museum for African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) for her historic contributions (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Patrisse Khan-Cullors is a Los Angeles, CA-based, queer Black artist, activist, organizer, published writer, and public speaker. She has led campaigns against mass incarceration for many years after her own brother was wrongfully arrested and beaten unconscious by guards (Ransby, 2018, p. 27). In addition to being a co-founder of #blacklivesmatter, she is also the Founder of Dignity and Power Now. She is a New York Times Best Selling Author and Fulbright scholar. Khan-Culors also toured her multimedia performance art piece, “POWER: From the Mouths of the Occupied.” All three co-founders have won numerous prestigious awards for their social justice work, and have earned honorary doctoral degrees (Black Lives Matter, 2020).

The events that led up to the birth of #blacklivesmatter and the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM) changed public attitudes and shaped the modern civil rights movement for Black liberation. BLM brought “all kinds of people,” including women and youth, to the streets, but mostly poor Black people (Ransby, 2018, p. 58). BLM brought out all kinds of organizations, and as diverse bodies united in dialogue, the many dimensions of the issue became clearer (p. 66). Racism was not an unrelated issue to sexism, for instance. “Fighting for liberation and freedom from police violence and harassment had raised the large and unwieldy questions, What freedom are we fighting for?” and called for the destruction of a patriarchal society (p. 66). There were demonstrations in over 150 cities in the year after Brown’s murder and the link
between race and gender, between state violence and sexual violence, or the intersectionality of these issues among others demanded a sort of organizational structure to sustain and expand the movement. As stated previously, it is an important reminder that “If we think we all “get free” through individual or uncoordinated small-group resistance, we are kidding ourselves” (Ransby, 2015, para. 13). Movement building is not entirely organic or spontaneous. Rather, it is a result of thoughtfully coordinated efforts among organizations and between organizations of consensus building and negotiations for a democratic, sustainable structure. For instance, building relationships with organizations and collectives and strategizing and mobilizing through open, accessible, and collaborative meetings, workshops, and debates are processes which enable participants to look critically at dominant views and mindsets as well as make sense of, and negotiate a collective identity. Grassroots movements do not happen without serious organizing (Ransby, 2018). Ransby (2018) described this convergence as “political quilting” and asserted that building bridges to connect progressive organizations is essential to sustaining movements (p. 148). Accordingly, the Black Lives Matter network and organizational chapters were established across the nation with the intent to organize but with an agenda that was/is “multi-issued, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and affirming of the full breath of humanity and community” (pp. 14, 75). Their intention was/is to be inclusive and engage participants far beyond that of “heterosexual, cisgender men” (Black Lives Matter, 2020).

There are a number of lessons learned from BLM founders/leaders and the BLMM. A critical, radical Black feminist perspective modernizes the civil rights movement in a way that makes it more equity-minded and inclusive. “Black feminism is concerned about the lives of those deemed most disposable by society” (Love, 2019). Crenshaw (1991) asserts that prevailing narratives of gender are based on the experience of White, middle-class women and narratives
of race are based on the experiences of Black men (Crenshaw, 1991). When feminism fails to consider the overlapping systems of oppression, such as race, feminism reinforces and reproduces the subordination of people of color and when antiracism fails to consider the overlapping systems of oppression, such as gender, antiracism reinforces and reproduces the subordination of women and cisgender folk (Crenshaw, 1989 &1991). BLM provides an example of a culture of and resistance strategies of intersectional feminism.

Unfortunately, a consequence of not having a Great Man at the forefront of a movement is that the leadership and much of the work being done is often “invisible” to the media (Ransby, 2015, para. 18). For instance, most Americans do not know who the leader-organizers of #blacklivesmatter and the Black Lives Matter Movement are and the work being done by the BLMM to address LGBTQIA rights, the climate crisis, affordable housing, low wages, immigration rights, funding for public education, and so on. If Americans know anything about the movement at all, they may associate it with being anti-police as opposed to anti-police brutality and structural racism. The re-appropriation of the slogan to “All Lives Matter” served to “erase” the leader-organizers and the great social justice organizing being done by them and participants of the movement (para. 20).

Labor Movement

This section is an exploration of lessons on leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change from the labor movement with particular attention paid to the Red for Ed movement. It acknowledges the relationship and solidarity between the Black freedom/liberation movement and labor movement and the importance of militant action in the Red for Ed Movement. The labor movement’s relationship to the Civil Rights Movement and the Red for Ed
are relevant to this study because participants are education workers engaged in racial justice organizing.

**Lessons in Solidarity**

According to Boyer and Morais (1955), since the Communist Manifesto of 1848, Marxism has resonated with workers and has been a force in the United States, “Working men of all lands unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!” Marx exposed the evils of capitalism, and unionists increasingly became anti-capitalist and anti-racist (Boyer & Morais, 1955, pp. 83, 129). One of the founding members of the Industrial Workers of the World, Eugene Debs, stated, “The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for socialism because I am for humanity” (p. 13).

As discussed previously, the struggle for Black liberation, women’s rights, and immigrant’s rights are deeply connected to labor’s welfare (Boyer & Morais, 1955). Labor has historically been concerned with the concentration of corporate power (p. 30), for profits have been and continue to be at the expense of working people (p. 39). In 1891, a labor organizer affiliated with the Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Cooperative Union, Mary Elizabeth Lease, stated, “The great common people of the country are slaves, and monopoly is the master … money rules … the common people are robbed to enrich their master” (Boyer & Morais, 1955, p. 110). Throughout American history, deplorable work conditions, low (or no) pay, etc. outraged Americans (pp. 41, 70); however, the patriarchy was skillful in keeping its opposition fragmented. Despite sharing a common enemy, all too often the working class remained divided, “fighting valiantly, but separately and alone” (p. 71). The public was fragmented and even labor organizations, at points in American history, paid too little attention to engaging and organizing with immigrants and people of color (Boyer & Morais, 1955; Honey, 1993, p. 108).
In the 1930s and 1940s, the unity of southern Whites and people of color in unions “profoundly unsettled the segregation system” and raised questions about the agenda of unions, goals of unions, and role of unions “in broad movements for social change” (Honey, 1993, p. 7). According to a labor organizer Forest Dickenson with the United Rubber Workers, “You can’t put workers into two unions, one white and one black. You have to be able to shut down the whole plant to be effective, and that means you have to have everyone in the same union” (Honey, 1993, p. 184). Interracial labor organizing and the belief that “the most downtrodden and oppressed” needed to be brought “into the ranks” played a significant role in the rise of the Civil Rights Movement (Honey, 1993, p. 9). In fact, both King and Baker were trained labor organizers (Rocco-Chaffee, 2019) and knew that the American labor movement was the Civil Rights Movement’s greatest “supporter and ally” (Honey, 1993, p. 9). When Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed for civil disobedience in the 1960s, organized labor marched and provided legal and financial support. In 1968, King was murdered while standing in solidarity with sanitation workers on strike (AFL-CIO, 2020). As discussed earlier, there was also a rise of militant unionism during this time – picket lines, strikes, and various forms of grassroots rebellions – and, consequently, police brutality (Honey, 1993, p. 63). In response to the violence against women and people of color trying to exercise civil liberties and rights, Honey (1993) asserted that “the repression of black civil liberties generally, and of labor and civil rights activists in particular, reflected the long unchallenged dominance of an oligarchy that felt it had the perfect right to protect its interests” (p. 63). According to Honey (1993), the movement for civil rights and labor rights shared a common struggle and common opponent, and “both movements sought to change the way people thought about themselves and their fellow humans” (pp. 172-173).
The basis for solidarity is in class oppression as exploited workers. The lesson, of course, is in solidarity and organized labor. Unfortunately, education unions have been active participants in efforts to both promote racial justice and oppose racial justice initiatives. Education unions have not been consistently social and racial justice oriented (Charney, et. al, 2021).

*Lessons from Red for Ed Movement*

Education reform, low wages for teachers, and their inadequate teaching materials and working conditions in general—demonstrate the power of the patriarchy and capitalism and its ability to oppress and exploit working people and to stifle moves toward an equitable society. Despite upsurges and wins for labor, particularly in the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s, public education is not where it needs to be (Uetricht & Eidlin, 2019, para. 6). Public education, in the U.S., remains a largely conservative system, promoting and maintaining neoliberal ideology that arguably fails to adequately serve the public and contributes to economic inequality (Watkins, 2012).

United States labor unions, in general, have been declining for decades (Uetricht & Eidlin, 2019, para. 1). Labor unions have focused largely on labor law reform and electing sympathetic politicians to reverse this trend instead of effectively linking workplace and community struggles and fiercely and bravely organizing in the workplace and beyond for collective action (para. 9). “The norm is working-class resignation, rather than resistance” and low expectations for what we have a right to demand as citizens (Blanc, 2019, p. 3, 9). Teachers’ unions and educators, however, appear to be waking up.

Blanc (2019) documented the behind the scenes actions during 2018-2019 of teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona who rose up and initiated illegal rank and file rebellions
that ultimately guided them to victory, achieving more in two months than in two decades (pp. 3-7). For West Virginia, some wins included freezing health care costs; canceling invasive, mandatory medical trackers; dropping pro-charter and anti-union legislation; and giving a 5 percent raise to all public employees. For Arizona, some wins included stopping proposed tax cuts, keeping an anti-voucher referendum on the 2018 ballot, winning a significant increase in school funding, winning a 10 percent raise for teachers, and reversing an attempt to tie funding increases to cuts from Medicaid and students with disabilities and the arts (pp. 7-8). Although the rebellions had to do with far more than issues of pay, pay is important: “Fights around pay are simultaneously struggles for basic human dignity” (p. 24). The biggest win, however, was the revitalization of militant unionism and organizing abilities, the empowerment of educators, and the critical consciousness that developed. It “increased people’s (educator’s) political awareness” regarding the attack on public education and the devaluing of teachers (p. 8, 23) and increased a feminist perspective on the gender implications of the deskilling and devaluing of teachers (p. 25).

According to Blanc (2019), unions played a vital role but organizing was from below (p. 5) and leadership was exercised by teachers without formal positions of authority (p. 89). In fact, when union leaders of the West Virginia Educators Association prematurely announced the strike was over, the crowd of educators demanded that union leadership continue fighting. “Back to the table! … We are the union bosses!” they chanted (p. 93). And at the end of the strike, they chanted, “Who made history? We made history!” (p. 94). The red state revolt was not leaderless (p. 103), but, rather, leader-full.

Blanc (2019) asserted that “workers tend to search for individual solutions to collective problems, particularly where labor organizations are weak” (p. 37). The red state revolts were
transformative for teachers and brought a sense of individual and collective power. Teachers learned that “the system depends on labor” and that “strikes are worker’s most powerful weapon” (p. 41). Blanc stated, “Paralyzing production remains the most impactful and empowering action that working people can undertake” (p. 43). Teachers also learned that it does not matter if actions are illegal if enough people are doing it and there is public support (p. 54). They worked hard to build unity and overcome differences in race, religion, and gender (p. 44; p. 57). Organizers engaged in numerous solidarity-generating actions to unite with families/the community, such as wearing red (p. 46). Blanc asserted, “A big strike is made up of many small acts of solidarity” (p. 84.) The red state revolts were a result of serious organizing over many months, despite the media’s framing as spontaneous (p. 103).

The teacher-organizers of West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma inspired a national #redfored campaign and made possible a new labor movement. According to Blanc (2019), a White Arizona teacher stated, “Red for Ed has awoken my spirit of justice, truth, love, and respect for all people. I will not return to my previous slumber but fight for the many with little against the few with much” (p 71). “The red state revolts demonstrate the actuality of an old socialist axiom: most working-class people learn about power through their experiences in struggle and mass organizing” (Blanc, 2019, p. 97).

The link between socialism and the working class is still relevant today. In fact, Bernie Sanders’s campaign for Presidency of the United States of America, which began in 2015, promoted a power shift from the wealthiest people in America to the working people (p. 101) and, according to Blanc (2019), the militant unionists of the West Virginia revolt pointed to Sanders as inspiration. Sanders brought awareness to class politics and reduced the stigma around the word socialism (pp. 107, 109). The Black Lives Matter movement has likely had an
impact, as well, and helped Americans see that capitalism is “reaching the end of its rope” (Murolo & Chitty, 2018, pp. 359-363). According to Blanc (2019), in response to the smear campaign launched by the Koch-funded right wing against Arizona educator-organizers, an Arizona journalist wrote, “If the leftist revolution that we’ve been warned about results in an energized labor movement and better funding for education, health care, roads, and other public institutions, that actually would be pretty good” (p. 182).

“The Red state rebellions have demonstrated that reuniting political radicalism and organized labor is both necessary and possible” (Blanc, 2019, p. 106). Specifically, Uetricht and Eidlin (2019) asserted that union revitalization requires shop-floor militancy—building power in the workplace and “on the shop floor” and engaging in strikes or other militant actions (such as the actions of the educator-organizers of the red state revolt).

There are a number of lessons learned from the labor movement and Red for Ed movement specifically. These are that interracial labor organizing strengthens unity of workers and builds collective power, leadership does not need to be exercised by people with formal positions of authority, public support can strengthen movements, all workers share a common opponent, patriarchy will launch a counteroffensive to protect profits and preserve power, and, lastly, one of the biggest lessons we can learn from the Red for Ed movement is that working class people learn about power—the dynamics of power—through collective action and organizing.

Summary

The purpose of this Literature Review was to establish familiarity with existing research on grassroots educational leadership and organizing for equitable systemic change. A historical analysis of the feminization of the teaching profession was included to illustrate why teaching in
public schools is an oppressive experience and the role of educators as change agents for educational justice and the dual function of schools to both circulate dominant ideology to maintain the power and privilege status quo and to produce critical thinkers and participatory citizens who are capable of transforming society was briefly discussed. Ideology meaning a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).

Next, the existing literature on grassroots educational leadership and community organizing for equitable systemic school change was reviewed beginning with the emerging literature on grassroots educational leadership and ending with the emerging literature on grassroots community organizing for education reform, also known as educational organizing.

Because the bodies of literature on grassroots educational leadership and educational organizing for equitable systemic change are emerging and because it is relevant to the coalition’s leadership and organizing, lessons on grassroots leadership and organizing from anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist progressive grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/1960s, Black Lives Matter Movement, and Red for Ed Movement were also included in the Literature Review. There are many lessons to learn about resisting white supremacy and capitalist patriarchy from progressive grassroots movements – lessons that white public school teachers must learn. Schools reproduce capitalist economic and racial inequality, as well as justify the existence of inequalities by effectively blaming targets of oppression for failing to succeed (Au, 2018, p. 85-86). A greater awareness of the relationship between capitalism and the exploitation of teachers (workers) and students and families of color has the potential to create the tension necessary to drive a resistance and build a movement for social and
economic change (Au, 2018). The liberation of teachers and students of color are bound up together (Leistyna, 2004).

In conclusion, there is a significant gap in the literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing, especially from the perspective of public school teachers. What this dissertation research seeks to explore is how teachers, particularly White female teachers (but not exclusively), are compelled to action and what tactics/strategies they use to disrupt or rupture dominant ideologies (even if only partly). That is, how do they, despite the intricate circulation of oppressive ideologies and the current culture of demoralization and deprofessionalization, refuse to be a servant to power, refuse to be submissive, compliant, and compliant and work towards their own and collective liberation? Most importantly, how do these educators without formal positions of authority exercise agency and pursue counterhegemonic praxis, despite the heavy constraints on time and the possibility of institutional retribution?
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Patriarchy, White supremacy, and heteronormativity have largely influenced America’s first middle-class profession for women (Hoffman, 2003). Corporate education reformers say they want excellent education for all students, yet scholars have documented the failure of corporate, neoliberal education reform (Watkins, 2012). Educational organizing offers a powerful alternative to education reform (Renne & McAlister, 2011). The purpose of this study was to understand how teachers in the coalition—a community-based coalition made up of workers, educators, students, parents, guardians, grandparents, elected officials, and community leaders—organized for equitable, systemic school change. The goal of the study was to look for patterns that supported understanding of how educators, particularly White female teachers (but not exclusively) in the coalition made sense of the world and functioned. More specifically, how they refused to be servants to power, how they built solidarity with progressive grassroots movements, and how they disrupted or ruptured dominant ideology through organizing and activism for equitable, systemic change.

Guiding Research Questions for this study included:

- What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness?
- What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change?
- What factors and conditions do K-12 teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations?

Feminist, or anti-patriarchal, grassroots educational leadership and community organizing offers an alternative to corporate, neoliberal education reform. Understanding what nurtured their
critical consciousness, how they organized, and what limited and supported their efforts was the goal of the study.

In Chapter Three, a complete description of the methods is provided, containing: (a) Rationale for Critical, Feminist Activist Ethnographic Design; (b) Participants and Site, including an explanation of how and why the participants were selected and the description of the site; (c) Instruments, including an explanation of the development and/or selection of instruments used; (d) Data Collection Procedures, including specific tools used to answer each guiding research question; (e) Data Analysis Procedures, including a description of the step-by-step procedures used to guide the analysis; (f) Participant Confidentiality; (g) Researcher Bias; and (h) Delimitations, including delimitations of participants, site, scope, etc.

**Rationale for Critical, Feminist, Activist Ethnographic Design**

A critical, feminist, activist ethnographic qualitative method was chosen for this study. In an ethnographic study, researchers identify and locate a culture-sharing group to observe and analyze (Creswell & Poth, 2016), which, in this case, were educator members of the coalition. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), the goal of the researcher in an ethnographic study is to interpret the “shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language” of a small culture-sharing group (p. 164). To do so, ethnographers immerse themselves in the field for significant periods of time, building strong relationships with “subjects” to collect rich data. Traditionally, ethnographers aim to study groups to uplift marginalized voices and support causes for equity and justice (Craven & Davis, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hesse-Biber, 2014).

Understanding how and why this ethnographic study is/was qualified as critical, feminist, and activist is important. In this section of the rationale for the design, the following components
of this ethnographic study are discussed: the characteristics of and the relationship between
critical, feminist, and activist ethnographic research; the researcher as an insider; the significance
of keeping the research qualitative; and the fallacy of objectivity and application of reflexivity.

Critical Versus Feminist Versus Activist Ethnography

There is rationale behind choosing an ethnographic study to examine educator activism in
the coalition. There is further rationale behind conducting the study through a critical, feminist,
activist lens. Ethnographic studies, without further being qualified, address inequities and
injustices and support social justice and change, but the application of critical, feminist, and
activist lenses serves to deepen the research approach and data analysis and to help the
researcher understand her relationship to the study. Understanding what is meant by critical,
feminist, and activist and how they come together is essential to understanding this study.

Critical ethnography looks closely at power and speaks out against inequality and
domination (Carspecken & Apple, 1992 as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 184) and advocates
for the emancipation of a group (p. 167). The goal of a critical ethnographic study is to address
inequities and injustices and support social justice and change (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 3). A
critical ethnographic researcher does not view people involved in the research as subjects but
sees them instead as participants. Indeed, the researcher collaborates with the community to
solve problems together (p. 112).

A feminist ethnographic study is similar to a critical ethnographic study in the ways
described previously. It goes further, however: feminist philosophy attunes researchers to power
dynamics that structure women’s lives (Hawkesworth, 2014). As such, the researcher asks
questions which challenge hegemonic ideas that reinforce existing gender inequality. Feminist
ethnography positions gender at the center of inquiry and the research process and centers
women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 3). Feminist scholars, particularly anthropologists (Davis & Craven, 2016, p. 30), have long studied women and labor, studied the women’s movement and related movements, critiqued patriarchy, and attributed women’s oppression to capitalism. Intersectional feminist ethnographers consider race, class, and ability in addition to gender in their data analysis (Craven & Davis, 2016, p. 21-27). Because this research involved studying K-12 female teachers (workers) engaged in racial justice work within a neoliberal context of the education system in the United States, a feminist approach was appropriate. Moreover, the attention paid by feminist ethnographers to being caring/compassionate (p. 77) and to building connection with “subjects” felt right, considering the researcher’s intentions to avoid exploiting participants and instead supporting and uplifting their voices and work (Craven & Davis, 2016).

Feminist activism and ethnographic research have contributed to the development of the scholar-activist/activist-scholar model that highlights the relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist activism. In feminist activist research, the researcher has an activist commitment to bringing about change that guides the research. Many feminist scholar-activists come to the research after already being involved in struggles for social justice, such as struggles for gay, disability, or women’s rights. There is often careful attention paid to making the research usable to the public—ordinary people—through accessible language and publications, such as podcasts, blogs, vlogs, and open access journals. They use their cultural capital as scholars to bring attention to injustices, sometimes as simple as exposing power structures and hierarchies (Craven & Davis, 2016, pp. 145-154).

In the end, activist ethnography and critical ethnography, framed as feminist or not, are similar. Both address injustice and disrupt the power and privileged status quo, both operate with
deep compassion for those who are suffering, and both recognize that the work of an ethnographer is political. In fact, ethnographers engage in counterhegemony when they challenge dominant, normative views of qualitative research. Together, in this study, critical, feminist, activist ethnography enabled the researcher to center gender, race, class, and ability as part of the analysis, always paying close attention to how power and privilege operated. Together, they deepened the researcher’s concept of intersectional feminism and feminist research and allowed the researcher to engage in an active process for social change with participants.

The Researcher as an Insider

As mentioned, ethnographers must build relationships with the group being studied. They must not only observe but establish trust in order to get authentic data (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 191). As such, data collection involves prolonged time in the field (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 182; Rai, 2020). The researcher must immerse themselves in the “natural environment” for long periods of time to get a “deep” understanding of the cultural perspectives and practices of participants (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 108).

While ethnographers do enter communities as outsiders to study culture sharing groups, anti-colonial or critical ethnographic researchers often study groups as insiders who are part of the community they are studying (Rai, 2020; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015) and acknowledge both the advantages and complications (Chavez, 2008). Although there may be complications to insider research, such as bias in selecting participants, selective reporting, breaking relationships with participants when exiting the study, etc. (Chavez, 2008), being a cultural insider is not viewed as inferior to being an outsider. Rather, the insider position affords an opportunity to collect rich, authentic data (Hesse-Biber, 2014; Rai, 2020; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). Some advantages of being a cultural insider include: easier access to
participants, more rapid acceptance by participants, greater comfort experienced by participants, greater intimacy between researcher and participants, and ultimately more meaningful fieldwork which enhances the quality and validity of the research (Chavez, 2008; Rai, 2020). Studying a culture-sharing group as a cultural insider is also viewed as an ethical approach to ethnographic research (Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015) because of the cultural competence of the researcher and equal power sharing between researcher and the researched (i.e., the participants or subjects) (Keikelame & Swartz, 2019). In fact, Chavez (2008) asserted that outsiders are in danger of imposing their values, beliefs, and perceptions on the lives of participants.

In this study, the researcher had been engaged with the coalition as a member since 2018. A relationship with the culture-sharing group and trust had been established and was essential to eliciting an honest account of participant experiences. The researcher had a deep understanding of the history of the coalition and a rich contextual understanding of participant experiences being a White woman, educator, and a coalition member herself. Being intimately involved with the coalition and sharing multiple identities and experiences with participants qualified the researcher as a cultural insider (Chavez, 2008). However, there were also aspects of being an outsider: shared membership in a group does not imply sameness or that all members share the same experiences (Craven & Davis, 2016, pp. 60-63). According to Craven & Davis (2016), the researcher, after all, is the researcher. There is space between the researcher and participants through the nature of being the researcher and a power dynamic despite the researcher’s genuine involvement and engagement with participants in the struggle for equity. This was apparent when the researcher conducted formal interviews with participants and collected field notes using the field observation tool. In those moments, the researcher was no longer just a member of the group, an equal. One participant in the study admitted to “sweating bullets” and another
asked if she got “the questions right” during formal interviews, as if they were students taking a
high-stakes exam. As Mani Rai (Yamphu) (2020) stated, an outsider position creates a hierarchy
between researcher and subjects and may make participants nervous and alter their actions.

Therefore, although a cultural insider, the research occupied both insider/outsider
positions in a continuous, iterative, and emergent manner during the study. Aware that the
researcher’s bias could be overly positive and influence data analysis (Chavez, 2008), the
researcher engaged in reflexivity described below.

Keeping it Qualitative

Due to the audit culture of schools and teaching and society’s obsession with body
standards and measurement of women (i.e., body size), it was important that this study remain
qualitative, avoiding quantifying the experiences of educator-activism and that this study diverge
from the positivist conception of science that we learn about as children in school: make an
observation, form a hypothesis, test the hypothesis, analyze the data, repeat (Hawkesworth, 2014). As discussed in Chapter One, teachers reinforcing beliefs that knowledge can be
deposited, measured, and controlled does not always serve students well. In the context of
critical, feminist, activist research, measuring women and their work would be avoided. The
qualitative instruments and procedures used are discussed more in the Instruments and Data
Collection section.

Reflexivity and Feminist Objectivity

The scientific method rests upon a flawed notion of neutrality and objectivity.

Hawkesworth (2014) asserted:

In suggesting that the scientific method commences with “neutral” observation,
positivists invoke a conception of “manifest truth,” which attempts to reduce the problem
of the validity of knowledge to an appeal to the authority of the source of that knowledge (for example, “the facts ‘speak’ for themselves”). The belief that the unmediated apprehension of the “given” by a passive or receptive observer is possible, however, misconstrues both the nature of perception and the nature of the world. The human mind is not passive but active; it does not merely receive an image of the given but rather imposes order upon the external world through a process of selection, interpretation, and imagination. Observation is always linguistically and culturally mediated. It involves the creative imposition of expectations, anticipations, and conjectures upon external events (pg. 7).

According to standpoint theory, one’s knowledge, beliefs, and perspective develops from one’s experiences (Craven & Davis, 2016; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Haraway, 1998; Hawkesworth, 2014; Richardson, 2007). Feminist researchers understand this about their research “subjects”/participants, but they also understand this about themselves. The researcher’s own perspective should be shared transparently and examined throughout the research process.

Feminist ethnographers often include their own experiences in interviews with participants or in publications. For a critical feminist researcher, ignoring one’s positionality, or social location, is far more dangerous than acknowledging it and being attentive to it (Craven & Davis, 2016, p. 81). In this study, the researcher engaged in self-reflection after every interview with participants and while coding/analyzing data, journaling about what feelings and thoughts came up for her. Self-reflection and an awareness, or reflexivity, of her privileged (i.e., being White) and marginalized identities (i.e., being a woman) was critical to this study since she is also an educator and member of the coalition. Reflexivity allowed the researcher to see both the similarities and differences of her experiences and the research participant’s experiences.
Journaling and sharing her experiences and thoughts with participants helped the researcher to remain vigilant about the relationship between inner self and the external world. This form of feminist objectivity allowed the researcher to be attuned to overgeneralizations, stereotypes, and false “universal truths” (Hawkesworth, 2014). The researcher illustrated her positionality using descriptive narratives throughout the dissertation and discussed the impacts of her sociocultural perspective on her research and writing and summarized her journal entries in Chapter Five.

In conclusion, there was a rationale for choosing to study educator activism in coalition through a critical, feminist, activist lens and methodology. The type of design strategy chosen by the researcher enabled the researcher to be mindful of her insider/outsider position in the coalition, remain reflexive, and incorporate her reflexivity into her work. It also enabled the researcher to work toward a goal of resisting patriarchy and moving society in the direction of equity and justice. Lastly, it enabled the researcher to study educator activism qualitatively and in a way that does not reinforce narrow views of scientific scholarship.

**Participants and Site**

The participants in this ethnographic study were K-12 public school educators who work in the region, live in the city, and are members of the coalition. The majority of educators who participated identified as White able-bodied females, one White male and one Black female participated, and a total of 6 educators participated in the study. Through their work in the coalition and beyond, these educators have been actively involved in grassroots community organizing for equitable, systemic change and have built solidarity with progressive movements, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement.

The sites for data collection was expansive due to the nature of grassroots organizing and the close relationships shared between coalition members. Sites consisted of coalition
membership meetings (both virtual and in-person), various protests/marches/rallies, formal
Action Dialogues characterized as public forums to dialogue about educational issues and
identify action steps toward equitable systemic change, house parties, recreational walks through
public parks, and virtual Zoom meetings for informal interviews.

In summary, the participants are educators affiliated with the coalition and the sites for
field observations consisted of wherever their activism took place over the course of six months.
Delimitations are discussed below.

**Instruments**

The instruments used to collect data included a brief demographic survey, ethnographic
field observation tool, and informal interview guide. In this section, an explanation of the
development and/or selection of instruments used is provided.

The Demographic Survey (Appendix A) was used to gather data on the following: job
title, place of employment, education, pronouns, gender, race, and age. The survey was designed
to capture data that does not tend to come up organically in conversation when engaging in
activism and data that might not have been shared during interviews. It is uncommon to ask
someone their age in conversation, for instance. The researcher did know the participants’
preferred pronouns in advance due to organizing over Zoom, but chose to include it in the survey
anyway. The researcher decided to include race in the survey after two participants shared that
they are often identified as people of color when they identify as White. It became incredibly
apparent that it is better to ask than assume. Whether the researcher knew the answers ahead of
time or not, all of the questions included in the survey were critical to the study. Class was not
included in the survey due to the likelihood of it being discussed during interviews. Google
Forms was used to create and deliver the survey to participants.
The Field Observation Tool (Appendix B) was used to collect data in the field and/or organize field data once the researcher was home as well as at coalition meetings. The observation protocol included Guiding Research Questions to help the researcher stay focused/grounded when conducting fieldwork due to the amount of information she was exposed to and processing during encounters with participants. The observation protocol included two columns: one for “descriptive notes” to objectively document the flow of events/conversations occurring during the meetings and one for “reflective notes” to document reflections, including personal feelings that arise, and conclusions for later theme development, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018, pp. 287-288). The reflective column on the observation protocol included a section for coding (a checklist of codes) if any codes were apparent during data collection and the researcher wanted to note it quickly and in the moment. This tool was supposed to make data collection in the field easier, but this was not always the case and is discussed further in the Data Collection Procedures.

The Interview Tool (Appendix C) was used to collect data during one on one interviews with participants over Zoom. Interview questions (topics of conversation) were developed around themes related to the Guiding Research Questions. The questions were all open-ended and intended as conversation starters that were not meant to limit the participant and researcher in. Based on responses by participants, the researcher asked follow-up questions to deepen understanding. The researcher hoped that interviews would resemble natural, organic conversations between coalition members; however, this was not always the case and is discussed further in the Data Collection Procedures.

In summary, tools developed by the researcher consisted of a brief demographic survey to capture information that would likely not come up during interviews or while engaged in
activism in the field, an ethnographic field observation tool to collect and organize observations during actions and to jot down the researchers own thoughts and feelings when engaged in activism with the coalition, and an informal interview guide to guide one on one conversations with participants.

Data Collection Procedures

The instruments used to collect data included a brief demographic survey, ethnographic field observations tool, and informal interview guide. Public artifacts (social media posts, photos, articles written, quotes in paper, etc.,) were also collected. In this section, how the tools were used is described.

The Demographic Survey (Appendix A) was delivered to participants online using the share option on Google Forms. It was used to collect critical information about participants that would assist in data analysis of participant power and privilege and help to create profiles of the participants.

The Field Observation Tool (Appendix B) was used to collect data in the field and/or organize field data once the researcher was home. The Field Observation tool was used to collect data during monthly coalition meetings and while study participants were engaged in demonstrations/actions for equitable systemic change. Coalition meetings lasted 60-80 minutes and actions often lasted longer. It turned out, however, that the tool was more useful during meetings than during actions. The researcher was committed to not disrupting the work of the coalition while she conducted her research. Once she was engaged in the field, she realized that pulling out this tool to collect data could potentially create an element of disruption. It became apparent that people would feel self-conscious and possibly afraid due to the sensitive nature of the actions and the vulnerability of participants. This became apparent during an action,
described in Chapter Four, during which the researcher was observing educators working with undocumented immigrants who were fighting for safe working conditions. Instead, the researcher kept the field observation tool hidden and referred to it only when she was alone. There were times that even having her phone out felt disruptive, too, so the researcher took mental notes and recorded thoughts down once she was in a bathroom or back in her car. Shorthand notes included: date, time, context, participants, sketches, memorable quotes, major events, and her own feelings. The researcher recorded shorthand notes of what she saw, heard, felt, and thought so as to record observations as well as triggers for memories that would require greater thought and description later when the researcher was home with her computer. Once home, equipped with shorthand notes of accounts and triggers, the researcher elaborated on what was experienced and observed, trying to capture as much rich detail as possible. The researcher anticipated the field notes would become a great source of data as she spent a good deal of time in observation of participants engaged in various actions.

The Informal Interview guide was used to guide conversations over Zoom with participants. In an ethnographic study, there is a reliance on verbatim quotes to present a participants’ viewpoints that are then interpreted through the researcher’s perspective and aim of understanding how the culture sharing group works (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 182). To capture quotes, interviews were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 134). Interview questions (topics of conversation) were developed around themes related to the Guiding Research Questions.

The intention was to have interviews resemble natural, organic conversations between coalition members with semi-structured, open-ended questions; however, Zoom interviews did not feel as natural as conversations in the field. Conversations did not unfold as organically on
Zoom. Participants had their cameras on (except for one participant who chose to have his camera off) and the researcher paid close attention to body gestures and facial expressions, aiming to capture the “subtle shades of meaning” conveyed by participants as they spoke (DeVault & Gross, 2006, pg. 173). When participants brought up gender, the interviewer/researcher asked follow up questions to dig a little deeper and enhance understanding. When the researcher could relate, she shared her own thoughts and experiences. In some instances, the participant took on the role of interviewer, asking the researcher questions to deepen their own understanding. When this back and forth occurred, for the researcher, it felt like a natural conversation between two women. In a safe space between women, finding and acknowledging common ground is normal as is finding and acknowledging differences. Having rapport with participants shaped the interviews and made reflexive interviewing (i.e., sharing her own sociocultural perspective with participants) critical. The researcher practiced active listening so as to be attentive to thoughts and experiences too often overlooked and to acknowledge and process more than what she wanted to hear, but, rather, what was actually being said, even if it felt contradictory or uncomfortable to the researcher (DeVault & Gross, 2006).

Lastly, the researcher collected public artifacts created by participants consisting of social media posts, op-eds, presentations, speeches at actions, and more. Some artifacts the researcher located on her own, but others were provided by participants. Participants wanted to share their work for equitable systemic change that they engaged with outside of the coalition. The researcher looked to see if artifacts and field observations confirmed emergent themes from the interviews. She also looked for contradictions.

In summary, the demographic survey, ethnographic field observations, informal interviews and public artifacts provided data that enabled the researcher to answer the Guiding
Research Questions and provide insight into what brought educators do the work of the coalition, how they organized to challenge hegemony and move society and schools in the direction of equity and justice, barriers to their organizing, and more.

**Data Analysis Procedures and Coding**

Consistent with ethnography, data analysis was done by looking for cultural themes and categorizing and describing how the culture-sharing group worked (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 322-323). To develop themes, the following strategies were used: memoing, various coding methods, identifying and highlighting noteworthy quotes, creating coding diagrams/maps representing relationships between codes, and drafting summary statements of recurrences and/or outliers in the data (Saldana, 2016). Despite taking these steps, there was no “recipe” for coding as the researcher strived to remain flexible, drawing from various coding methods and remaining vigilant of her own positionality and biases. In this section, coding and data analysis is described.

Saldana (2016) asserted that each study is unique and each coding method is unique (p. 69). As stated, the researcher drew from a variety of coding methods. The coding methods that the researcher drew from were: Descriptive Coding, Emotion Coding, and Values Coding.

Descriptive Coding is a process by which the researcher “assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data,” making subsequent indexing and categorizing relatively easy (Saldana, 2016, p. 292). According to Saldana (2016), Descriptive Coding is particularly appropriate for ethnographies (p. 292).

Emotion Coding is a process by which the researchers “label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant” (Saldana, 2016, p. 293). Values Coding is “the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and belief.” According to Saldana (2016), Values Coding is
particularly appropriate for a critical ethnographic study (p. 298). Both Values Coding and Emotional Coding provide insight into the participants’ perspectives and worldviews (p. 293; p. 298).

Coding was done over the course of two weeks. The researcher took space between coding cycles to reflect and determine next steps. In this way, the process was organic and even intuitive, to a degree. Data analysis involved coding interview transcripts, code mapping to create categories and subcategories of codes, turning categories into themes, and using artifacts and field observations to deepen themes and further research findings.

First Cycle Coding

Coding began by reading through interview transcripts one by one and using a coding chart created on Google Docs to organize codes. The coding chart included emotions, values, descriptive nouns, quotes, reflexive memos, and a summary statement. Each participant had their own coding chart.

Once the researcher had gone through all of the interview transcripts and organized the codes on the coding chart, she recognized that her mind was already hard at work making connections between participants and analyzing codes. As such, the researcher began to compile recurring codes and similar codes on a separate spreadsheet.

At this point, it felt right to take space or create distance from coding and reflect on the process. Coding had begun on the computer and the researcher was moving through one participant at a time. Graue and Walsh in Saldana (2015), assert that “handling the data gets additional data out of memory and into the record. It turns abstract information into concrete data” (p. 30). The researcher decided that she needed to touch the data and engage in a kinesthetic metadata activity—an activity that would enable her to mix up, move around, sort,
and mark up (with an actual pen and highlighter) participant quotes. To do this, the researcher color coded the coding charts and then printed them out. With six coding charts before her, all with their own color, the researcher began to cut out the quotes into strips of paper, resulting in a rainbow mountain of quotes (see Figure 1). Having the quotes on strips of paper enabled the researcher to interact with quotes from multiple participants at once and to sort quotes based on the essence of their meaning. The researcher asked what the quotes meant, what participants were saying, and how the essence or meaning could be summarized or captured in one word (Saldana, 2015). Because they were color coded, the researcher did have the ability to identify the participant if she needed to. This process took an entire day and ended with a handwritten list of about 60 words that captured the essence of the quotes.

Figure 1

Quotes Cut Into Strips of Paper
Second Cycle Coding: Code Mapping

After taking space, the researcher returned to analyzing the data. This time the researcher compared the handwritten paper list from the kinesthetic activity to the spreadsheet of codes from the coding charts that were created earlier. She asked: What emotions showed up again? What values showed up again? Which ones showed up in abundance? Did certain values and emotions dominate? With all of the codes in front of her from both coding activities, the researcher began to categorize codes. She looked at the relationships between codes: Did they intersect? Did they fall under a larger umbrella? Were they different enough to be separate categories? Categorization involved narrowing down the list of codes or distilling and condensing meaning. Five categories with subcategories emerged from the code mapping.

Then, as a way to see if the five categories worked, the researcher went back to the cut-out quotes and tried to sort them according to the five categories that emerged from the code mapping. She also looked to see if the majority of participants were represented in each category which she was able to do because of the color coding. The researcher found that the majority of the quotes fell naturally into the categories; however; a handful of quotes did not. When the researcher looked at the quotes that did not belong to the five categories, she realized that they were similar and a new category emerged resulting in six categories.

Looking at the quotes in each category helped the researcher confirm that she had gotten it right and also helped the researcher better articulate what were becoming six strong themes.

Categories to Themes

Although previous steps took many hours and were labor intensive, this was perhaps the hardest part of the process. The researcher took the six main categories, which were mostly
single words, and expanded on them. She tried to think visually, to think symbolically, to think in metaphors. The researcher did not want to overgeneralize or reduce the meaning or essence of the categories, but at the same time, it felt inevitable. Brainstorming also involved talking with a trusted peer while maintaining participant confidentiality. Saldana (2015) suggested that researchers “talk regularly with a trusted peer, colleague, advisor, mentor, expert, or friend about [their] research and data analysis. This person can ask provocative questions the researcher has not considered” (p. 231). Accordingly, the researcher verbally explained the categories to a trusted peer. As she articulated the themes to a peer, the peer asked questions to clarify understanding and, subsequently, word choice became clearer. This process helped the researcher best articulate the six themes found in the interview transcripts.

Deepening Themes with Artifacts and Field Observations

Feminist scholars aim to “understand the patterns and variations in all their complexity” (Hawkesworth, 2014). This is where artifacts and field observations were particularly helpful. After interviews were coded and categorized, the researcher compared the data to the observations made in the field and artifacts collected. Field observations and artifacts deepened interview responses and provided additional context. When synthesizing the data, the researcher aimed for “thick descriptions” or “detailed descriptions of a particular mode of life that attempt to situate social practices within the cultural norms and values of a particular group” (Geertz, 1994, as cited in Hawkesworth, 2014) – covering the commonalities and points of divergence and disagreement. Conflicts or contradictions between interview responses and field observations or artifacts were noted. In addition to the artifacts and field observations, the survey provided insight into participant responses, as well. For instance, the survey captured the
educational background of participants and brought further insight into the privilege and	
sociopolitical perspective of participants.

Themes to Findings

After the six themes were articulated, the researcher went back to the Guiding Research Questions to see if the themes informed the questions. They did. In some instances, participants had provided direct answers to the GRQs during formal and informal interviews, such as identifying experiences that engendered their understanding of systems of oppression and barriers to challenging negative power relations, and in other instances the researcher made inferences using the themes and artifacts.

The second GRQ (What are the various ways these teachers organized for equitable systemic change?) was so broad that it required the researcher to examine a number of coalition artifacts, including campaign literature, photos, meeting agendas, organizational documents of principles, news articles, the coalition website, etc. It also required careful observation of the interactions/behaviors between participants at meetings and in the field.

The six themes as they relate to each finding are described in Chapter Four.

Participant Confidentiality

Considering confidentiality of participants is essential, especially when discussing activism which challenges the power and privilege status quo. Ethnographers in particular should always consider the safety of the participants (Craven & Davis, 2016).

Before beginning the study, the researcher obtained consent from “subjects” to participate in the research study. Steps to confidentiality included the following: transcriptions of interviews, field observation notes, Zoom interview video recordings, and artifacts collected were kept in a personal computer (protected by a firewall software and passwords) and/or
secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to all participants to ensure that participants could not be identified. Zoom recordings were destroyed after interviews were transcribed and coded. All data will be destroyed after five years. These steps to provide confidentiality were disclosed to participants in the consent form.

**Researcher Bias**

Bias is a prejudice typically in favor of or against something. As a critical feminist researcher, the researcher does not believe that it is possible to be neutral, unbiased, or emotionally distant from the research (Craven & Davis, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hawkesworth, 2014; Hesse-Biber, 2014; Rai, 2020; Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2015). Qualitative researchers, outsiders or insiders, cannot claim that their data analysis is objective and unaffected by their various identities and positionalities (Chavez, 2008).

Being a co-chair in the coalition, friends with coalition members and participants, and sharing the same profession as participants meant that the researcher had a strong point of view and needed to safeguarded against limiting stereotypes, broad sweeping generalizations, false universal truths, and projection when analyzing data by practicing reflexivity (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 151), described in the “Reflexivity and Feminist Objectivity” section previously. The researcher documented an honest account of her feelings, experiences, and beliefs that she brought to the topic primarily through journaling. A summary appears in Chapter Five. The researcher aimed to be transparent about her experiences and perspective by including descriptive narratives from the point of view of the researcher that revealed knowledge, emotion, and background context that likely influenced the study, defined as “dark matter” and often left out of qualitative research (Weiner-Levey and Popper-Giveon, 2013). For example, dark matter appears in Chapter One.
Delimitations

Delimitations limit the scope of the study, or, in other words, are the boundaries around the study. The researcher as a cultural insider is a delimitation of the study. Delimitations regarding participants included: participants were primarily White female teachers or identified as women, members of the coalition, and K-12 teachers. Other delimitations included choosing one community organizing group to examine as opposed to multiple educational organizing groups and exploring educational organizing from the perspective of teachers in the coalition as opposed to other coalition members such as students and parents. Lastly, the Guiding Research Questions limited the scope of the study and the coding methods placed boundaries around data analysis. The delimitations were conscious decisions made by the researcher to ensure that the study was manageable.

Summary

A critical, feminist, activist methodology enabled the researcher to continue her work as a community activist while studying the culture of the coalition through the lens of K-12 educators and complemented the work of the coalition as opposed to being in contradiction with it. Meaning, the methodology employed also challenges normative structures and is counterhegemonic.

The study included 6 participants and involved field observations, formal and informal interviews, and artifacts collected over 6 months. The instruments used to collect data were a demographic survey, a field observation tool, and interview questions. Guiding Research Questions included: (a) What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness? (b) What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change? (c) What factors and conditions do K-12
teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations? Coding methods combined Descriptive Coding, Values Coding, and Emotion Coding. Six themes emerged and informed the Guiding Research Questions. Themes and findings are described in the following chapter.

Because of the close relationships between researcher and researched, the researcher accounted for bias using reflexive practices and maintained participant confidentiality through pseudonyms. Research subjects were also able to read the study before publication and discuss potential identifiers with the researcher to omit any if necessary. To place boundaries around the study and make it manageable, one educational organizing group was studied, only K-12 educator members of the coalition were studied, three GRQs were developed, and three coding methods were utilized.

Reflecting on the methodology, if the researcher simply looked for answers in the interviews to the GRQs, it would have been no different than administering a survey to participants. The researcher’s insider position and the many months engaged in the field with participants resulted in the trusting relationships necessary to have vulnerable and authentic conversations and, ultimately, a deep contextual understanding of the collective values, emotions, beliefs, and experiences of the culture-sharing group, teachers in the coalition.

In the following section, the six themes are described and the Guiding Research Questions are addressed.
Chapter Four is a complete description of the results and contains: (a) Participant Profiles, where study participants are introduced; (b) Presentation of Data Collected; (c) Presentation of Themes, including the six themes that emerged from the data; and (d) Presentation of Findings for each Guiding Research Question.

**Participants Profiles**

The plan was to meet at 9:00 a.m. to organize the delivery of a letter written by fish house workers to management. The letter demanded that the company cease the use of a machine that was emitting toxic fumes that workers believed was making them sick. Although the educators who agreed to meet at 9:00 a.m. knew they would be confronting management in solidarity with the fish house workers, all of which were immigrant workers, the educators could not have anticipated the degree of tragedy and injustice they would bear witness to.

9:00 a.m. and we were parked blocks away from the meeting destination. Traffic was blocked by caution tape, orange cones, police cars, fire trucks, and people—people quietly leaning up against buildings staring up toward the sky. As we walked down the avenue, ashes blew around us. We could not only smell the soot, but taste the toxic fumes from the fire that had broken out earlier that morning. The fire had taken down two mixed-use, multifamily buildings. We walked quietly past, absorbing the anxiety and sadness of the onlookers. I remember looking toward the pink cherry blossoms for comfort. On an avenue of concrete and plastic, black soot, and debris, and people living in poverty, these trees were possibly the only life thriving.

At our destination, we knocked on the door. No answer. Did we have the correct address, we wondered. There were no signs in the windows that indicated where we were. After a few more knocks a young man opened the door. None of us spoke Spanish but we did our best to
communicate. Ruth suggested we take courses to learn Spanish. Eventually, we successfully explained that we were there to support the fish house workers and were let inside.

Again, we stood in silence trying to make sense of our surroundings. I scanned the room: Anne’s t-shirt read, “We Are All Dreamers.” The space was largely empty except for a desk in the corner and some large sheets of paper taped to the walls. All of the shades were drawn. At the end of this space was a smaller room. Although it was dark, we could see the familiar pink and orange Dunkin’ Donuts bags. We could see that people were there, sitting on the floor with their food. I hardly spoke. Anne and the four other educators that I was with made minimal small-talk as we waited for instruction.

What we came to learn was that the fish house workers and their families were also the victims of the fire. Two lives were lost that morning and dozens were displaced. During the next hour, we organized together to deliver the letter to management—some of us had homes to return to afterwards and some of us did not.

Observations of the coalition, particularly educators in the coalition, raised questions for me. In the roles of both teacher and doctoral student, both community organizer and unionist, I wanted to formalize what I had always done (i.e., organize) and let observations evolve into a research study. I hoped that whatever I could deduce from the data collected during this research would help educators strengthen their critical pedagogical approach and toolkit for educational organizing that would be useful to educational organizations and labor organizations.

All six participants were members of the coalition. Two of the members had been with the coalition since its transformation in 2018, Ruth and Vincent, while Anne, Natalie, Sasha, and Jean joined within the last two years (2019-2021). Ruth was a member of the coalition prior to 2018 when it was a regional organization. All participants had been part of the coalition for a
year or more. In this section, brief profiles of participants are included to situate the reader. The profiles are intentionally brief and superficial so as to protect their identities. The demographic survey that was administered to participants largely informed participant profiles. Many proper nouns have been omitted for this purpose. Personal experiences which influenced their sociopolitical perspectives are described in the Presentation of Themes.

Ruth

Ruth was a White woman, age 51-60 years old. She was a resident and elementary school teacher in the city. She attended public elementary schools outside of the city but moved in her youth and graduated from the local school district. She went on to attend college at a local state university earning a Bachelor’s degree. Ruth had always been politically active in the community, ever since a youth organizing alongside her father.

Vincent

Vincent was a White man, age 31-40 years old. He was a resident and an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher at a middle school in the city. Vincent moved to the city as an adult. He attended a combination of private and public elementary schools and a private boarding school for high school. He went on to study at a private university outside of Boston earning a Bachelor’s degree, a state school in Boston earning a Master’s degree, and then a state school in Western Massachusetts for an additional Master’s degree. Vincent became engaged in organizing around the same time that he joined the coalition in 2018.

Anne

Anne was a White woman, age 41-50 years old. She was a resident and secondary school teacher at a local vocational school in the city. She attended a combination of private and public elementary and secondary schools in the city, including Catholic schools. She went on to attend
colleges at local state universities earning a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree. Anne had been politically active in the community for many years, but increased her level of organizing and activism over the past two years.

Natalie

Natalie was a White woman, age 41-50 years old. She was a resident in the city and a secondary school STEM educator at a local vocational school outside of the city. She attended public elementary and secondary schools in the local school district. She went on to attend colleges at local state universities earning a Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, and an EdS (Education Specialist in Educational Leadership) advanced graduate degree. Natalie had recently become acquainted with organizing and activism through the coalition and affiliated organizations.

Sasha

Sasha was a White woman, age 31-40 years old. She was a resident in the area and a special education educator in the city. She attended public elementary and secondary schools in the area. She went on to attend colleges at local state universities earning a Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree. She then went on to a private institution out of state earning a Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership where her research focused on Black and Brown students in special education. Sasha had recently become acquainted with organizing through the coalition and affiliated organizations.

Jean

Jean was a Black woman, age 21-30 years old. She was a former resident and a former educator in the city. (Jean moved and changed jobs in the fall of 2021.) She attended public elementary and secondary schools outside of the city. She went on to attend college at the local
state university earning a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology and Anthropology with a Black Studies minor. Jean had been familiar with organizing and activism during college, as she was an organizer with the Black Student’s Union and a member of various groups on campus.

Participants spanned in age from mid-20s to late-50s. Most were White women, but one was a White male and one was a Black woman. They were primarily residents of the city and had experience as public-school educators. Half of them had experience teaching at the secondary level and half had experience teaching at the elementary level. Participants weren’t only members with the coalition. All participants were members of various community-based organizations. Some of the organizations included faith-based organizations, women’s organizations, labor organizations, the local branch of the NAACP, the local Democratic City Committee, etc. For many of them, their involvement and memberships with these organizations grew within the last few years and during their work with the coalition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during a period of significant racial unrest across the United States due to police brutality.

**Presentation of Data Collected**

Various forms of data were collected over six months, as described previously in Chapter Three. Data collection included a demographic survey, formal and informal interviews, field observations, and artifacts. In this section, the data collected for each Guiding Research Question is presented.

**Data Collected for GRQ 1**

Through formal and informal interviews, participants shared experiences as K-12 educators that they believed engender their critical consciousness. The researcher also observed growth in participant’s critical consciousness. The data is organized into three categories: (a)
personal experiences with oppression as youths and as educators, (b) naming forces and systems of oppression through education, and (c) experiences dismantling systems of oppression through activism and organizing. The data presented here is concise and further discussed in the Presentation of Themes.

**Personal Experiences with Oppression as Youths and as Educators**

Personal experiences of oppression contributed to an awareness of forces and systems of oppression. Participants described personal experiences as youth as well as adults. Experiences as youth included:

- poverty: living in public housing, experiencing food insecurity, being made fun of, feeling embarrassment
- racism: being feared, being treated with hostility, feeling anger
- immigrant: being born and living outside of the United States, feeling like an outsider
- ableism: being made fun of, struggling, feeling inadequate
- sexism: being objectified, being underestimated, feeling anger

Experiences as K-12 urban educators included:

- gendered profession and oppression of women: being monitored, being managed, being exploited, being undervalued, being disrespected
- White supremacist school culture and observing the oppression of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) youth in schools: being silenced, being monitored, being controlled, being treated with hostility

These personal experiences as youth and as adults contributed to an awareness of inequality, inequity, and privilege and that the world is not as it should be. These personal
experiences raised a degree of awareness of forces and systems of oppression, but participants were limited in their ability to understand what they were experiencing, particularly as youth.

**Naming Forces and Systems of Oppression Through Education**

Participants stated that they first learned to identify and analyze forces and systems of oppression in college and their understanding increased as adults through other educational opportunities. Explicit educational opportunities to learn about systemic racism, for example, were described by participants as college courses, workshops, book clubs, and Action Dialogues. Action Dialogues were forums hosted by the coalition to engage in critical dialogue about issues to move participants to a place of action. They were also forums to engage in critical dialogue about issues and reflect on actions. Action Dialogues provided an iterative process of dialogue, action, dialogue inspired by Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970).

**Academic Educational Experiences as Adults:**

- college courses
- workshops/presentations

**Formal Action Dialogues with the coalition:**

- Reimagining School Safety: A Conversation on Police in Schools, 2020
- What does it mean to safely return to schools? Part I, 2020
What does it mean to safely return to schools? Special education and vulnerable populations, Part II, 2020

Radical Love in the Time of Pandemics, 2021

Black Lives Matter Movement:

- Justice for George Floyd national protests
- Local protests for Black youth murdered by police

Participants stated that they first learned to identify and analyze forces and systems of oppression in college but had other opportunities to learn as adults through workshops, conferences, book clubs, and Action Dialogues, many of which were through the coalition or with coalition members. Participants also learned to identify and analyze systems of oppression through political education around the murders of George Floyd and a local youth of color by police. A series of educational experiences including walking tours and presentations, organized by a racial justice group affiliated with the coalition, on the murder of a local youth of color in the city was incredibly transformative for participants. None of the educational opportunities that raised participant critical consciousness were through their workplaces.

*Experience Dismantling Systems of Oppression Through Activism and Organizing*

Although personal experiences raised awareness of forces and systems of oppression and political education helped participants identify and analyze forces/systems of oppression, actively participating in challenging these forces and systems further developed their critical consciousness. Participants were engaged in numerous social justice campaigns with the coalition and beyond and described the ways that campaign work engendered their critical consciousness. Because of the Police Free Schools campaign, Anne changed her position on School Resource Officers and because of the MCAS Resistance campaign, Natalie’s view on
standardized testing began to shift. (Both of these campaigns are described in the following section.) Engaging in collective action with the coalition might have been the most transformative experiences for participants, because it was not only educational but built commitment to challenging forces of oppression and dismantling systems of oppression or, in other words, political agency.

In conclusion, data presented on the development of critical consciousness consisted of three components: an outline of personal experiences with oppression, an outline of educational experiences on systems of oppression, and an observation of the transformative experience of organizing to challenge systems of oppression. The ways participants organized for anti-oppression and liberation are described and outlined in the next Guiding Research Question (GRQ 2).

Data Collected for GRQ 2

Through formal and informal interviews, K-12 educators reported how they organized and through field work and artifacts, the researcher observed how K-12 educators organized for equitable systemic change.

There are many ways to articulate how participants organized for equitable systemic change. In this section, some of the social justice organizations that participants were affiliated with are listed, the organizational structure and organizing culture of the coalition are described, specific organizing actions/tactics utilized are identified, and campaigns that were meaningful to participants are outlined.

**Participant Affiliations**

Participants organized with the coalition but they also organized for equitable systemic change with other organizations. Some other organizations included the Massachusetts Teachers
Association and local affiliates, the Center for Juvenile Justice, a local faith group, Citizens for Public Schools, the local Democratic City Committee, and local racial justice groups including the local branch of the NAACP, to name some. Aside from educational and racial justice groups, participants belonged to organizations that address women and immigrant rights issues. The majority of participants became active in these groups within the past few years and around the time that they joined the coalition. The coalition had collaborated with these organizations on various efforts and actions.

**Structure of the Coalition and Organizing Culture**

The structure and culture of the coalition has slowly evolved since 2018 and continues to evolve as members move in and out of the organization and experience organizing for equitable systemic change. At the time of the study, families were recruited into the organization through personal relationships or by coalition members going out into the community (e.g., canvassing, house parties, leafleting) to connect with ordinary people and ask them what their concerns were regarding public education, which worked to draw people in, initially, through self-interest.

Coalition members met both as a general membership and as a steering committee. The general membership was around 150 members and the steering committee was around 15 members. The steering committee met biweekly. The general membership met monthly and meetings were open to the public. Youth members met biweekly in the youth academy/student union. Really, anyone could be on the steering committee or join a subcommittee which primarily required a serious time commitment. The coalition was multigenerational, multilingual, and multiethnic.

The coalition aimed for a leader-full (Ransby, 2015) organization. Meaning, there were no management levels and there certainly weren’t any bosses. Leadership was not leadership in
the traditional sense, it was not in a name or title. Members took the lead and organized actions. Members often set the agenda and identified priorities. For example, Ruth led the way on identifying political candidates and endorsements as well as created marketing materials, while Vincent conceptualized and led multiple caravan protests and other creative actions. Jean led the coalition’s youth organization and Natalie took the initiative to conduct research on and write about various topics for the group. Natalie also managed the coalition’s finances. Anne organized canvassing among other actions and Sasha led book clubs. All participants led efforts beyond this list, but these examples provide a snapshot of a leader-full organization.

Some form of hierarchy did exist in the coalition, as described in the structure of co-chairs and a steering committee, although it was a relatively flat hierarchy. Co-chairs sometimes made quick decisions for efficiency’s sake or if an external communication was time sensitive. Having co-chairs was largely for practicality. When co-chairs made quick decisions on behalf of the membership to get things done, the decisions were always grounded in the organization’s values and mission. The other function of co-chairs in the coalition was to be spokespeople for the organization, especially on controversial topics that were risky for anyone to challenge, let alone teachers to challenge. Anything involving police was one topic that felt threatening to members and the community at-large. The co-chair that was most often the spokesperson was a man, a person of color, a professor who holds an honorific of “Dr.” Consequently, he did get viewed by the public as the leader of the educational organizing group. This is consistent with the age-old dilemma of public perception and the Charismatic, Great Man (Huggins, 1984; Mouton, 2019) brand of leadership.

The flattened hierarchy and leader-full movement/organization of the coalition was inspired by the Black liberation movement of the past and present and the co-founders of the
BLMM in particular. The progress of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a result of grassroots organizing and building confidence in people about their collective ability to make change (Ransby, 2015). Civil rights organizer and activist Ella Baker promoted leader-full movements, involving the integration of all into the leadership process or the activation of all to be participatory in the leadership process. Our modern civil rights or Black liberation movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement, is also a leader-full movement with a flattened hierarchy (Garza, 2020; Ransby, 2015). Leader-full movements allow “ordinary people [to] define their problems and imagine solutions” (Ransby, 2015). BLM co-founder Alicia Garza often says that the mission and purpose of organizing is to build power (Garza, 2020).

The concepts of leader-full movements/organizations and flattened hierarchies were challenging for educators in the coalition to grasp due to the ways in which they had been socialized in schools. Some members did not acknowledge their activism as leadership. Natalie noted, “I still feel like it’s a learning process, I feel like it’s been, what, a year, so I’m still pretty new … trying to understand structures or, or lack of hierarchy and how that works.” Participants appreciate the leadership structure for more than one reason: They don’t want to be “figureheads” and they feel as though everyone in the organization is genuinely collaborating. Anne said, “I’m quite comfortable not having a “leadership” role so … I’m happy to start this stuff and just walk away and let somebody else run with it … being some kind of figurehead, or whatever, like that’s not, I don’t care about that,” while Vincent observed, “Flat hierarchy … You know people like people are working together.”

Embedded in workshop materials produced by the coalition, its philosophy reads (2021):

We believe that institutions are changed as a result of social movements and that those changes can only be sustained through continuous grassroots pressure. We believe in
involving those most affected by regressive and unjust policies. We believe in consistently challenging structural racism, gender injustice, heteronormativity, class oppression, disability oppression, the exclusion of youth and elders, xenophobia (to name a few social evils). We believe that there is no defeat, only new pathways of possibility, so long as we are consistently struggling for a better future (A Community Approach to Building Antiracist Schools).

Observations of participants and the statement of philosophy revealed the coalition’s commitment to equity, inclusion, and disrupting various forms of oppression as well as optimism or belief in people-power and change.

Because of the commitment to equity and inclusion, coalition meetings were held in public spaces, such as public housing and public libraries, with food, translation, and childcare (albeit informal) so that meetings were accessible to the community. As a community-based, grassroots coalition, the structure and organizing was neither formal nor rigid. Coalition members agreed upon norms rather than enforced procedural rules. If this structure felt informal, it was because it reflected a commitment to maintaining an organic sensibility toward greater participation. Members were mindful of avoiding educational jargon and academic language that was not accessible to the general public.

Because of the commitment to personal and relational transformation, coalition members weren’t laser focused on or preoccupied with the development of the organization; rather, emphasis was placed on the development of relationships and people/members/individuals in the organization to self-reflect, understand oppression, and cultivate compassion. As a result, relationships in the coalition resembled friendships and members operated with a strong ethic of care for all members and their families. The commitment to personal and interpersonal
transformation was also observed in coalition campaigns, as well: Other than the Charter Resistance campaigns, coalition members were much more focused on the experience and process of organizing than the end result, such as a campaign win.

Because of the belief that ordinary people can make change, there were no experts in the coalition. Members of the coalition by and large were not professional organizers and did not view themselves as experts on organizing. They were workers, parents, guardians, grandparents, educators, students, elected officials, and community leaders who organize. Coalition members were unpaid volunteers motivated by the need to transform schools so that they are more responsive to those who bear the most social cost. Members developed organizing skills with more experienced organizers as partners.

Much of this is similar to the Freirean toolkit (Su, 2009) described in Chapter Two. In short, the coalition and study participants envisioned a radically different society and demanded new educational policies and dynamics in relationships. They wished not to perpetuate structures of inequity and oppression which was reflected in their organizational structure, philosophy, and ultimately their culture.

**Organizing Roles of Coalition Members**

Examples of participant leadership in the organization was briefly described earlier. The ways in which members of a grassroots-organization function differs from other organizations. As stated, there was a flattened hierarchy without rigidly defined roles for members. Members pitched in wherever needed but leaned towards taking on responsibilities that spoke to their talents and interests. Organizing roles that participants took on included research, writing, emotional support, running errands, showing up as a body for actions, giving speeches, leading
workshops and presentations, etc. All participants contributed to the sensemaking of the organization.

Natalie was inclined to do research and writing, noting “Anytime we have to write something, I’m like okay.” She was great at executing ideas by getting things done:

I can listen to people’s ideas and I can generate something. Um, the, the planning who to contact, knowing that we need legal observers, like this is all stuff that I’ve learned. I would not know where to begin whatsoever so it’s like all right, give me a task, and I can do it.

Vincent often provided emotional support to individuals or the group:

I’m good at doing, it’s kind of like, hanging back and, like, reading situations; Or, like, I’m just, you know, I’m kind of, like, making jokes the whole time. That’s sometimes like, you know, (I) perform a, like, pathak function and, like, help, like, be the glue.

Vincent was also someone who dreamt up ideas and possibilities that inspired others. Many of the creative actions were conceived by Vincent As a White man, Vincent asserted that he had also taken on roles that other participants felt less comfortable with. To this, he stated:

I don’t mind, like, putting, putting myself in this, like, I think there’s, like, a privilege thing, like, I don’t mind, like, putting my physical safety… I’m a big guy, so, like, I don’t, I don’t fear for my physical safety that much.

In short, organizing roles that participants took on reflected their interests, talents, skills, privilege, and generosity. The contributions of members influenced the actions taken by the Coalition for equitable systemic change.

A Snapshot of Actions Taken by the Coalition
Participants in the coalition were actively organizing in both traditional and nontraditional ways. Not all of the actions of the Coalition were visible to the public or conformed to norms around what direct action is or looks like. For instance, much of the coalition’s work was about personal transformation of individual members, an active process that happened through the Action Dialogues described previously, book clubs, etc. Traditional actions included

- holding campaign signs for local elections,
- writing and publishing op eds for the paper,
- participating in media interviews,
- creating and publishing podcasts,
- organizing and participating in rallies and marches,
- writing and distributing petitions,
- writing persuasive letters to stakeholders,
- creating political arts-based installations,
- participating in and/or leading workshops/presentations,
- writing and delivering public speeches,
  
  organizing and hosting community forums, phone banking, and
- canvassing door to door.

Campaigns/Initiatives

As discussed in Chapter Two, neoliberal education reform is responsible for standardized curriculums, scripted lessons, high-stakes state testing, corporate educational leadership models, charter schools, and the attack on teachers’ unions (Watkins, 2012). Many critics commonly argue that neoliberal education reform is an assault on Black and Brown students, and it
absolutely is; however, the coalition also believes that education reform is an assault on women (i.e., our teachers, especially our elementary school educators). The liberation of K-12 educators and students of color are bound up together.

Coalition campaigns were built by listening to educators, students, and families – specifically those who are most impacted by schools and corporate education reform. Participants in the study did not ask families to care about the issues they face in schools. Instead, participants cared about the issues that students and families were experiencing in schools and even in the broader community.

The Coalition’s work was grounded in a myriad of active campaigns to protect public education as a public good and campaigns for racial and economic justice. Coalition campaigns from 2018-2021 that were meaningful to study participants are included in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

*Meaningful Campaigns to Participants*
Charter School Resistance. In 2018, the coalition resisted a backdoor deal that was rushed to avoid public scrutiny between the Mayor, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Executive Director of a local charter school. The deal involved allowing for 450 charter seats, the gifting of public property to the charter school at no cost, and the automatic enrollment of students in the neighborhood into the privately-run charter school. This “neighborhood charter school” model would have been the first of its kind in the state, set a legislative precedent, and been implemented statewide. The coalition defeated the deal through extensive grassroots organizing and a class action lawsuit by 10 families.

The charter resistance was particularly meaningful to Ruth, who stated “that was probably the biggest thing that I’ve seen people come out for, you know, in a long time or ever.” The charter school fight, she said, “made me feel empowered and it made me feel like wow we’re finally getting other people to understand.”

Fund Our Future. In 2018-2019, the coalition joined the Massachusetts Teachers Association, American Federation of Teachers – Massachusetts, Boston Teachers Union, Citizens for Public Schools, Massachusetts Education Justice Alliance, Massachusetts Jobs with Justice, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, locals across the region and more in the fight to win the Student Opportunity Act. The coalition actively mobilized for community forums on increasing Chapter 70 funding and led a delegation to join thousands of MTA members at the May 16, 2019 statewide Fund Our Future rally on the Boston Common. The coalition continued to address issues on funding beyond the Fund Our Future campaign, pushing the school district towards participatory budgeting so as to increase transparency with the budget and give the community a seat at the table involving how school funds are allocated. Transparency, funding, and the school budget was a priority for Anne. For her, it was “about
getting the kids what they need” as opposed to schools “creating, you know, more administrative positions for people’s friends.”

**Food Justice.** In 2019, the coalition launched its food justice campaign which advocated that the school district offer culturally responsive meals, scratch cooking, and locally sourced food after hearing from students and families about the poor quality of school food and concerns regarding the portion sizes. The coalition is working with the local school department to make this a reality. In addition to advocating for better experiences for students, the coalition also advocated for a living wage and better working conditions for food service workers. The coalition has been involved with the paraprofessional’s union in the district who is in an active contract fight to win increased benefits and pay and has articulated that food justice cannot exist when justice for those who work so hard to feed our students can’t feed their own children at home due to poverty wages.

**Only When It’s Safe Campaign.** In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the state teacher’s union, coalition, and community youth not affiliated with the coalition but in solidarity with the coalition, engaged in a campaign to demand that students and educators would return to school buildings only when it was safe. The coalition chalked up the sidewalk around the central administration building with demands for a safe return and organized caravans and other demonstrations (Figure 4) and a high school student led a powerful arts-based installation at the high school and in front of the school committee calling attention to the dangers of a return to in-person schooling particularly in a city with outdated ventilation systems and all-around inadequate infrastructure.
Police Free Schools. In 2020, the Alumni for Black Lives, local branch of the NAACP, and coalition petitioned for the removal of School Resource Officers (police officers) from schools in the district. Together, they issued a call to action to city officials and released a series of public statements regarding police presence in schools, the criminalization of youth, social control, youth surveillance, and the damage of punitive and zero tolerance policies. The coalition also invited leading scholar-activists in the country on police in schools to a virtual community forum to help educate the public on the issue.

MCAS Opt-Out. Most recently, in 2021, the coalition organized statewide, virtual community forums for families to learn how to opt their students out of MCAS. Students from the city and beyond participated to share their stories about high-stakes standardized testing with hundreds of families in Massachusetts. Coalition members also participated in a number of
actions to raise visibility around the opt-out movement and canvassed school neighborhoods across the city, putting up 150 opt out of MCAS lawn signs around schools. Youth in the coalition also created opt out t-shirts to wear to school. Ruth, the most veteran educator in the coalition, had long been against standardized testing, stating “The standardized testing, like, that’s the one that probably is the most upsetting to me because I realized how much it changed and destroyed what my job is.”

Youth Academy. The youth of the coalition organized primarily through the coalition’s youth organization which emerged during a world historic moment: The COVID-19 pandemic, climate catastrophe, and the long-standing state sanctioned violence brutally reincarnated in the murder of George Floyd.

The coalition’s youth organization was built out of a powerful realization that we live in a society unprepared to protect its citizens (and non-citizens) from a public health pandemic yet fully prepared to unleash its authoritative arm in the form of state sanctioned violence at the hands of police, militarized terror against those who protest that violence, and in the form of social control through high stakes schooling and standardized testing.

Circle Leaders of the youth organization were higher-education students and youth participants were in middle school and high school. The youth organization met every other Friday online, functioned through Action Dialogues, and was a youth-led safe space which allowed the participants to imagine and reshape the environments they live in. The space served as a site where youth were able to develop and deepen their language and capacity to effectively identify and name forms of oppression and cultivate a sense of resistance to rewrite the false narrative that they have been taught through formal education and re-imagine the world they want to create. Jean played a primary role in the facilitation of the youth organization, although
Natalie was involved in assisting the youth with their first conference presentation at the New England Conference of Multicultural Education.

**Political Candidate Support.** The coalition also offered support to political candidates by canvassing for them, helping to develop their platforms, and strategizing on their campaign teams. Ruth observed:

I started to see a lot of connections between who we elect and the things that are happening. And, what if we don’t get that person elected, what’s going to happen? That’s when I really started to pay attention to who’s out there, helping the people that need help.

Listed above are the educational justice campaigns of the coalition; however, coalition members supported other campaigns not directly related to educational justice. Solidarity efforts included the local Black Lives Matter movement, a steelworker strike, and immigrants’ rights. A local campaign to hold police officers accountable for the death of a Black youth in the city was incredibly significant and meaningful to participants. To restate, members of the coalition, including the participants in this study, engaged in a campaign to demand justice for a Black youth in the city who they believed had been murdered by police. While engaged in the campaign, participants were able to view evidence of the case presented by an attorney who represented the youth’s family, including surveillance tapes of the youth hanging out at a basketball court with his friends. Participants were disconcerted and disgusted by the level of surveillance that this youth endured and how it played a role in his murder. Participants played active roles in organizing a caravan across the city to deliver letters to elected officials demanding justice for this youth (see Figure 5), specifically demanding that the police officers be charged with murder and active roles in organizing a rally and march across the west end of the
city where the youth lived. The march included stops at city hall, the school department, courthouse, the police department, and state Senator’s office where people delivered speeches. Natalie spoke at one stop, delivering a powerful speech. Part of her speech read: “Racism has been artfully woven into the fabric of America. It appears in the over-policing and criminalization of BIPOC, undocumented, and poor communities everywhere … We need to act locally.”

**Figure 5**

*Justice for Local Black Youth Caravan*

In conclusion, data presented on how participants organized to disrupt negative power relations and transform schools and society consisted of five components: a list of social justice organizations that participants are affiliated with, a description of the organizational structure and organizing culture, a snapshot of the leadership and organizing roles that participants took on, a snapshot of actions taken by participants, and a list of campaigns that were meaningful to participants.
Data Collected for GRQ 3

Through formal and informal interviews, K-12 educators shared the factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted the intentional dismantling of negative power relations through activism and organizing. The following section is organized by inhibiting and promoting factors and conditions. The data presented here is concise and personal experiences of participants are further described and discussed in the Presentation of Themes.

Inhibiting Factors and Conditions

Participants reported a number of inhibiting factors/conditions to engaging in educator-activism. Inhibiting factors included: local educator unions; being school employees; sexism; not being from the community you teach in; and individualism.

Local Educators Unions. Despite labor’s history with the civil rights movement and the intersectionality between race and class struggles, the majority of participants cited their local unions as barriers to their educator-activism and organizing for equitable systemic change. (Only one participant did not identify her local as a barrier; and, it is worth noting that this outlier could be due to the fact that her local was newly established within the last couple of years.) Of the 6 participants in the study, 3 different locals are represented and 2 different state educator unions. Therefore, the criticisms described and barriers identified by participants in this section are about two locals; however, because the researcher interacts with educators across the state she asserts that these are not uncommon criticisms to hear from educators in locals across the state.

The first barrier reported by participants was an acceptance by the local of the exploitation and the unfair treatment of workers and unjust experiences of youth in schools—acceptance meaning an attitude of “there is nothing that we can do,” “it is what it is,” or “things could be worse.” Participants asserted that local union officers framed the labor struggle as
“picking its battles” and picking “bread and butter” issues that can be won, obtained, or persuaded through boardroom or backroom agreements between union officers and administrators only as opposed to organizing efforts of the membership. According to participants, local union officers rarely or never utilized rank and file organizing to fight for better working and learning conditions and a fair contract. Ruth described her frustration:

I wasn't aware of how screwed up my local was and how they actually prevented the things that I knew we should be doing. I wasn't aware of it until the second half of my, you know, my career. I'll say it took me a long time to realize that I was, we weren't, getting what we should be getting from our local; Once you become aware of it, then the frustration really, that's when it really builds. I was already upset that we were being treated a certain way, but then I realized, why are we just accepting this when we can do something about it.

This leads to the second barrier identified by participants: the lack of organizing and power building among members of the local. Because of the patriarchal structures of locals where officers work for as opposed to with members, members do not get to build and experience their political agency. About her union, Sasha noted, “You [local officers] don't want anybody to organize you don't want anybody to be loud about the issues.”

This leads to the third barrier: the reproduction of patriarchal leadership and organizational structures of educational institutions. Participants reported that they do not play meaningful roles in their locals even when elected or appointed to formal leadership roles outside of the position of President. According to participants, building representatives and board positions were symbolic and held little to no power. Similar to committees in schools, the function was performative and did not actually allow those who were most impacted by
decisions to make decisions. Local union presidents resembled school administrators much more so than labor leaders and grassroots organizers. Power was also discussed by participants. To them, local union officers appeared to be more concerned with protecting and expanding their own power than building the power of members and youth. Sasha stated, “How is us having, you know, the boys club, how is that supporting the kids?”

The fourth barrier was the lack of work done to expand the critical consciousness of educators. Participants reported that their locals do not create educational opportunities for members to learn about class oppression, never mind systemic racism. Natalie noted, “I told you that we have never once, in eight years of being at that school, at a union meeting, discussed anything racial justice related.” Current educational issues were not discussed between members, either. For example, participants longed to engage with their colleagues on discussions such as the privatization of schools and the deprofessionalization of teachers.

The fifth barrier was perhaps the most concerning. Participants reported that locals avoided engaging with topics of racism and even tolerated racism and functioned to uphold White supremacy. Participants shared numerous stories about union leaders and officers failing to adequately address issues of racism that they reported never mind practicing anti-racism. Speaking of racism and her colleagues, Natalie stated, “[The] union should not protect shitty [racist] teachers.” Participants wished for their locals to organize against a number of racist policies, including the School Resource Officer program.

Despite the criticism of their locals, participants were pro-union and half of them were engaged with their state union. Sasha was really disappointed and even disgusted by her local during the 2020-2021 school year— a period of racial unrest and stated, “Honestly, if the union didn’t provide dental, I think, this year, I would have not been in the union.” She went on to
reiterate her support of unions, “That goes so against, like, well, I'm so pro union, like my dad was in a union. I believe in unions, but this union, this local has a problem.”

**Profession as an Educator and Schools as an Institution.** Despite participants' beliefs that educators should teach students about different forms of racism and systems of oppression and that schools should function to move society in the direction of equity, participants identified their jobs and schools as barriers to equitable systemic change.

Maintaining job security was a concern for most participants, although two said that job security was no longer a barrier for them. Vincent said that job security “doesn't really feel like a barrier … anymore.” Anne emphatically stated that her school could “go ahead” and try to fire her. “I just didn't care anymore, and I figured, go ahead and do something – fire me.” Job security was especially conflicting for Natalie and Sasha. They both discussed their activism being incompatible with teaching as a profession and a threat to their jobs. They were dedicated activists but worried about “straddling the line” to maintain job security and keep professional opportunities open for them within the schools. Sasha said:

> We are expected to be quiet, like complicit, people, but we're not, we're actually not. We, I mean, I wouldn't want, I wouldn't want my child's teacher to be a complicit person. I would want them to be fighting for my kid’s rights, you know what I mean?

Natalie often reflected on ways to secretly make change from the outside as well as from the inside, asking “How, how can I infuse within the system? How can I infuse the things that I know are right to slowly pick away at the system from the inside and continue my work on the outside secretly?” She described operating as an educator-activist under “a cloak of secrecy.” Sasha shared many personal stories that illustrated the fear K-12 educators have in speaking up and engaging in activism and organizing that challenges forces and systems of oppression. She
said that her colleagues have commented on her podcast episodes in which she discusses educational issues, asking “Aren't you, like, nervous, like everybody's talking about, like, why are you involved in this thing?” In regards to the podcast she produced with another educator, Sasha admitted:

There's been times where I've been, we've both been, nervous to say some things that we've said. We ended up scrapping, because we were both scared, because we were talking about how unfairly teachers are treated during this pandemic. She said that it occurred to her that “they're [other educators] gonna, you know, send it [podcast episode] to the HR and then, there, you know, I mean, like, I just don't, I just didn't want to have to deal.” Sasha also said that educators are so scared that a few stopped talking to her. “There are people in [school] who I do think, have the same mindset as me, but are so scared.”

Ultimately, participants understood that their schools function to maintain the power and privilege status quo. Patriarchal structures and curriculum make it incredibly difficult for K-12 educators to fight for equitable systemic change.

**Gender and Sexism.** When discussing factors and conditions that inhibited their intentional dismantling of negative power relations, the women all mentioned their gender. Natalie noted, “It wouldn’t be this way if this wasn't a women's profession. It's an oppressive system because it's a female dominated profession.” Others also spoke of the limitations of a gendered, feminized profession and how this impacts all educators, despite their sex and gender, but they also felt that male educators have it better in schools. Sasha observed,

“They're so outspoken, but unapologetically outspoken. If we were men, and, I know for a fact that the men who are in education are not treated this way, um, you know, we,
that’s something that has especially, this year, has really, really, really, like, bothered me.”

Anne felt as though they weren’t “taken seriously” as women and she asserted that “females tend to be more vulnerable and targeted” in society but also in schools and in the teaching profession. In fact, Anne shared that she had experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.

**Exhaustion.** Another limiting factor/condition identified by participants was mental and physical exhaustion. Five participants discussed the exhaustion they experience as K-12 educators and the energy that it took to engage in activism and organizing beyond their workday. They also discussed the physical and emotional toll of engaging in struggles to challenge forces and systems of oppression. Exhaustion can also be explained by the violent existence they experience, as well (see Violence theme). Vincent shared that he often has difficulty sleeping. Sasha admitted that sometimes she needs to step away to care for herself. Particularly as a Black woman, Jean explained how psychologically and emotionally challenging the work can be:

I don't process it in the way that I need to so that I can, you know, effectively, like, serve in the work and fight in the way that I, that I would need to. Um, I think it's sometimes hard finding, like, that balance between, like, you know, dealing with those emotions, confronting them, and, like, you know, actually, like, allowing yourself to feel and not allowing it to consume you as well.

For Jean, the emotional piece was her biggest barrier.

**Not Being From and/or Living in the Community.** Not all of the participants grew up in the community. Two of the participants moved to the area in adulthood; however, all of the participants immersed themselves in the community and the majority lived and taught in the community. Members of the coalition often commented on the significance of having deep roots
in the community where they live and work and how this impacted them as educators as well as how it impacted their understanding of oppression and their commitment to challenge forces and systems of oppression. In the Empathy theme, participants described their struggles as women and immigrants, their experiences with housing and food insecurity, and their experiences with racism. These experiences were things they held in common with their students. When educators live outside of the urban communities that they serve and have made little effort to understand the struggles of their students and the community, the lack of consciousness impacts their commitment to activism and organizing for equitable system change, according to participants in the study. Participants attributed not being from and/or living in the community that they teach in as a barrier to engaging in educator-activism for equitable systemic school change.

**Individualism.** Lastly, participants in the study discussed a philosophy of individualism that they felt was a limiting factor to challenging forces and systems of oppression. They explained that we, as a society, seem to be selfish, prioritizing our own personal freedoms and dedicated only to fighting battles that directly and immediately affect us. Participants asserted that their locals were only focused on “bread and butter” issues, such as pay and working conditions, and discussed their colleagues' disinterest in engaging with issues that affect the BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) community, for example. Two participants stated that their colleagues refused to acknowledge the ways in which White people benefit from the oppression and exploitation of people of color. Moreover, participants expressed that schools and society tend to value individual action over collective action, which they feel is a significant barrier to making equitable systemic change.

In conclusion, participants reported that barriers to educator-activism include: the structure and organizing philosophy of their local unions; their profession as educators in
Educational institutions that uphold patriarchy and White supremacy; gender and sexism in general and across systems; exhaustion due to a violent existence; educators not being from the community and experiencing, witnessing, or understanding race and class struggles and oppression themselves; and individualism among Americans, including among educators in schools.

**Promoting Factors and Conditions**

Participants reported a number of promoting factors/conditions to engaging in educator-activism. Promoting factors included: being an educator (which was also an inhibiting factor); having roots in the community that they teach in; their education on systemic racism and other systems of power and forms of oppression; being part of a world historic moment (police killings of people of color and COVID-19 pandemic) and the Black Lives Matter Movement and the labor movement’s responses; a particular state teachers union (the Massachusetts Teachers Association); and, most significantly, the capacity built through feelings of community in the coalition and collective action of the coalition and affiliated groups.

**Being an Educator.** Participants identified their jobs and schools as barriers to their activism and organizing for equitable systemic change. Participants, however, believed that educators should teach students about different forms of racism and systems of oppression and that schools should function to move society in the direction of equity. All participants felt that they had an ethical duty as humans and, specifically, as educators to address inequity and injustice. Jean stated:

[I] like, really see and feel and understand the environment of, of, of, like, inequity and exploitation and, and, like, injustice that there are like, like … actually, um, I think that, for me, it is kind of like the driving force that makes me want to continue to do this work.
Every participant shared this sentiment and was motivated by the desire to help improve conditions for others, for their most vulnerable and marginalized students and their families. Even when discussing their activism in terms of labor and their own work conditions, they connected it back to their students. “A teacher's working conditions are a student’s learning conditions” was a common sentiment.

**Having Roots in the Community You Teach In.** Members of the coalition often commented on the significance of having deep roots in the community where they lived and worked and how this impacted their understanding of oppression and their commitment to challenge forces and systems of oppression. In the Empathy theme, participants described their struggles as women and immigrants. They described their experiences with housing and food insecurity and their experiences with racism. These experiences were things they held in common with their students. They also saw their students outside of school, in the neighborhood, at the park, at the grocery store, and at coalition meetings and actions. They had relationships with students and families beyond school walls. They understood the political, social, and economic aspects of the community and how it impacted them as well as the families they served. These shared experiences and contextual understanding of the community is what promoted their commitment to organizing and activism for equitable systemic change.

**Education on Systemic Racism.** Another promoting factor to educator-activism for equitable systemic change is educational opportunities to learn about power and privilege and forces/systems of oppression, such as systemic racism. As stated in the Education theme, the researcher observed that participants engaged in a variety of educational experiences to better understand interpersonal and systemic (institutional and structural) racism, as well as to educate the community about it. Participants talked about college courses that they took and how it was
the first time that they engaged with topics of power, privilege, and racism. Before taking these courses, they could not put a name to what they were observing and experiencing. As adults, participants immersed themselves in targeted/vulnerable communities as allies and accomplices, participated in book clubs, attended and led virtual workshops/conferences/dialogues, gave speeches at marches/rallies, and published articles and podcast episodes. Participants took on the role of both learner and educator. They placed significant value on education, especially regarding understanding institutional and structural racism.

**Living in a World Historic Moment.** The murder of George Floyd and other Black people by police and the COVID-19 pandemic also had an impact on participants’ commitment to education-activism. Race and class struggles were moved to the forefront of their minds as the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum and labor unions demanded safe working conditions. While police reform and education reform were important to some participants prior to 2020, a stronger commitment to making change emerged. Vincent noted, “[We are] in, like, a world historic moment. A sense of stakes emerged. Like being, being kind of forced to confront, like, what's going on.” The ways in which people worked to make change was also impacted by the Black Lives Matter Movement and Red for Ed Movement. These movements reminded people of the power of grassroots organizing to create systemic change and forced people to reflect on militancy and its place in organizing. Participants grappled with looting and the destruction of property as well as teacher strikes and moved beyond organizing through petitions and the like, in part, because of the larger movement of the time.

**State Teachers Union.** While local unions were barriers to participants’ ability to engage in activism and organizing for equitable systemic change, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) was a promoting factor for participants. Half of the participants were
engaged in education justice work and/or labor organizing with the MTA beyond/outside of the coalition. All participants were engaged with the MTA through the coalition.

The MTA provided support to the coalition in various ways: staff support for canvassing efforts and other organizing initiatives, graphic design, printing, research, food for community meetings, a platform for coalition educator-activists to offer professional development to other educators in the state, and grant funds to pay stipends to youth leaders in the youth academy.

The state union found value in the work of the coalition and did not function to monitor or control the work; rather, it aimed to lift barriers for educators who were engaged in campaigns for educational equity and justice.

**Capacity Built Through Community.** Community was a word frequently used by participants and captures the essence of the coalition structure and process and was the most significant promoting factor for educator-activism and the antidote to a violent existence.

Participants expressed that the community experienced through the coalition was liberating, increased feelings of belonging, built their capacity to make sense of the world, expanded their understanding of anti-patriarchal leadership, organizational structure, and grassroots organizing, motivated and energized them, and increased a sense of safety/security.

In a world and profession where people are so disconnected from one another and feel unseen, isolated, or alone, participants longed to be part of a community, as described in the Community theme, Vincent noted, “It feels nice to be part of something.” All participants expressed how good it felt to be seen and to be heard, accepted, around people with shared values, and engaged in collective action. What they desired was belongingness and this is what they found (or created) in the coalition.
In addition to belongingness, the sense-making capacity of participants expanded through the community of the coalition. Participants engaged in an iterative process of dialogue, action, dialogue described earlier in the Education theme. The dialogue happened between educators, students, families, and community leaders and in spaces that were multigenerational, multiethnic, and multilingual. The diverse sociopolitical perspectives expanded participants’ abilities to make sense of the world and dream up solutions to problems. Belongingness and sensemaking capacity work hand in hand. Coalition members were able to bring their authentic selves to spaces and speak openly and honestly because of a strong feeling of belonging. Participants were able to expand their sensemaking capacity because they were challenged by different perspectives while also feeling secure in their belongingness. There was something about the security of belongingness that enabled participants to be open to discomfiting ideas instead of rejecting them.

The community of the coalition also expanded their concept of and understanding of anti-patriarchal (i.e., critical feminist) leadership, organizational structure, and grassroots organizing. Participants believed that they had a voice, that they had power in and through the coalition. Their concept of leadership expanded from a narrow view of the leader as a manager that they experienced in schools. Their concept of organizing expanded from a narrow view of what they experienced in their locals (local unions/associations). What participants were experiencing was a critical feminist approach to leadership that the co-chairs were conscious of and intentional about. For instance, they learned about leader-full movements and flattened hierarchies (Garza, 2020; Ransby, 2015).

Two participants led a workshop on A Community Approach to Building Antiracist Schools where they discussed leader-full movements and flattened hierarchies. The benefits of
an anti-patriarchal approach to leadership, organizational structure, and organizing was refreshing and liberating to members, as well. It was obvious in the ways that participants expressed themselves. Participants could think creatively and pitch ideas, they could assert themselves, they could joke freely and laugh loudly, and they could even use profanity. The use of profanity was particularly interesting. Over time, as the researcher observed participants, she observed that they grew more comfortable with expressing a range of emotions. If they needed to scream and swear, they did. They stopped apologizing for being furious and showing their anger. Over time, members were raw, real, and honest. The anti-patriarchal leadership, structure, and organizing of the coalition enabled participants to imagine new ways of existing and interacting with people and in organizations.

The energetic capacity of participants grew as a result of being in community together through the coalition. Many participants spoke of exhaustion as described in the Violence theme. Participants expressed that they felt energized after coalition meetings and actions. Instead of anger simmering down into depression or hopelessness or boiling up as anxiety, collective anger became a source of motivation. Participants expressed that they had renewed hope and motivation from working together to challenge forces and systems of oppression. The inspiration they drew from one another fueled them to continue fighting for change despite how exhausting they viewed their professions and other aspects of their lives.

Lastly, their feelings of safety and security grew by being in community with one another. Being together as a community, Anne said, “helps other people that are afraid and uncomfortable, it helps them feel comfortable.” In many ways, “strength in numbers” has lost its meaning in locals. Most participants did not experience the security of collective action until organizing with the coalition or other grassroots, community-based groups. In schools, educators
are used to being singled out and fighting their own battles. They aren’t used to showing up for others, not other educators, not other locals, and not the community at large. Organizing as a coalition with a strong base of members that show up for one another provided participants with a strong sense of security when engaging in activism for equitable systemic change.

It is no wonder that participants believed community to be a prompting factor to their dismantling of negative power relations or, more specifically, a promoting factor to their educator-activism. The community of the coalition was quite remarkable. Outside of organizing meetings, coalition members, including the participants in this study, met for dinner and took walks together. They cared for one another and showed up in ways beyond the duties of the coalition. There was a strong ethic of care that spilled out of the coalition space into their lives. Organizing as a loving community was deeply meaningful to participants. Ruth admitted, “It gives you a reason for living.” There is an intrinsic piece—an inherent satisfaction—that makes organizing as a community sustainable. Vincent noted, “It feels nice to be part of something. It feels nice to, like, see possibility and then, you know, manifest it in some way; There's a, like, an incentive system built into it.”

Conclusion of the Presentation of Data

The data presented for each Guiding Research Question was gathered through a demographic survey, formal and informal interviews, field observations, and artifacts. The data for GRQ 2 illustrated that the way educators organize can be articulated in a variety of ways, including through descriptions of the organizational structure, leadership and organizing philosophies, and campaigns. The data for GRQ 3 revealed that there are a number of inhibiting and promoting factors for educator activism and organizing. The data for GRQ 1 was concise in
the Presentation of Data because the components that engendered the development of critical consciousness is discussed more deeply in the Presentation of Themes.

**Presentation of Themes**

Themes were derived through memoing and identifying noteworthy quotes; various coding methods including Emotion Coding, Values Coding, and Descriptive coding; creating coding diagrams/maps representing relationships between codes; and drafting summary statements of recurrences and/or outliers in the data (Saldana, 2016).

Descriptive Coding is a process in which the researcher “assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Saldana, 2016, p. 292). Emotion Coding is a process where the researchers “label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant, or inferred by the researcher about the participant” (Saldana, 2016, p. 293). Values Coding is “the application of codes to qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs…” (Saldana, 2016, p. 298).

Six themes emerged from the data: (1) Violence; (2) Empathy; (3) Education; (4) Righteousness; (5) Responsibility; and (6) Community.

As previously stated in Chapter Three, the researcher did not look for answers to the Guiding Research Questions when coding and developing themes. Therefore, themes do not neatly align with Guiding Research Questions but, rather, inform them. In most instances, multiple themes informed multiple GRQs which is why the six themes are described in detail in this section before the Presentation of Findings for each GRQ.
Theme 1: Violence

The interviews, observations, and public artifacts revealed a theme of violence. The theme first became apparent to the researcher during interviews when participants used words such as murder, rape, stab, victim, predator, targeted, and fear when responding to the interview questions. The essence of a violent existence is captured in several of the participants’ comments. Ann noted that “females tend to be more vulnerable and targeted,” while Sasha stated, “I’ve been threatened with rape… I’ve been stabbed.” Vincent offered, “There are systems of relations that are, like, grossly unfair – violent in that, like, like, rip people to shreds,” and Natalie commented, “I’m like, oh my God, I’m gonna get deported.”

We live a violent existence in the United States, in our communities, and in our schools. Participants experienced oppression and varying forms of abuse in multiple spaces, including their places of work. Abuse described by participants included eight types: physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, economic, cultural, and identity abuse. While many of these forms of abuse are commonly understood, identity and cultural abuse may not be. Cultural or identity abuse leverages systemic oppression to harm an individual or group, undermining, attacking, or denying an individual or group’s culture or identity (REACH, 2022; Strong Hearts, 2022). An example of cultural abuse in schools would be preventing non English speaking students from being able to speak their language in school. Examples of identity abuse would be using pejorative language towards women, people of color, or people who are queer.

Descriptions of a violent existence and experiences of abuse fell into three strong sub themes: (1) being surveilled (i.e., closely monitored) for the purpose of management and control, (2) not being able to exist fully as their full selves, and (3) being depleted or exhausted. In each
subtheme, multiple forms of abuse, listed previously, were experienced by participants and recognized. I do not classify or identify the forms of abuse throughout the following paragraphs.

**Being Surveilled for The Purpose of Management and Control Is Abuse**

The issue of surveillance came up many times throughout the study and in various contexts, ranging from the use of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Exam (MCAS), to educator evaluations, to the over-policing of students of color inside and outside of schools. Participants even described their places of work (schools) as factories and prisons, places that were dreary and rigidly controlled and associated with confinement and even captivity. To be clear, participants frequently used the term surveillance when describing being closely monitored and observed for conformity, compliance, and control.

More than half of the participants worked in schools with low MCAS scores, the exceptions were the two educators who worked in vocational schools. As a result, participants experienced increased “accountability” measures. Ruth stated, “I ended up in places [schools] that didn’t have good data or whatever; you have way more expectations put upon you, you’re watched more than other people.” Increased surveillance and administrative control over pedagogical practice is abusive in that it creates feelings of inadequacy and strips professionals of agency, autonomy, purpose, and joy. Ruth stated, “It’s so abusive.”

Participants felt strongly about the surveillance of people of color in schools and the community, as well, particularly youth of color. Key members of the coalition engaged in a campaign to demand justice for a Black youth in the city who had been murdered by police. While engaged in the campaign, participants were able to view evidence of the case presented by an attorney who represented the youth’s family, including surveillance tapes of the youth hanging out at a basketball court with his friends. Participants were disconcerted by the level of
surveillance that this youth endured inside and outside of school by police officers and how it played a role in his murder. Shock and disgust would accurately describe participant responses to the surveillance footage at the basketball court. Participants expressed deep concern over the placement of police in schools (School Resource Officers: SRO). Concerns included the increased surveillance of youth of color, the anxiety and fear it provoked in undocumented students as well as students of color, the issue with unskilled/untrained/unqualified workers interacting with students, the use of funds for SROs, and much more. Natalie stated that “police in schools might run a club with kids, but, but, you know what, he is also keeping tabs on the activities of their families.”

Although victims of abuse, participants took action to reclaim power and challenge oppressive systems. Multiple campaigns were influenced by concerns with surveillance: MCAS Resistance, justice for a local Black youth, and Police-Free Schools, all of which are described in the Presentation of Data.

**Not Being Able to Exist Fully, As Their Full Selves, Is Abuse**

The issue of not being able to fully exist and being treated as less than human came up throughout the study. Participants expressed having to conceal parts of their identity and being treated as property, things, and disposable. Participants believed that in order to be your full self, you need to be seen, heard, and valued. Because participants were primarily women, they spoke about this in terms of being women. And in the case of three participants, as mothers.

A number of participants shared their inability to exist fully as K-12 educators, both inside and outside of schools. “It’s like people don’t want to see teachers be anything besides teachers,” Sasha stated. The female participants all discussed beliefs attached to teachers, including beliefs that even children hold, such as teachers don’t exist outside of schools, teachers...
don’t have their own children, and teachers are “good.” They shared that they have had to conceal parts of their identity because of the beliefs attached to teachers and expectations placed on teachers as well as parts of their identity, including being mothers and even being adults.

One participant told stories about how her workplace never acknowledged that she was a mother, that she had a child at home to care for on top of her students in school. Ruth noted, “When you, when I go to work, I couldn’t even think about my own damn kid.” She spoke about the times she had to stay late at school to help students while her own child waited to be picked up. A couple of participants discussed a shared experience of having to hide from students while out at restaurants having alcoholic beverages despite being adults well above the legal drinking age. Female participants shared that they have not been taken seriously in their profession and were treated like children because of their gender. Ann stated, “You’re not taken seriously … gender played a huge role.”

Instead of participants talking about the fear they experience as activists, they spoke more about the fear they experience in a gendered profession and an institution with historic roots in patriarchy and White supremacy. Having to give up parts of yourself to be a teacher or having to conceal parts of one’s identity and fearing being revealed has an impact on one’s psychological well-being. They shared feelings of inadequacy and of not being good enough. Natalie stated, “I’ve got to be better than everybody else.” There is a phrase that one coalition co-chair often says when referring to students in schools—students who need to conceal their culture and identity—but now seems to apply to participant experiences: “Stop existing so as to exist.” And, participants don’t want to stop existing. Sasha said, “We’re not paid enough to give up our lives.”

Being Depleted or Exhausted Is Abuse
The issue of being utterly exhausted came up throughout the study. Participants discussed the mental and physical exhaustion of being a worker, educator, mother, activist, and a person of color in the United States (U.S.). They described violent systems designed to break down, to deplete, to exhaust people. Ruth noted, “People are just trying to survive instead of thrive. Not having a job is difficult and having a job is difficult.” Teaching in the city was described as difficult and both mentally and physically exhausting, particularly at the elementary-school level. Ruth admitted, “I don’t know if I have ever had an easy day, never mind an easy year.” And finally, Jean offered, “I think it is sometimes hard finding that balance between, like, you know, actually allowing yourself to feel and allowing it to consume you as well.” While being engaged in organizing and activism for equitable systemic change could be energizing, engaging in a struggle to challenge systems of oppression was also exhausting, especially for one participant, Jean, who was a Black woman. Jean elaborated:

It's very tiring work, you know what I mean? It’s, it’s tiring, it’s daunting, it’s exhausting; We’re dealing with, like, such heavy topics, such as, like, racism and, you know, like, extrajudicial murders … these are things that really tend to weigh on my conscience … sometimes I allow, like, like, myself to, like, be so consumed with the emotions.

To participants, surveilling, breaking, depleting, and exhausting people, women, felt intentional and strategic. They attributed a violent existence to gender and sexism, although race and country of origin were discussed. Natalie noted, “It’s an oppressive system because it is a female dominated profession.” Ann, a victim of sexual harassment at work, said “[Schools are] run by middle aged White men. They don’t care about women. They hide everything. They protect the predator and don’t care about, you know, the victim.” Participants, however,
recognized that women can uphold patriarchy, too. Ruth offered, “Even when it was a female principal, there are females that keep you down, too.”

In conclusion, participants experienced a violent existence by being surveilled (i.e., closely monitored) for the purpose of management and control; by not being able to exist fully, as their full selves; and by being depleted or exhausted as workers, women, mothers, and, for one participant, as a person of color. Throughout the study, participants shared experiences of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, financial, economic, cultural, and identity abuse. They used violent words to describe the abuse. Outcomes/effects (i.e., symptoms) of abuse included feelings of fear, anxiety, inadequacy, shame, and powerlessness. These experiences contributed to greater empathy for others who are victims of a violent existence as well.

Theme 2: Empathy

The interviews, observations, and public artifacts also revealed a theme of empathy. In fact, the word “empathy” was frequently used by participants. Participants placed value on being empathetic and practicing compassion.

Despite White privilege, participants have observed and experienced racism, xenophobia, classism, sexism/misogyny, and ableism. Half of the participants were first- and second-generation immigrants, 5% grew up in poverty, half have been targets of racism, and 5% have experienced sexism and misogyny on a regular basis. Racism, classism, sexism, and ableism are forms of oppression.

The interpersonal and systemic experiences of oppression, described by participants in their childhoods, adulthoods, and profession, were “moral shocks” (Catone, 2017, p. 134) to participants. Meaning, the experiences were jarring, felt in a visceral way, and helped participants “open their eyes” to see that the world is not as it should be. Furthermore,
participants asserted that their experiences of interpersonal oppression helped them empathize with and show compassion for others experiencing oppression. Showing or demonstrating compassion or concern for others meant bringing attention and awareness to the suffering and offering to help alleviate suffering. Within this theme, each participant’s interpersonal and systemic experiences with racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, and ableism are described since they attributed these experiences to their ability to empathize with other people experiencing oppression, even forms of oppression they themselves had not directly experienced.

Anne shared stories about childhood poverty and the stigma associated with it. She also shared stories about racism that she observed as a youth. When speaking about her early years in school, Anne stated, “All the other kids came from two parent affluent homes.” As an economically disadvantaged youth, she was stigmatized, adding, “You know, when you’re a kid and people don’t really like you, you hear stuff. They don’t realize that you’re there. You overhear things, or whatever, and learn what they really think about you, so it’s pretty eye opening.” When she went to Junior High School, things changed; she was no longer the only economically disadvantaged child in school. Her new school was much more diverse. Some of her closest friends were Black and Brown and also lived in poverty:

When I went to (Junior High), that was, like, the first time I ever was, really, accepted by people, and that was, you know, I was, I felt more comfortable, because I was around a more diverse population and all my friends were Cape Verdean and or Puerto Rican.

Anne also felt she could empathize with her friends, adding, “I just saw how my friends were treated and it was, you know, I know what it feels like, because it’s the same way that I was treated when I was younger.” She witnessed her friends, and one in particular, experience racism on top of classism and it was painful for her to witness, noting, “Going in stores and stuff, like,
how people would look at her, and it just, it’s, like, you know, it’s hurtful, because you care about this person."

Ruth spoke frequently about the impact her father had on her growing up. She described him as civically and politi- cally engaged, service minded, and compassionate, stating, “He always wanted to figure out how he could help other people.” Ruth was engaged with political action with her father starting from a very young age, including participating in the Democratic convention, local campaigns for political candidates, and labor campaigns. Ruth remembered volunteering with her father at the Immigrant’s Assistance Center and showing up to support Fall River women working in the mills. She briefly discussed the adversity her father faced in his lifetime, including living in an orphanage. She attributed the adversity that he experienced to his commitment to helping others, noting, “I think everything that he went through pushed him to try to make things better for other people.” She recalled that “he was one of the first, or the first person, who actually sold homes to people of color and there were people that were mad at him.”

Ruth faced adversity too and, despite employment as a public school teacher for many years, she struggled financially. Along with many families in the city, she experienced housing insecurity. Ruth lived in public housing and experienced being evicted from her home more than once. It bothered Ruth that many of her colleagues do not live in the city, never mind have deep roots in the community because she believed her colleagues lacked the ability to understand and share the experiences of the students and low-income families they served, stating “I want them to feel what I feel.”

Natalie shared stories about growing up in a Portuguese immigrant household, being economically disadvantaged, and experiencing racism, classism, and sexism herself. Being first-generation immigrants and losing her mother to cancer as a young teen, her family struggled,
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recalling, “Food stamps, the whole nine, like the apartment with cockroaches. All the Portuguese soap operas always depicted the Black folks as servants and enslaved.” She asserted that racism was/is pervasive in Portuguese culture. Speaking about her parents, she said, “They went to work in the factories and it was like, oh, so, so, nice, they’re Black, it’s not their fault.” Natalie was mistaken for being Black many times growing up. She recalled, “When I was younger, I would get really tan. Insults were hurled at me.” She knew White people felt uncomfortable around her. A friend told her once, “I had to tell them, you weren’t Black.” Natalie also experienced prejudice as a science major in college. She shared a story about entering a science classroom with large hoop earrings on, recalling, “I walk in and they were like, oh, this is, um, this is an Ecology presentation, you might be in the wrong, the wrong spot.”

Sasha grew up in a Portuguese immigrant household, too. She shared stories of racism and ableism. Sasha was a Special Education teacher and recalled being compelled to stand up against injustice and for people with disabilities from a young age:

The first, like, fight I ever got into at high school was because I saw a girl who stole [a chair from a student with a disability] during lunch. So, this kid, we don’t know what his disability was at the time, but you know, back then, autism wasn’t really like a diagnosis. I’m pretty sure he had autism.

Sasha shared that she had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD):

I do empathize a lot with the … I’m not neurotypical, like my brain doesn’t work the way other peoples do. So, I feel like that is something that, you know, that, that kind of has always give me the lens of, like, seeing the other side of things, and, like, seeing things, for, you know, seeing people being treated unfairly.
As a Special Education teacher, Sasha observed systemic problems and the intersectionality between racism and ableism:

Even seeing the way, like, special ed teachers were treated were very indicative of how the disability population were treated and, then, once I got into my master’s program, I started studying more about, like, the racial piece of it, and I was, like, it kind of opened my eyes, like, hey, you guys … we don’t have that many Black students in (the city) but my classes are always majority Black and that’s kind of how I got into more of the racial movement and … like the coalition and all that stuff opened my eyes to how these things actually work.

She proceeded to talk more about the way Special Education teachers were treated and the insight she gained from that, noting:

My whole, my whole career I’m constantly forgotten … I’m a special ed teacher, I’m an afterthought … Also, like, as a special ed teacher, we are treated differently than general ed teachers and I think that’s, that’s, another thing that’s not talked about enough to, like, we it’s, it’s, to me, it’s indicative of how people treat special ed students.

Like Natalie, Sasha was mistaken for being a person of color, stating, “I also, quite often, get mistaken for other races.” As a result, she has been a target of racism, recalling, “Working at a Portuguese bakery, someone said, “I don’t want that Black girl to serve me.” Sasha shared a few stories regarding racist attacks on social media. One time, she recalled someone “left a banana outside my door.” Sasha said that although she is White, it has “given me a lens into how it feels.”

Like Natalie and Sasha, Jean was from an immigrant household. Her family, however, was from Haiti. Unlike Natalie and Sasha, Jean was Black. She, too, shared experiences of
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racism and sexism. Jean said, as a woman “I think my role was pre-determined for me, what I was to be, I think a lot of where my activism roots can stem from is, for me, just like not wanting to be confined to that.” Being a woman of color and the child of immigrants she asserted that she was able to “like really see, and feel, and understand the environment of, of, of, like, inequity and exploitation and, and, like, injustice.” Jean did not expand on her experiences as a person of color, but she did share the emotional toll racism has taken on her psychological and emotional health. She said that being engaged in educator activism for equitable systemic change was exhausting but that she had no choice but to continue to fight. As an educator of color she was committed to racial justice, adding, “That’s not what I want for my students either.”

Like the majority of the participants in the study, Vincent was White; however, Vincent was the only male in the study and the only participant from an affluent family. Vincent discussed capitalist exploitation and shared his experiences of ableism and classism. Vincent spoke about living and teaching abroad and looking at the United States from the outside, noting, “I was watching what was happening and not feeling good about it.” When he returned home to Boston, he was hit with the reality of our unjust, violent existence (see prior theme of violence), pointing out, “Private healthcare system in the United States and, like, rent, rent out of control, and, you know there’s just like gun violence.” Living and working in another country with a national health insurance system of universal coverage and returning to a country where people struggled to access healthcare was a jarring experience. Vincent stated, “You know, it was, it was pretty, pretty intense the first year back and took me a while to kind of unpack that.” Vincent also shared that he struggled with speaking, admitting:

Speaking is difficult for me, like, I don’t, like, like, I don’t, like, oh I’m afraid of public speaking … I mean, like, literally, like, like, talk. Like, I think I probably have a speech
impediment that I never really addressed … it actually means that I am at a disadvantage, because I cannot say what needs to be said in a way that people are gonna take me seriously or that’s going to, you know, that people can even understand, like that’s even coherent.

Vincent understood what it felt like to not be taken seriously. Despite his privilege, he could relate to the experience of being looked down on and gave an example, noting, “It bothers me when, when, I feel, I feel sometimes, sometimes it feels like the way that, like, the Mayor talks to the rest of us is like, as if we, like, don’t know how to read.”

Participants also said that their experiences as educators working in and living in the city raised their consciousness about oppression and helped them better understand the experiences of targets of oppression. As previously stated, all participants used the word empathy frequently. The researcher observed that empathy was not something participants just understood, felt, and spoke of, but also practiced as compassion. Members of the coalition, including participants in the study, showed or demonstrated compassion or concern for others by bringing attention and awareness to the suffering and by offering to help alleviate suffering. The researcher observed many instances where participants were understanding and supportive of one another’s struggles, always offering help. For example, Anne was particularly generous, offering to give people rides, bring them food, and really serve in any way needed. During hard times, she sent flowers and cards just to let people know she was thinking of them. Vincent was incredible at offering emotional support, lending an ear and creating space for others to vent. As critical of people as Ruth could be at times, she also was typically one of the first people to remind others of our human struggle, of human suffering, reminding us to not take it personally and to give people
time when they were feeling overwhelmed and withdrew. Space, patience, and support were
given when needed. All participants cared deeply about alleviating the pain of others.

In conclusion, interpersonal and systemic experiences with sexism, racism, xenophobia,
and classism helped participants understand and share the experiences of others (in a cognitive
and emotional way) who experienced oppression and moved participants to help others as a
means to transform society, to make the world as it should be.

Theme 3: Education

Through interviews, observations, and public artifacts, the researcher observed that
participants engaged in a variety of educational experiences to better understand interpersonal
and systemic (institutional and structural) racism and worked to educate the community about it.

Interpersonal racism occurs between individuals (Lawson, 2021). The examples shared
by Sasha and Natalie in the Empathy theme are examples of interpersonal racism. Institutional
racism occurs within institutions (formal or informal institutions) in the form of policies and
practices that are oppressive to people of color and produce racially inequitable outcomes.
Structural racism is complex and includes racial bias, belief systems (culture, ideology, etc.),
policies, and practices across society and between/among institutions that disadvantage people of
color and benefit White people (Lawson, 2021).

Participants took on the role of both learner and educator. They participated in book
clubs, reading “Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools” by Monique Morris and
“Lift Us Up, Don’t Push Us Out” by Mark Warren with other coalition members, attended and
led virtual workshops/conferences/dialogues about structural racism, gave speeches at
marches/rallies always linking educational issues to racism, and published articles and podcast
episodes about the school to prison pipeline and racism in schools. They united in solidarity with
people of color as allies and accomplices in the local Black Lives Matter movement. Education on racism, power, and oppression mattered to participants. Moreover, the interviews, observations and public artifacts provided further insight into the value placed on education and their own educational experiences as youth and as adults regarding understanding institutional and structural racism.

As discussed previously within the Empathy theme, as youths, participants had observed and experienced racism. Vincent said that as a youth, “like, racism is bad, but I didn’t really have a clear framework or language for, for why that was or what, like, what that actually entailed.” They wanted to understand and make sense of it. Anne offered, “When we were kids, like, we would take out the tape recorder and we would, like, interview each other about society and race. Like, we were, like, in sixth grade.” Participants could not put names to what they were observing and experiencing for they did not have a framework for understanding racism in their youth.

Education, particularly at the college level, gave participants a framework for sensemaking. For instance, it wasn’t until taking an urban education course that Natalie grappled with concepts such as meritocracy and the intersections between meritocracy and racism and classism, observing, “I was like, oh man, I never considered this, because I was very much the hard working immigrant.” Like most participants, she shared her deep appreciation for college because it offered her an opportunity to explore, discuss, and make sense of complex and confusing lived experiences. Natalie noted that academia “made it okay for me to, like, step into that part of myself. You don’t have to silence yourself. Look, there’s this whole body of work on this and I found comfort in that.” Overall, college raised participant consciousness on racism, power, and oppression. Sasha observed, “It [college] really, like, opened my eyes to, like, how
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much inequity existed in education, but then how that translates to the, to the real world and how that translates to power.” Jean offered:

I majored in sociology and anthropology and with a Black studies minor. Still, like, through that, through what I was learning in those courses, like, I was able to, like, really become aware of, like, everything that I was experiencing and kind of put name to it. I really started to, like, learn and understand, like, what these differences of oppression were. It (college) shaped me, shaped who I am. It shaped my views on the world and who I am.

Although the coalition is not a formal educational institution, education is a fundamental part of the organization. The coalition engages in Action Dialogues inspired by the work of Paulo Freire in which participants engage in a cyclical process of action, dialogue, action. In short, coalition members dialogue about issues to think deeply and critically about them before taking action. The dialogue leads to a commitment to take action. Then, after an action is taken, the coalition members reflect on the action taken and revisit the dialogue. It is an iterative, cyclical process to deepen understanding and commitment. Education as a process, an active and immersive process, is incredibly powerful. Anne recalled a particular action that was educational and transformative for her. Ann described the day coalition members showed up to support the Fish House workers described in the Introduction to this chapter as having been a “real eye opener… made a huge impact on me.” For Natalie, engaging in the campaigns around policing was particularly educational and transformative, stating, “Yeah, I mean, huge awareness and I’m just, like, oh my God, why, why, why did I never really pay attention to the systems in place, and most of it is around policing.”
Unfortunately, participants asserted that education on racism and oppression does not happen in K-12 schools but only in higher education in their experiences. In fact, they felt conversations on racism were off limits. Natalie summed it up by saying, “Being a high school teacher, it’s like, oh shit, you know I can’t talk about these things, but higher ed…” In many ways, participants were critical of K-12 schools. Sasha said, “Why are the schools set up like prisons? And, then, we expect them to get out of school and act like functioning members of society, when they just spent the last four years in prison, essentially.” Participants had dreams for what schools should be. They wanted students to experience education as relevant and as safe spaces where they could fully exist. Jean observed:

School is, just like, it’s, it’s so confined to, like, you know, like, formal education … it’s so, like, to the book, to the curriculum … I think I questioned how we can create a society in which people are able to, like, really push the bounds of, like, their creativity and, and really build their capacity to, like, really critically think and analyze all these different systems around them. It’s like we’re so confined … [I] really try to center the student voices through my work … allow them to, like, have the space to share their, their thoughts, their concerns, their experiences.

In conclusion, according to the research data, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism and how racism intersects with class and gender can be taught explicitly within formal educational institutions and it can be learned through personal experience and process, although perhaps only to a degree. Participants became conscious of systemic racism through personal experiences as children outside of school, through college courses, and through organizing and activism with the coalition. Participants placed value on expanding their knowledge and political clarity around systems of oppression. They also opined that too many of their colleagues lacked
knowledge of and information on systemic racism and struggle to accept, acknowledge, and admit that they (White people) benefit from systemic racism. Anne observed, “They haven’t taken the time to learn about it (systemic racism and policing). They’re in denial about all the violence that happens on a daily basis. They’re in denial about how people are discriminated against.” Sasha stated:

[There is] a lot of conversations about reforming police, but I think that there needs to be reformed education, too, because I think that teachers can be just as bad … especially when it comes to racism … maybe not with killing people.

They wanted their colleagues to understand. Ruth stated, “I want to gain the knowledge, I want to help other people gain the knowledge.”

As a result of their knowledge and awareness of systemic racism and systems of oppression, participants had an ethical and moral obligation to work for equality, equity, and justice.

Theme 4: Righteousness

Through interviews, observations, and public artifacts, the researcher observed that participants were driven by a sense of justice, or, perhaps more precisely described as righteousness. Righteousness as in a commitment to equality, equity, and justice, yes, but also a moral binary and belief system of right and wrong (even “good and evil”) and a strong desire to be morally decent/correct. Vincent, when speaking about solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement, noted, “It is immoral for me to, to not try to, like, reconcile with [I’m] using the words, like, good and evil, but like, like, like (…) like I want to be good.” Anne, when responding to why she was involved with the Black Lives Matter Movement, said, “Because it’s the right thing to do.”
Righteous beliefs were shared by participants. For instance, they shared beliefs around not exploiting the vulnerable and aiding the poor in the form of material assistance, for example. There were righteous values, as well, including valuing volunteerism and service. In fact, service was a frequently used word by participants. Their service was, perhaps, evidence of their righteousness.

At times, righteousness resulted in a moral binary of black or white, right or wrong, good or evil thinking and moved participants to places of judgment and condemnation of certain individuals. The subjects of judgment and condemnation were people in positions of power who chose not to make moral and just decisions in the eyes of participants. Targets included the Mayor and Superintendent of Public Schools, for instance. Other times, participants sympathized with those who held opposing beliefs. For instance, although participants took a stand to resist charter schools, participants did not condemn or blame families that sent their children to charter schools. Participants also worked with people with diverse political ideologies and stood with them in solidarity on areas of common concern. Vincent and Ruth, two progressive Democrats, stood beside a group of laborers on strike every morning before work even though many were supporters of Donald Trump for President. Anne worked closely with colleagues in her union who held very different beliefs than her own on a range of issues ranging from homosexuality to policing. Coalition meetings are open to the public and are inclusive spaces where ideas are challenged but never people. Empathy discussed earlier enabled participants to center humanity, still, though, participants were not immune to judgment, condemnation of others, and even individual attacks on people outside of the coalition.

Additionally, participants often made moral arguments when debating educational issues. Righteousness was chosen over justice to articulate this theme because of the religious
undertones observed by the researcher when coding. Unfortunately, the researcher did not ask participants about their religion and faith during the study. The relationship between religion and righteousness was not explored; however, through ethnographic experiences with participants, the researcher does know that all participants were Christian, at least half were raised Catholic, and at least half were still practicing Christians who attend mass. Religion was brought up organically a few times by participants and described how it shaped their view of and commitment to morality and justice. Jean offered, “When I get to the root of my own faith, it’s based in, you know, in, in equity and justice for people; Like, I mean it’s based in love.” Similarly, Vincent stated, “I grew up Catholic so there was, like, there’s a lot of, like, good and evil;” “I was also, like, imbued with a very strong sense of, like, rules, like, right and wrong and rules.”

In conclusion, participants were driven by some sort of moral law and had a strong belief system of right and wrong, a strong desire to be morally decent/correct, and a commitment to equality, equity, and justice. The desire to be seen as good and the duty to serve could be viewed as White saviorism (Windholz, 2017) which is discussed in the next section.

**Theme 5: Responsibility**

Through interviews, observations, and public artifacts, the researcher observed that participants were deeply committed to transforming schools and society and believed it was their duty as White folks and as educators. In fact, the words duty and responsibility came up frequently during interviews when discussing disrupting oppressive power relations for equitable systemic change. In response to their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement, Vincent offered, “I have a responsibility,” and Natalie asserted, “If you’re not part of the solution you’re part of the problem.”
Participants discussed their White privilege during a world historic moment (COVID-19 pandemic and racial unrest due to the police killings of people of color) and how it related to their increased feelings of responsibility. Vincent noted that “a sense of stakes emerged, like being, being kind of forced to confront, like, what’s going on. I think there is like a privilege thing, like, I don’t mind putting my physical safety…” Sasha stated, “I feel like I have a responsibility to call on, call in, call out other White people. Black people shouldn’t have to do the labor of waking up other White people because you’re asleep.” And Ruth noted, “People of color, we expect them to do everything. I know how hard it is for me, can you imagine how hard it is for other people?”

A White person who is depicted as liberating or saving non-White people is a “white savior” (Windholz, 2017). Despite participant’s feelings of responsibility to address oppression and injustice, participants did not view themselves as superior to targets of oppression. Moreover, participants did not see targets of oppression as needing them. Rather, they viewed themselves as allies and accomplices working toward collective liberation in solidarity.

Race was not the only factor contributing to feelings of responsibility. Participants felt responsible as educators to fight for equitable systemic change. Anne said, “I think because I’m an educator I should, you know, lead by example and if something’s wrong, then I should speak out and encourage my students to speak out also.” Similarly, Ruth offered, “That’s the nature of an educator: you want to educate people and you want to touch on the things that really matter. I feel like we have to be the role models for what’s right.” Finally, Jean stated, “[As educators], we’re advocating for students.”

There were conflicting responsibilities discussed by participants, as well. Half of the participants discussed the responsibilities they have to their families and to themselves to
maintain their own security. They were conflicted, at times, to not jeopardize their own job security by engaging in activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression. Vincent said, “I have relationships, like, I have parents that have, you know (...) [I have] a wife, a mortgage, like, I have responsibilities to people.” Participants acknowledged the risks of engaging in activism, particularly around racial justice, and sometimes wondered if they could and should operate under the radar. Natalie stated:

How, how can I infuse within the system, how can I infuse the things that I know are right to slowly pick away at the system from the inside and continue my work on the outside secretly….a cloak of secrecy.

As discussed previously in the Education and Righteousness themes, participants were conscious of systems of oppression that made it very difficult for them to justify not engaging in activism for equitable systemic change, so they did despite the risks. “Strength in numbers” or collective action as a community was a strong promoting factor of educator-activism and a prominent theme in the study.

Theme 6: Community

Through interviews, observations, and public artifacts, the researcher observed that participants experienced a strong sense of community in the coalition that increased their capacity to engage in grassroots activism and organizing in a number of ways, including sensemaking capacity, energetic capacity, increased sense of safety/security, and motivational capacity. It also offered participants a space where they could fully exist and, therefore, provided a sense of belonging. Community was a word frequently used by participants and a word that captured the essence of the coalition’s organizational structure and culture that is discussed in the Presentation of Data.
Participants expressed feelings of isolation and the weight on their shoulders as individuals engaging in advocacy and fighting for equitable systemic change. Ruth stated, “Oh, [Ruth] is going to take care of that and they are shocked when nothing changes. I still feel like they just think I can do it by myself.” The majority of participants expressed having a desire to be part of their communities in meaningful ways prior to finding the coalition. Vincent described returning home after living abroad:

I think the, the notion of actually being, like, part of a community or being, like, not just being, like, the stranger rolling into town or, like, an astronaut essentially, like, but actually, like, being part of, being part of a, being part of, being part of a community, like, in a really, really meaningful way, not just in kind of like an abstract sense.

Natalie noted, “I’m not at all involved in my community, how can I become involved in my community, because I’ve never worked here.” They longed to find a group of like-minded people/other educators who cared about and were committed to social, racial, gender, and economic justice. They longed to belong. Natalie stated, “Finding people who think like me … that’s been huge, that’s filled a void, I feel like I found my people, like, this is, if this could be my work.” Sasha “I feel like it’s very much, you know, part of, like, what I care about, so I was, like, you know, I think I want to, like, be a part of if. This is going to be something that’s going to help improve it, I do want to be a part of it, you know.” Ruth, for her part, added:

Like before I would be shouting into the wind, you know, it’s like, whoa this isn’t working, so if you finally meet and communicate with people that are willing … committed people … more people that have the energy to care for others.

Jean offered, “Making sure that their (youths/students) voices were heard and that they felt like they had a place in the organizing.”
Participants also reflected on the leadership and organizational structure of the coalition and how it contributed to a strong sense of community and working collectively. Ruth stated, “We’re real grassroots” and Vincent offered, “You know, people, like, people are working together.” Throughout the study, participants expressed that they preferred functioning as a team and had no desire to be leaders in the traditional sense, which they had become accustomed to as educators in K-12 schools. Ruth asserted, “It’s not, it’s not about elevating yourself,” while Anne observed, “Being some kind of figurehead, or whatever, like, that’s not, I don’t care about that.” The coalition community functions as a team. All study participants were willing to work behind the scenes, pitching in wherever help was needed. Some participants were eager to do the writing required to get things done, others were eager to run to the store to grab supplies. The ways in which participants contributed varied and none of the work could have gotten done without one another.

Participants also described that their sensemaking ability, or their ability to give meaning to and understand experiences, as a result of being in an expanded community. Participants shared their feelings regarding dialoguing about and examining power and oppression collectively with a community. Natalie observed that “it ties everything together,” while Vincent observed that “a lot of the, lot of it just comes from, like, you know, having, like, like talking to people and, like, building friendships and, like, and, like, making sense of events together.”

Lastly, participants spoke of a number of actions that enabled them to experience their collective strength and power. Ruth, in discussing the impact the charter fight made on her, stated:
“The most people that I had seen, that was probably the biggest thing that I’ve seen people come out for, you know, in a long time or ever. [It] made me feel empowered and it made me feel like, wow we’re finally getting other people to understand.”

There is strength in numbers and participants have experienced it. Anne asserted, “It helps other people that are afraid and uncomfortable. It helps them feel comfortable.”

Because all of these factors contributed to a strong sense of community, there was a strong sense of “we” amongst participants in the coalition. Ruth stated, “We have authentic reasons for doing what we are doing. We know that it’s based on needs in the community. We know it’s based on things that are keeping people down.” Community also made the work sustainable. Working in partnership and experiencing power through collective action was a positive feedback loop that sustained the coalition. According to Vincent, “It feels nice to be part of something. It feels nice to, like, see possibility and then, you know, manifest it in some way; there’s a, like, an incentive system built into it.”

Conclusion of Themes

Themes were primarily articulated through words frequently used by participants when describing their activism and organizing with the coalition for equitable systemic change. As a result of a violent existence, participants felt nervous, scared, exhausted, frustrated, and angry (all emotions identified by participants to describe their feelings). Other outcomes/effects (i.e., symptoms) of abuse that were not identified by participants but inferred by the researcher included feelings of inadequacy, shame, and powerlessness. Participants have come to understand their experiences as educators and workers as well as systems of oppression, including systemic racism, through personal life experiences as youth and as educators in K-12 schools, through college courses and workshops, and through engaging in organizing and
activism with the coalition. Their consciousness regarding power and systems of oppression and the moral law or moral compass that guided them and developed within them a sense of duty to function as change agents for equitable systemic change. Despite their own oppressive conditions, participants found joy, hope, and inspiration (all emotions identified by participants to describe their feelings) through the coalition. Other outcomes of the strong sense of community included expanding sensemaking capacity and feelings of belongingness and security. We know that grassroots community organizing is a means to equitable systemic change; however, according to participants, organizing as a community is the antidote to demoralization and incredibly significant to the capacity and sustainability of the organization/group, as well.

**Presentation of Findings for Guiding Research Question #1:**

*What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness?*

The various experiences that engendered the critical consciousness of teachers in the coalition were illustrated in the Violence, Empathy, Education, and Community themes. As shown in the Presentation of Data, experiences shared by participants spanned their lifetimes, from stories about their youth to present experiences as educators and activists/organizers. In this section, the Findings for Guiding Research Question #1 are presented or, in other words, the experiences that engendered participant critical consciousness are distilled and outlined.

**Finding #1 for GRQ 1**

The development of critical consciousness consisted of personal experiences of oppression, education regarding systems of oppression, and activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression.
Participants first witnessed and experienced oppression as girls, immigrants, and economically disadvantaged youth, although they were unable to name the oppression and fully understand their experiences. Participants reported a number of educational experiences in adulthood that helped them understand power and systems of oppression, namely college courses. Beyond courses about systemic racism and other forms of oppression, participants asserted that their understanding of oppression and commitment to challenge and disrupt oppressive systems developed through their activism and organizing or, in other words, through being actively involved in coalition campaigns. The three components that engendered the critical consciousness of participants are seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Critical Consciousness Development of Educator-Activists in the Coalition
Presentation of Findings for Guiding Research Question #2:

What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change?

The Righteousness, Community, Empathy, and Education themes helped the researcher understand the culture of the coalition and ways teachers organized for equitable systemic change. However, as seen in the Presentation of the Data, additional field observations and artifacts collected helped illuminate the organizational structure, campaigns, and tactics/actions of the coalition. In this section, the Findings for Guiding Research Question #2 are presented or, in other words, the ways that teachers in the coalition organized for equitable systemic change are distilled and outlined.

Finding #2 for GRQ 2

Finding #2 for GRQ 2 is that educator-activists of the coalition organized collectively in a leader-full organization with a flattened hierarchy and with a Freirean toolkit for racial and economic justice.

There are a number of ways the coalition educators organized for equitable systemic change. How they went about challenging forces and systems of inequity and injustice are evident in the structure of the coalition, the ways they practiced leadership, the organizing tactics they chose to use, and the campaigns they engaged in.

Observations of participants and the coalition’s statement of philosophy revealed the coalition’s commitment to equity, inclusion, and disrupting various forms of oppression as well as optimism or belief in people-power and change.

Despite the existence of co-chairs, many members of the coalition took on leadership roles, shaped the organizational structure and culture, and drove campaigns, including the
participants in the study. There were no experts in the coalition and members developed with more experienced organizers as partners. Relationships resembled friendships and members operated with a strong ethic of care for one another. Personal development, relationship development, and process were far more important to the coalition and study participants than end results, including campaign wins. All of the campaigns centered racial and economic justice. Members in the coalition envisioned a radically different society, demanded new educational policies and dynamics in relationships, and wished not to perpetuate structures of inequity and oppression.

**Presentation of Findings for Guiding Research Question #3:**

*What factors and conditions do K-12 teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations?*

As seen in the Presentation of Data, participants were conscious of and, therefore, readily identified the factors and conditions that promoted and inhibited their activism and organizing during interviews. However, the themes of Violence, Empathy, Education, Righteousness, Responsibility, and Community helped the researcher understand the factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted their activism and organizing more deeply. In this section, the Findings for Guiding Research Question #3 are presented or, in other words, the factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted their activism and organizing to dismantle negative power relations are distilled and outlined.

**Finding #3**

Inhibiting factors for participants were their local unions, their profession as educators, sexism, exhaustion, individualism, and educators not being from the community they teach in. Promoting factors for participants were being educators (also an inhibiting factor), having roots
in the community that they teach in, education on systemic racism and other systems of oppression, living in a world historic moment (Black Lives Matter Movement and COVID-19 pandemic), their state teachers union, and the community of the coalition.

Participants reported a number of inhibiting factors/conditions or, as they often referred to them, “barriers” to engaging in educator-activism, many of which were described in the Violence theme. Challenging forces and systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice isn’t easy. In fact, participants adequately describe engaging in educator-activism as scary; however, educators in the coalition continue to fight for equitable systemic change. Understanding the factors and conditions that inhibited and promoted their activism and organizing to dismantle negative power relations and fight for change is important. Limiting factors do exist, but promoting factors, as described in the Community theme, ultimately prevail; otherwise, participants would not engage in the incredible work that they do. Promoting and inhibiting factors are seen in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Promoting and Inhibiting Factors/Conditions to Educator-Activism for Equitable Systemic Change
Finding #4

Perhaps the most important overarching finding of this study is that taking some form of organized collective action is a powerful counter to demoralization and a route to remoralization and this stands as Finding #4.

In Chapter One, the following question was asked: How do teachers, despite the intricate circulation of oppressive ideologies and the current culture of demoralization and deprofessionalization, refuse to be a servant to power, refuse to be submissive, complacent, and compliant and work towards their own and collective liberation? The ultimate Finding is that engaging in organizing with the coalition served as a process of re-moralization for participants. The coalition was a space that re-opened a sense of purpose, where participants felt seen and valued, where they could engage in critical dialogues about their experiences, and that allowed for the cultivation of agency or, in other words, the feeling that they could transform their realities. Perhaps demoralization can’t be solved by individuals – there is no amount of self-care that can remedy feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and hopelessness. Rather, a remedy, the antidote, is in community and involves a collective and structural response as opposed to an individual one. Engaging in organized, collective action is a powerful counter to demoralization and route to remoralization.

Summary

In summary, six K-12 educator members of the coalition participated in the study and six themes emerged from field observations, interviews, and artifacts: (1) Violence: Violent Existence, (2) Empathy: The Ability to Share and Understand the Experiences of Others, (3) Education: Education on Racism and Oppression, (4) Righteousness: Moral Law and Binary of Right and Wrong, (5) Responsibility: Responsibility of White Educators, and (6) Community:
Community Builds Capacity. These six themes informed the Guiding Research Questions and resulted in a number of findings.

Finding #1: The development of critical consciousness consisted of personal experiences of oppression, education regarding systems of oppression, and activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression.

Finding #2: Educator-activists of the coalition organized collectively in a leader-full organization with a flattened hierarchy and with a Freirean toolkit for racial and economic justice.

Finding #3: Inhibiting factors for participants are their local unions, their profession as educators, sexism, exhaustion, individualism, and educators not being from the community they teach in. Promoting factors for participants are being an educator (also an inhibiting factor), having roots in the community that they teach in, education on systemic racism and other systems of oppression, living in a world historic moment (Black Lives Matter Movement and COVID-19 pandemic), their state teachers union, and the community of the coalition.

Finding #4: Taking some form of organized collective action is a powerful counter to demoralization and a route to remoralization.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Chapter Five is organized using the following headings: (a) Summary of the First Four Chapters; (b) Discussion of Key Findings, including how the research reinforces and fills gaps in the existing literature, the implications of the study and recommendations, and the originality of the study; (c) Delimitations and Limitations of the Study; (d) Future Research; and (e) Final Reflections. Please note that teacher and K-12 educator are used interchangeably and the use of the term “teacher” is discussed in Chapter Two.

Summary of the First Four Chapters

To reacquaint the reader with the study, the four chapters of this dissertation are briefly summarized here.

As stated in Chapter One, the goal of the study was to look for patterns that supported understanding of how educator-activists, particularly White female teachers (but not exclusively), in the coalition organized for equitable systemic change. It also included the Statement of the Problem, the three Guiding Research Questions, an overview of the literature reviewed, an overview of the method, and the significance of the study.

In Chapter Two, the following bodies of literature were explored: a historical analysis of the feminization of the teaching profession, the dual function of schools to both circulate dominant ideology to maintain the power and privilege status quo and to produce critical thinkers and participatory citizens who are capable of transforming society, the existing literature on grassroots educational leadership, and the emerging literature on grassroots community organizing for education reform, also known as educational organizing. Because the bodies of literature on grassroots educational leadership and educational organizing are limited and emerging and it is relevant to the coalition’s leadership and organizing, lessons on grassroots
leadership and organizing from anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist progressive grassroots movements such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s/1960s, Black Lives Matter Movement, and Red for Ed Movement were included in the Literature Review. It was also a way to apply social movement theory and practice to educational leadership theory and practice and, therefore, deepen understanding of activism (i.e., grassroots leadership) and organizing.

In Chapter Three, a complete description of the methods was provided. This critical, feminist, activist ethnographic study enabled the researcher to study the coalition as a cultural insider, included six participants, and involved field observations, formal and informal interviews, and artifacts collected over several months. The instruments used to collect data were a demographic survey, a field observation tool, and interview questions. Guiding Research Questions included: (a) What experiences do K-12 teachers believe engender their critical consciousness? (b) What are the various ways K-12 teachers report they organize and were observed organizing for equitable systemic change? (c) What factors and conditions do K-12 teachers believe inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations? Coding methods combined Descriptive Coding, Values Coding, and Emotion Coding.

In Chapter Four, six themes emerged: (1) Violence: Participant’s experienced a violent existence as women and workers/educators in a patriarchal society; (2) Empathy: Due to their own experiences of oppression, participants were able to share and understand the experiences of others; (3) Education: Participants had a framework for understanding racism and other forms of oppression because of courses and other educational opportunities; (4) Righteousness: Participants were guided by a moral law and binary of right and wrong and had an intolerance for injustice; (5) Responsibility: Participants felt responsible for challenging systems of oppression as White educators; and (6) Community: Participants believed that community builds
the capacity needed to challenge oppressive power dynamics and work for equitable systemic change. The themes informed the Guiding Research Questions (GRQ) as well as additional data such as artifacts. Key findings of the study as they relate to each GRQ were detailed in Chapter Four and were from the perspective of teachers in the coalition.

Finding for Guiding Research Question (GRQ) #1: The development of critical consciousness consisted of personal experiences of oppression, education regarding systems of oppression, and activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression (see Figure 2). Finding for GRQ #2: Educator-activists of the coalition organized in a leader-full organization with a flattened hierarchy and with a Freirean toolkit for racial and economic justice (see Figure 3). Finding for GRQ #3: Inhibiting factors for participants are their local unions, their profession as educators, sexism, exhaustion, individualism, and educators not being from the community they teach in. Promoting factors for participants are being an educator (also an inhibiting factor), having roots in the community that they teach in, education on systemic racism and other systems of oppression, living in a world historic moment (Black Lives Matter Movement and COVID-19 pandemic), their state teachers union, and the community of the coalition. Lastly, the overarching finding is that taking some form of organized collective action is a powerful counter to demoralization and a route to remoralization.

Discussion of Key Findings

The discussion of key findings is divided into three sections: how this study reinforces and fills gaps in the existing literature, the implications of this study and recommendations for educational organizations, and the originality of this study.
How This Study Reinforces and Fills Gaps in the Existing Literature

This study supports and/or further develops concepts that are described in the Review of the Literature contained in Chapter Two. Findings did not conflict with or contradict the existing literature. How this study reinforced and filled existing gaps in the existing literature is described in this section.

Reinforces the Literature

This study supported the existing and emerging bodies of literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing as well as the relevant, interconnected bodies of literature discussed in Chapter Two. Because the study participants comprise the coalition, the terms participants and coalition are used interchangeably in this section.

Consistent with the literature on educator-activism, participants in this study had experiences that woke them up to injustice and oppression in schools and society (Catone, 2017) and, like other educational organizing groups, the coalition situated schools within a larger socio-economic context, so as to keep perspective that schools are not separate from society and therefore community conditions are school conditions (Renee and McAlister, 2011). An awareness of power and oppression influenced the leadership philosophy, organizational structure, campaigns, and actions of the coalition.

Best articulated by Ransby (2015), ordinary people are able to define their problems and imagine solutions. Congruous to the literature on leader-full organizations and movements, the coalition aimed for an authentic distribution of power, where every participant has leadership potential, leadership is not in a title, and leadership, therefore, moves around within organizations depending on strengths and interests and who steps up to lead actions/initiatives (Ransby, 2015). In the coalition, there were no experts and leadership developed with organizers,
families, and educators as partners as opposed to professional organizers training members in the organization (Su, 2009). Civic engagement skills, or leadership skills, needed for the sustainability and effectiveness of the organization (Anderson, 2009; Renee and McAlister, 2011) included: facilitating membership meetings, speaking publicly, lobbying, writing press releases and op eds, developing campaigns, etc.

How the coalition organized to disrupt negative power relations and make equitable systemic change was consistent with the literature on educator-activism and educational organizing. The coalition created new spaces where people could experience their own power (Catone, 2017), developed racial and economic justice campaigns, and engaged in traditional and nontraditional organizing actions or tactics (Su, 2009). Beyond traditional protests, relational transformation was a priority and viewed as organizing by the coalition. The goal was to create authentic, meaningful relationships between, educators, students, and families (Catone, 2017; Renee and McAlister, 2011) and included those who bear the most cost into the organization (Anderson, 2009). There existed an incredibly strong ethic of care and, therefore, relationships often resembled friendships (Su, 2009). Similar to other educational organizing groups with an emphasis on transformative practices, the coalition was much less productivity-minded and much more equity-minded (Anderson, 2009; Su, 2009). Complimentary to the Freirean organizing culture defined by Su (2009), the commitment to equity and inclusion and the focus on political education and individual development or personal transformation meant that the organization was less preoccupied with organizational development and end goals.

The inhibiting and promoting factors that educators experienced when engaging in activism and organizing for equitable systemic change is consistent with the literature, as well. Study participants reported how difficult, if not impossible, it was to make change from within
educational institutions and without formal positions of authority. They asserted that traditional and popular leadership models in schools don’t enable the most vulnerable and marginalized to participate in decision making and that change efforts can be compromised and even undone when bottom-up and top-down leaders converge. Ultimately, leadership models, including distributed leadership models, experienced by educators in schools maintain traditional power dynamics (Meyerson, 2004; Kezar, 2012). The study also demonstrated how pervasive and problematic the Great Man theory or brand of leadership is. Consistent with the literature, perpetuating the charismatic Great Man, tricks Americans into situating themselves in a hierarchical structure where they are at the bottom and a powerful leader is at the top, tricks them into believing that they need the guidance of a Great Man, and results in a developing dependency of and limiting capacity of members in an org. When we point the beam at leaders, we leave everything and everyone else in the dark. The Great Man at the forefront of an organization or movement, reinforces biases and drives narratives about men, leadership, and systemic change (Carson, 1987; Huggins, 1984; Mouton, 2019). Participants in the study witnessed outside forces, including the media, perpetuate this harmful trope and attempt to undermine the collective efforts of the educators and women, for example, in the coalition.

According to this study, social identity does influence how we identify with movement doctrine and build solidarity with campaigns and movements, which is complimentary to the existing literature on social identity and movement building (Platt & Fraser, 1998). Participants acknowledged their White privilege as well as other parts of their identity, such as being women and workers. They centered gender in their analysis of their experiences as educators and their awareness of themselves as workers in a capitalist society. Lastly, participants connected to the coalition and local Black Lives Matter movement through personal relationships rather than
institutional ties and related themselves to the movement as occurring for the benefit of all races (Platt and Fraser, 1998).

In addition to the study supporting the literature on anti-patriarchal, transformative leadership philosophy, organizational structure, campaigns, and processes, the study demonstrated the historical relationship between the labor movement and civil rights/Black liberation movement (Boyer & Morais, 1955; Charney, et. al, 2021; Honey, 1993; Taylor, 2016).

In response to the murder of George Floyd by Police Officer Derek Chauvin, people joined in solidarity to protest across the nation and even across the world. In response to the unsafe working conditions and the exploitation of workers during a global pandemic, labor unions protested. From my perspective, Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) members experienced a renewed commitment to racial justice in their state union. Educators were viewing the pandemic through an intersectional lens, thinking about how the most vulnerable would be impacted by school closures and who the most vulnerable in society were. The coalition’s racial justice work was supported by the MTA. For the participants in this study, their involvement in both the labor movement and modern civil rights/Black liberation movement had never been greater.

Lastly, educator-activists in the coalition found hope and possibility through their activism and organizing (Catone, 2017). This study reinforced the ultimate finding of social movement theory, which is that our strength lies in our collective power (Blanc, 2019; Garza, 2020; Renee and McAlister, 2011).

**Fills Gaps in the Literature**

Although the study primarily reinforced the literature, it also filled gaps and contributed to an emerging body of literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing.
Finding for Guiding Research Question (GRQ) #1: The development of critical consciousness for educators consisted of personal experiences of oppression, education regarding systems of oppression, and activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression (see Figure 2). Although one may not have to experience oppression to understand it and build a commitment to challenging oppressive systems, this was the case for the majority of participants in the study. This study indicated that one component of the development of critical consciousness for educators was personal experiences of oppression which helped participants build empathy and a commitment to challenging oppressive systems.

Finding for GRQ #2: Educator-activists of the coalition organized in a leader-full organization with a flattened hierarchy and with a Freirean toolkit for racial and economic justice (see Figure 3). While Su (2009) previously defined a Freirean toolkit, this study described a critical pedagogical approach to organizing called Action Dialogues which was also inspired by Paulo Freire. Moreover, this study provides an anti-patriarchal (i.e., critical, feminist framework), however imperfect, that may be useful to educators wanting to build coalitions in their communities.

Finding for GRQ #3: Inhibiting factors for participants included their local unions, their profession as educators, sexism, exhaustion, individualism, and educators not being from the community they teach in. Promoting factors for participants included being an educator (also an inhibiting factor), having roots in the community that they teach in, education on systemic racism and other systems of oppression, living in a world historic moment (Black Lives Matter Movement and COVID-19 pandemic), their state teachers union, and the community of the coalition. This study clearly identified inhibiting and promoting factors for educator-activism and organizing for equitable systemic change that is useful to educational organizing groups,
including education labor unions. It provides a reference for organizations to evaluate their organizational structure, policies, and practices. For example, it helps educational organizations know what to implement, nurture, cease, avoid, and challenge.

This study described the violent existence that K-12 educators experience and is rarely captured in the educational literature because the study centered gender in the data analysis. Female participants clearly articulated their experiences with sexism and misogyny and how it impacted them as humans, educators, organizers, and leaders. As described in Chapter Two, despite the teaching profession largely being a workforce of women, still today, men are more likely to occupy formal leadership positions in schools (Maranto, 2018). This is, of course, symptomatic of a larger issue of male domination and sexism. Patriarchy has operated and continues to operate in organizations, including schools, unions, and educational organizing groups and must be acknowledged and challenged when organizing with K-12 educators, so as to avoid perpetuating normative, oppressive experiences for women. Lastly, I would go as far as to say that this study indicates that framing educational issues as women's issues would be an effective campaign development and movement building strategy for educational organizations hoping to engage K-12 educators. Gender justice should be centered in educational organizing.

In conclusion, this study offers greater insight into the development of critical consciousness of K-12 educators, an example of an anti-patriarchal, leader-full organization with a flattened hierarchy and strong ethic of care for its members, examples of organizing tactics, direct action, and educational issues that resonate with K-12 educators, inhibiting and promoting factors to educator activism and organizing, and a route to remoralization that may be useful to educators aiming to build community-based coalitions and organize for equitable systemic change.
Implications of this Study and Recommendations

This research has implications for educators, school workers, school leaders with formal positions of authority, policymakers, organizations that provide professional development and teacher certification/development, and labor unions looking to better understand the experiences of educators organizing for justice and looking for lessons on how to make equitable systemic school change. Included are recommendations for labor organizations, schools, and the coalition.

Recommendations for Labor Organizations and K-12 Schools

Recommendations include the following: provide education on systemic racism and oppression, use a critical feminist lens to evaluate policies and practices so as to not reproduce oppressive dynamics, recruit and retain educators that live in the community they work in, define the purpose of education in a democratic society, and build a strong community and opportunity for collective action.

Provide Education on Systemic Racism and Practice Antiracism. Labor and educational organizations should offer education on systemic racism and oppression. Finding #1 and 3: A promoting factor to critical consciousness and educator-activism for equitable systemic change was educational opportunities to learn about power and privilege and forces/systems of oppression, particularly systemic racism. Participants engaged in a variety of educational experiences to better understand interpersonal as well as systemic (institutional and structural) racism. Participants talked about college courses that they took and how it was the first time that they engaged with topics of power, privilege, and racism. Before taking these courses, they could not put name to what they were observing and experiencing.

Beyond learning about systemic racism and oppression, labor and educational organizations should commit to being antiracist. Finding #1: A promoting factor to critical
consciousness was engaging in activism and organizing to dismantle systems of oppression. This means moving beyond learning about racism. “[An antiracist is] one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing antiracist ideas” (Kendi, 2019, p. 13). One way to challenge systems of oppression is through a critical pedagogical process such as Action Dialogues described in this study (i.e., an iterative process of dialogue, action, dialogue). Action Dialogues involve critical dialogue as well as taking direct action through initiatives and campaigns to disrupt negative power dynamics. The application of abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019), that is, teaching for equitable classrooms that love and affirm Black and Brown children, and understanding of Critical Race Theory (George, 2021) would be helpful to teachers. Additionally, we need to help students build political agency through organizing for racial, gender, and economic justice, not through the types of service projects currently engaged with in schools. Educator unions could engage youth in a variety of projects around labor and racial justice and even offer student labor internships. During the 2021-2022 school year, we started to experience a commitment from educators and schools to being antiracist. However, we also witnessed the corresponding backlash with the attack on ethnic studies programs and Critical Race Theory, banned books, and so on.

**Use a Critical Feminist Lens.** Labor and educational organizations must evaluate policies and practices through an anti-patriarchal, critical feminist lens. Both labor organizations and public schools must critically examine policies, practices, and all of the ways that sexism operates to oppress women/teachers in schools and unions since study participants felt that their gender (but more accurately male domination and sexism) was a barrier to their equity work (Finding #3). These organizations should look at their organizational structure, leadership philosophy, and decision-making processes through a feminist lens. Who holds positions of
authority and who does not? Who is given opportunities for advancement? Whose work is recognized and acknowledged? Whose work is compensated? Whose voices are not heard in decision making? Who are we most concerned with protecting? Those who bear the most cost (i.e., the most vulnerable and marginalized) in an organization need to be centered and deserve a seat at the decision-making table. As stated previously in this dissertation, women can uphold patriarchy too. For instance, paternalism is particularly problematic in local associations; too many locals operate as a “one-man show” (or a one-person show) and create members who are dependent on local presidents and disempowered. From a feminist perspective, labor and educational leaders need to be careful not to “take care of” everything for everyone.

Recruit and Retain Educators that Live in the Community. Labor and educational organizations need to implement and organize initiatives/campaigns to make it easier for educators to work in their own community. Finding # 3: Members of the coalition often commented on the significance of having deep roots in the community where they live and work and how this impacts them as educators as well as how it impacts their understanding of oppression and their commitment to challenge forces and systems of oppression. In the Empathy theme, participants described their struggles as women and immigrants. They described their experiences with housing and food insecurity and racism. These experiences are things they hold in common with their students. When educators live outside of the urban communities that they serve and have made little effort to understand the struggles of their students and the community, it impacts their commitment to activism and organizing for equitable system change, according to participants in the study. Participants attribute not being from and/or living in the community that they teach in as a barrier to engaging in educator-activism for equitable school change.
Define the Role of Schools and Education in Our Society. What is the purpose of schools and unions in a democratic society? Labor and educational organizations need to consider the role of educators in moving society in the direction of equity and justice. Educational institutions need to take seriously their duty to teach more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. Labor organizations need to address more than “bread and butter” issues and counter the ideology of individualism (Finding #3). Robust dialogue and co-constructing a clear vision of the purpose of labor unions and schools in a democratic society is an essential first step to creating educational institutions that function to transform society as opposed to reproduce oppressive systems.

Build Strong Communities. Labor and educational organizations must take care to build a strong sense of community for its members and opportunities for collective action which are both necessary for the sustainability of organizations but also necessary for the liberation of members (Finding #4). A strong sense of community can be created through the organization's shared leadership, flattened organizational structure, and collective action, but also through joyful, loving experiences.

Labor and educational organizations should consider building leader-full organizations or the activation of all to be participatory in the leadership process – allowing members to identify problems, set agendas, and develop solutions collectively. Doing so would involve an examination of hierarchical structures and a critical look at neoliberal organizational values and objectives. In his book Rules for Radicals, Alinsky (1971) wrote that “A good [organizing] tactic is one that your people enjoy. If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with the tactic.” Labor organizations and public schools should consider how
significant joy and radical love are to building community, as well. Being part of a community does not just mean that you have a voice and participate, but that you experience joy and care.

As stated in Chapter Four and identified in Finding # 3, participants expressed feelings of isolation and the weight on their shoulders as individuals fighting for justice. A result of a violent existence, participants felt nervous, scared, exhausted, frustrated, and angry (all emotions identified by participants to describe their feelings). Other outcomes/effects (i.e., symptoms) of abuse that were not identified by participants but inferred by the researcher included feelings of inadequacy, shame, and powerlessness. Exhaustion, isolation, and other feelings observed, are symptoms of demoralization (Santoro, 2012). Santoro (2012) asserted that teachers experience “moral rewards” in their profession. Moral rewards can include connecting meaningfully with students and being able to use your knowledge, skills, and talents to educate students. Demoralization occurs when teachers are no longer able to experience these rewards as a result of oppressive working conditions. According to Santoro (2012), demoralization “is more than just sadness or a sense of defeat, but a sense that the moral dimension of the work is foreclosed.”

The community experienced through the coalition provided an antidote to these feelings. Participants found joy, hope, and inspiration (all emotions identified by participants to describe their feelings) through the coalition. Other outcomes of the strong sense of community in the coalition included expanding sensemaking capacity and feelings of belongingness and security.

At the start of the study and dissertation I wondered: How do teachers, despite the intricate circulation of oppressive ideologies and the current culture of demoralization and deprofessionalization, refuse to be a servant to power, refuse to be submissive, complacent, and compliant and work towards their own and collective liberation? Perhaps the key finding of this research is that engaging in organizing with the coalition served as a process of re-moralization
for participants. The coalition was a space where participants felt seen and valued, a space where they could engage in critical dialogues about their experiences, a space that re-opened a sense of purpose, a space that allowed for the cultivation of agency or, in other words, the feeling that they could transform their realities. Demoralization can’t be solved by individuals. There is no amount of self-care that will remedy the feelings of isolation, exhaustion, and hopelessness. Rather, a remedy, the antidote, demands a collective and structural response rather than an individual one. The ultimate finding in this dissertation is that engaging in organized, collective action is a powerful counter to demoralization.

**Recommendations for the Coalition**

The coalition already has a strong sense of community and is working to challenge White supremacist capitalist patriarchy through its leadership, structure, process, and campaigns.

This study, however, has brought greater awareness as to where the organization can improve or grow. Because outsiders continue to obscure the leadership of the coalition and misrepresent its structure and process, it is clear that there is work to be done to help the public, including other educators, understand how we do what we do. Additionally, the coalition should consider social identity, particularly class cultures, when developing campaigns, as discussed previously. Framing of campaigns should ideally unite students, families, and educators. Although it was not studied, it is possible that coalition campaigns appealed more to middle class educators than to students and families in the community, for example. Additionally, the coalition might consider centering issues that impact immigrant families in the community, since oppression experienced by immigrants came up during data collection and the fish house experience in Chapter Four was so significant to participants. Finally, the coalition should continue to develop its understanding of anti-patriarchal (i.e., critical feminist) leadership and
think more deeply about gender justice when developing campaigns. An Action-Dialogue on corporate neoliberal leadership models versus radical/critical feminist leadership might be a good place to start.

Community organizing is a powerful alternative to neoliberal education reform (Renee & McAlister, 2011). There are lessons to learn from teacher activists organizing for systemic change in a community-based coalition. Contributions include lessons on the development of critical consciousness in teachers, factors and conditions that inhibit and promote educator-activism and organizing for equitable systemic change, and a framework for anti-patriarchal leadership that might be useful to schools and labor organizations. The culture of the coalition (anti-patriarchal leadership philosophy, organizational structure, and organizing process) provides a framework, a starting point, for other educational organizing groups aiming to transform schools and society.

Originality the Study

This study is original in that it explores educator-activism and organizing through a critical/radical feminist lens that centers the experiences of women and applies social movement theory and practice to educational leadership theory and practice. A critical feminist activist ethnographic methodology enabled a cultural insider to explore and document educator activism in a community organizing group and resulted in a deep contextual understanding of public-school teachers organizing for educational justice during a global pandemic. Ultimately, there remains a small but growing body of literature on community organizing for education reform, particularly from the perspective of teachers. This study, however, describes the culture of an educational organizing group from the perspective of educators that could be helpful to other educational organizing groups working to transform schools and society.
Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The delimitations of the study were conscious decisions made by the researcher to ensure that the study was manageable. Delimitations regarding participants included: participants were primarily White female teachers or identified as women, members of one community-based coalition, and K-12 teachers in the same geographic area. Other delimitations included: choosing one community organizing group to examine as opposed to multiple educational organizing groups, exploring educational organizing from the perspective of teachers in the coalition as opposed to other coalition members such as students and parents, the Guiding Research Questions, and the three coding methods. Lastly, the researcher being a cultural insider can be viewed as both a delimitation because of the boundaries it places around the study as well as a limitation.

The intimate encounters that I was able to have with participants was a result of being a coalition member who was engaged in activism and organizing with study participants. The work that I did with participants created the trust needed to collect authentic, rich data. Despite this, being a member of the coalition can be viewed as a limitation. Being a cultural insider makes it impossible to maintain a bird’s eye view of the culture that is being explored. Additionally, my deep connection to participants also meant that I cared very much about their feelings and avoiding hurt feelings. Researcher as insider is described previously in the “The Researcher as An Insider” section in Chapter Three.

The number of participants in the study – the sample size – can be viewed as a limitation, as well. Perhaps the data would have been different if I had observed a larger sample of educators who lived in diverse districts across the region or state.
In my view, the greatest limitations of my research involved not doing the research in partnership with someone and not being knowledgeable about all of the interrelated bodies of literature that informed this dissertation. Ideally, this study would have been a participatory action research study that involved the educator-activists in the coalition. At the very least, it would have been helpful to dialogue with a partner when analyzing data.

Although I did a deep exploration of the bodies of literature most relevant to grassroots educational leadership and organizing, it was not possible to explore all of the interrelated bodies of literature that are relevant to the study. I am a professional educator with degrees in science and education. I do not have a background in American history, labor, or social movements. Expertise in these fields would have likely strengthened my analysis.

Lastly, even though I aimed to be mindful of what I brought to the study and analysis of the data through journaling, I am certain that there are blind spots or, in other words, that I remain unaware or unconscious of all of the various ways that I have been socialized.

**Future Research**

After reviewing the literature on grassroots educational leadership and organizing by K-12 educators for equitable systemic change and completing this study, there are a number of next steps that I might take or would suggest others to take. The following is a list of topics that need to be further explored through a critical/radical feminist, qualitative lens:

- The Leadership of Local Education Associations: Philosophy, Structure, and Process.
  - Example: Explore the ways that local union officers practice leadership and what the benefits and limitations are.
- Race, Religion, and Righteous Educator Activism
○ Example: Seek to understand the relationship between race, religion, and righteous social justice activism in educators.

● Social Identity and Framing Campaigns for Collective Action
  ○ Example: Discover what turns educators away or ties them to campaigns, particularly racial justice campaigns.

● Action Dialogues, Sensemaking, and Action Taking
  ○ Example: Explore Actions Dialogues, or learning as a dialogical process, as a sensemaking process and route to agency for educators.

● Black Lives Matter Movement and the Education Labor Movement During COVID-19 Pandemic in Massachusetts
  ○ Example: Understand the relationship between the Black Lives Matter movement and social justice unionism in Massachusetts.

● Coalition Members and Remoralization.
  ○ Example: Report stories of re-moralization of members of the coalition engaged in educational organizing.

**Final Reflections**

In my Statement of Sociocultural Perspective (SSP) that I wrote as a benchmark paper for my doctoral program at Lesley University, I explored defining personal social experiences and significant aspects of American culture that shaped who I am and what I know about the world (Takacs, 2003, p. 27) with a critical look at concepts of privilege and inequity. In the SSP, I described my ideology as an educational leader and biases that could influence my research. I also included ways to remain vigilant to address biases. In this section of Chapter Five, I do not go into the depth with which I explored my sociocultural perspective in the SSP, but I do
disclose my own personal interest in the research topic, a summary of my reflexivity practice (i.e., a summary of journal reflections), ethical dilemmas that came up for me during the study, and what I learned both personally and professionally as a result of the dissertation process.

Personal Interest

I am an educator. I have been a high school science teacher for my entire adult life. While friends and family have tried out more than one career, I have not. In fact, even my high school job was as a camp counselor working with children. Professionally speaking, being an educator is all I have ever known.

While I used to believe that educators educate students to transform society and make it a better place, at some point, I became disillusioned. I realized that the schools that I had worked at functioned to maintain the power and privilege status quo. I felt like I was working to maintain an unjust society despite my best efforts to do good/to do the right thing in my classroom.

It took a decade in the profession for me to realize that I could not change my school, let alone public education, by signing up for another curriculum project or committee. It took a decade in the profession to realize the limitations of educators both with and without formal positions of authority to make equitable systemic change. I began to understand that my boss was just a compliance manager and that he was just as demoralized as the rest of us.

Wanting to find greater meaning and purpose in my profession, learn more about systems change and how to move schools and society in the direction of equity and justice, and find other educators who had similar concerns and commitments, in 2018, I enrolled in a PhD program in Educational Leadership, looked for leadership opportunities in the National Education Association and Massachusetts Teachers Association, and joined the coalition.
Quickly, I became fascinated by the activism of educators much like myself who were organizing to transform schools and society. I wished that I had gotten involved in my union sooner and that I had discovered the coalition or a group like it earlier on in my career. I wanted to dig into the experiences of educator-activists and share everything that we were learning with the world.

Summary of Reflexivity

A critical feminist researcher aims for an honest and transparent account of the biases, assumptions, experiences, preconceptions, and beliefs that they bring to a topic of study. I practiced reflexivity in three ways: (1) I wrote an in-depth paper of my sociocultural perspective which examined my privilege; (2) I shared my experiences, thoughts, and feelings openly and honestly with participants during the study; and (3) I journaled, documenting what thoughts and feelings came up for me during data collection and analysis.

Certainly, as a public high school teacher and member and co-chair of the coalition, I brought assumptions and preconceptions to this work. I hold biases as a woman and as someone who belongs to almost every dominant group in society (e.g., White, able bodied, heterosexual, and Christian). As mentioned, I shared honestly and openly with participants during the study. Our interviews were dialogues as opposed to one-way conversations. In all of our encounters, I probably shared just as much as I listened. This wasn’t strictly a result of my research approach but, more so, that the participants and I became friends. In dialogue with friends, it is only natural to both give and receive. My journal entries were extensive; however, a handful of entries stand out as particularly relevant. Here, I include a summary of those entries.

It turned out that the transformative experiences cited by participants in the coalition were transformative for me, as well. Two transformative experiences included: the morning we
went with the fish house workers to deliver a letter to management and the evenings we reviewed the evidence of the death of a local Black youth. Those experiences made a significant impression on many of us, reminding us that the world is not as it should be.

In the Introduction to Chapter Four, I chose to describe the experience with the fish house workers for this reason. The experience sensitized me further to the oppression experienced by immigrants in America and in our community. A quote from my journal entry read: “I looked toward the pink cherry blossoms for comfort. On an avenue of concrete and plastic, black soot, and debris, and people living in poverty, these trees were possibly the only life thriving.”

“Thriving versus surviving,” I wrote in my notes. It made me think of family and friends who spend their days figuring out how to manifest an abundant life, how to thrive. “They aren’t preoccupied with survival.” (Survival – this was something I understood on a visceral level due to an incredibly challenging and personal experience in my life.) It made me think of family and friends who employ undocumented workers as nannies, housekeepers, and farmhands. It made me think of my twin brother and his commitments to immigration and labor law. It made me think of the cruel anti-immigrant positions and actions taken by Donald Trump and Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson. Shortly after this experience, I found myself participating in Matahari Women’s Workers Center virtual events and following their monthly newsletter.

The murder of the local Black youth sensitized me further to the oppression experienced by people of color in America and in our community. Prior to the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin, I had built solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement. My mother had bought me a black and yellow Black Lives Matter sweatshirt in March for my birthday three months before Floyd was murdered. I was aware of the roots of White supremacy in the criminal justice system and police brutality. In fact, I, myself, had experienced excessive,
unwarranted use of force by a police officer in my twenties and needed help from a professional therapist to cope with the trauma from that experience. To this day, I feel uneasy when in the presence of a police officer. Witnessing the surveillance tapes of youth of color hanging out and playing basketball and the police rolling up on them, however, probably made the greatest impression on me. I experienced, along with study participants, what can be described as shock and utter disgust. We were entirely unaware that police had this much power and control over the lives of our children of color. Other than the murder of George Floyd, I had not seen such a gross abuse of power in my life and the local case furthered my support of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLMM).

The BLMM called for a critical look at the role of police in society and in schools. These events led to the development of the Police Free Schools campaign and, sadly, also created significant tension between myself, family, and friends who don’t share the same understanding of systemic racism, perspective, and experiences. It is difficult for me to understand how taking a position to remove police from schools could cost me a friendship that I had since preschool. The loss of this friendship has been heartbreaking; however, I am unable to ignore my values, principles, beliefs, convictions. I cannot study educational leadership and avoid naming racist policies and practices in schools and taking a position to remove police from schools no matter how threatening and uncomfortable it is.

Sexism was a theme in my sociocultural perspective paper (SSP) and a theme in my journal entries. In my SSP, I detailed the unequal treatment of men and women that I experienced as a youth being the twin to a male. As an educator, I experienced what it meant to work in a gendered profession. As a co-chair to a male, I experienced sexism as it relates to
leadership and public perception. I could relate to the sexist, misogynistic encounters experienced by the participants in this study, including sexual harassment and assault.

In many ways, I fit the demographic of K-12 educators in America and of the majority of participants in this study. In other ways, my experiences differed from study participants. For example, I am not a first- or second-generation immigrant and, although my mother struggled financially in my youth, we did not experience the level of poverty described by half of the participants in the study. Despite the adversity that my family faced, our apartment growing up was a family home and my mother was able to pursue an education.

I could not have anticipated the six themes that emerged from this study. The Violence theme surprised me. Meaning, it jumped out at me, hit me in the face, unexpectedly. The words described in Chapter Four when I was coding were jarring. I myself had not experienced a family member murdered by police. I had not experienced the level of surveillance, exhaustion, or being unable to fully exist as an adult that participants described in schools. I assume this is in large part because I do not work in the same city or district as participants in the study. The demographic at my school is different, our MCAS scores are satisfactory, and we have greater resources available to us. I have experienced feeling like I can’t fully exist as a mother, educator, academic, and activist at once. I can relate to feeling as though my identity needs to be fragmented or that I need to fragment myself depending on spaces that I am in or people that I am around. I don’t like when I am in spaces where I have to pretend that I don’t have a child that needs me or that I have to be considerate of. I don’t like when I am in spaces with other mothers or family where I have to pretend that I don’t have other priorities besides my child. Although I am asserting that I can’t fully identify with the Violence theme, I also believe that I may be unaware of how oppressive my own experience as an educator has been, for example. As I
shared earlier, teaching is the only profession that I have ever known. This could be the apologue of the boiling frog: If you put a frog in a pot of boiling water it will instantly leap out, but if you put a frog in a pot filled with slightly warm water and gradually heat it, the frog will remain in the water until it boils to death. Maybe I am like the frog, not able to detect the gradual increase in temperature until it's too late.

Unlike the Violence theme, I could relate more to the following themes: Empathy: the ability to share and understand the experiences of others; Education: education on racism and oppression; Righteousness: moral law and binary of right and wrong; Responsibility: responsibility of White educators; and Community: community builds capacity. In my SSP, I discussed White saviorism and my experience in the United States Peace Corps. For as far back as I can remember, I have felt a deep commitment to being in the service of others and fighting for equity, equality, and justice. It took my Peace Corps experience in Jamaica to understand the difference between saving the oppressed and working together toward liberation and understand how problematic it is to recreate a harmful trope that centers White folks as heroes and identifies White folks as good.

Overall, I experienced similar barriers and promoting factors to activism and organizing for equitable systemic change as participants in the study. The BLMM was probably one of the most significant promoting factors for me, as well as the community experienced through the coalition. While so many educators around me were depressed and anxious during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the advantage of a community – the coalition – that helped expand my capacity for hope, joy, and purpose.

There is so much that I could say about my biases, assumptions, experiences, preconceptions, and beliefs that I bring to this study. This section is a summary of my journal
and only a glimpse of my reflexivity practice. Detailing the entire experience would be a dissertation in itself, an autoethnographic study. Ultimately, journaling was a useful way to remain vigilant of my biases about women, educators, and the coalition and aware of how it might have influenced data collection and analysis.

Ethical Dilemmas

I read a lot about entering a community when doing an ethnographic study but did not read much about exiting one. It was not due to a lack of trying. I found that there is a dearth of literature on exiting a community which you have been immersed in to collect data. It was difficult to find literature that captured my feelings and concerns around ending the study and exiting.

The dilemma for me was compounded by the reality that I grew attached to study participants. I cared deeply about their feelings and how my work would impact them. I worried about abandoning them and the work of the coalition once the study was complete, that they would feel used, and that completing the study would not benefit them and the community.

As much as I want to honor my own hard work in my doctoral program, I would not have been able to write a dissertation and get a PhD without the participants in this study. At the conclusion of this process I will have earned a PhD that could help me move up the socioeconomic ladder, that could open doors for me, while participants in this study do not benefit from the privilege of holding a doctorate.

After spending years reading the scholarly literature on education and education justice, I also wonder how much research and academia really impacts schools and the education profession, especially when everything in schools feels so backwards and people around me don’t seem to care about research. The local school system does not seem to care about the
scholarly literature on police in schools and the school to prison pipeline. My own school district cares minimally to support me in my pursuit of a PhD. Will my research have a positive impact on the educators in this study or my community? This study could end up filed away in an electronic database never to be used in any meaningful way. It could end up just a line in my Curriculum Vitae. I don’t want it to. I want it to be useful to others.

What I Learned Personally and Professionally

Through the dissertation process, I learned a lot about who I want to be as a leader and a researcher. The type of research and the process. I am proud of the work of the participants in this study and the entire coalition. I am grateful for the guidance of my committee; I stand by the methodological choices made; and, I am genuinely proud of my research. However, I might have done things differently if I had known what I know now. Maybe I would have chosen autoethnography because my personal experiences could have strengthened the work by providing a more intimate account of experiences. Perhaps I would have collected data through more creative processes, such as through portraiture for instance. Moving forward, as a researcher, I will likely embrace participatory action research so as to develop work with others, engage in data analysis with participants, and publish work together.

As a leader I learned a lot, too. Conducting a study with people that you are organizing with forces you to consider your role in their experiences. I had to ask myself if I was also a force that limited their agency and ability to challenge negative power relations and organize for equitable systemic change. I listened to what they shared about their experiences in their locals, schools, and lives and asked myself if I was creating, reinforcing, and supporting the same oppressive conditions in the coalition.

I learned:
● That we can hold contradictory thoughts and feelings simultaneously about public education. For example, as a leader who believes in public education as a public good I can defend public education while also critiquing it. I can be pro public schools and acknowledge the ways our schools are failing students.

● That while I can sympathize and empathize, my experiences are not the same as others. I learned to remain vigilant of my White privilege.

● That good, meaningful work is messy and to value process over product. I have gotten criticism from people about the sensemaking and organizing process of the coalition at times. People are used to straight paths. Efficiency is normalized and associated with success and productivity. Zig zags and circles feel messy and unproductive, but they are not.

● That transformative work is messy and even painful at times. Challenging negative power relations is incredibly hard and comes with discomfort.

● That I need to be even more flexible and open to possibilities. The first idea might not be the best idea, my idea is not the only idea, and we all deserve the freedom to exercise our creativity, try things out, and make mistakes.

● That community care is critical to the strength of and sustainability of an organization, especially an educational justice organization. This means that we operate with a strong ethic of care for our members and their families.

● That genuine relationships build solid foundations and relationship building takes time. Transactional relationships do not result in meaningful work or sustainable organizations. Building relationships involves being present with others; it means listening and showing up for others when they are in need, but mostly listening.
● To set personal emotional boundaries to manage the amount of time spent on others and their feelings; specifically, the amount of time I spend on soothing male egos. I find myself wanting to make men feel good and important. I worry that if they don’t feel powerful and in control that they won’t want to participate. I sometimes find myself not wanting to upset men even if they should be upset. Ultimately, it is not my responsibility to help men work through these feelings and emotions.

● To be more honest with others, because I tend to withhold the truth when I am trying to avoid hurt feelings.

● To stand up for myself by sharing how I feel and communicating clearly.

● To be inclusive when building a movement. An organization won’t grow and a campaign won’t turn into a movement if we remain insular and fear collaboration.

● When to apply pressure. Resorting to public, contentious action is necessary when collaboration and negotiation fails.

● To see the value in everyone, to see their brilliance, talents, and strengths and to help others see the beauty in them too.

Concluding Statement

Grassroots, anti-patriarchal educational leadership is a powerful alternative to corporate leadership models. Educational organizing is a powerful means to equitable systemic school change. As a result of this study, there is greater insight into: (1) the development of critical consciousness in teachers, (2) the ways teachers practice anti-patriarchal leadership to organize for equitable systemic change, and (3) factors and conditions that inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations. The coalition’s culture (leadership, structure,
process, and campaigns) provides a framework for other educational organizing groups aiming to transform schools and society.

If you are an educator who is feeling uninspired, lethargic, anxious, or hopeless, I urge you to connect with others who are experiencing similar problems and then identify solutions and take action together. As Joan Baez said, “Action is the antidote to despair.”
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Appendix A

Demographic Survey

1. Name *
   
   Your answer

2. Job Title *
   
   Your answer

3. Place of Employment *
   
   Your answer

4. Briefly outline your education: Include the schools you attended as a youth as well as post secondary educational institutions. Please include degrees and degree programs. *
   
   Your answer

5. Pronouns *
   
   a. they/them
   b. she/her
   c. he/him
   d. Other:

6. Gender *
   
   a. Woman
   b. Man
   c. Prefer not to say
   d. Other:
7. Race *

a. American Indian or Alaska Native – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

b. Black or African American – A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.

c. Asian – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

e. White – A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

f. Other:

8. Age *

a. 20-30

b. 31-40

c. 41-50

d. 51-60

e. 61+
## Appendix B

### Field Observation Tool

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<td>What experiences engender the critical consciousness of these teachers?</td>
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<td>What are the various ways these teachers organize for equitable systemic change?</td>
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<td>What factors and conditions inhibit and promote the intentional dismantling of negative power relations by these teachers?</td>
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## Coding

Coding Methods:
- Descriptive Coding
- Emotion Coding
- Values Coding
Appendix C

Interview Tool

● What campaigns/causes have you been involved with?

● How would you describe your activism and/or organizing in regards to these campaigns?

● What was the most radicalizing or transformative action/campaign/initiative and why?

● What brought you to the coalition?

● What factors and/or conditions have inhibited your participation in activism and organizing?

● What factors and/or conditions have promoted/supported your participation in activism and organizing?

● How have your life experiences developed your ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and developed your commitment to take action against these systems?

● What brings you to doing racial justice work and supporting the Black Lives Matter Movement?