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We Gotta Work with What We Got: School and Community Factors That Contribute to Educational Resilience Among African American Students

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"WE GOTTA WORK WITH WHAT WE GOT": SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY FACTORS

THAT CONTRIBUTE TO EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE

AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how Black residents in the Mississippi Delta claim and deploy agency and resiliency in a rural community context entrenched in a legacy of oppression. Black, low-income communities are implicitly labeled non-resilient when macro-level community capitals and resiliency literature are applied. However, I find that resiliency is culturally distinctive and oftentimes detected in ritual, daily processes in Black communities. This thesis rejects dominant narratives that Black communities in Mississippi are only poor, backwards, and lacking. It questions the assumption that dominant institutions have created inescapable boundaries for Black people in this region and challenges the notion that the current and past economic exploitations by dominant White elites determine the lives and identities of Black people.

The research question for this thesis is straightforward—what are Black people doing and saying in their daily lives that counter the cultural deficit language imposed on the Delta region? Through this question, I explore what agency looks like for Black students, and how they re-define resilience through skepticism and frustration. Black students in the Mississippi Delta exercise human agency, defined as pre-existing practices of knowledge that empower collectives and individuals in the pursuit of their goals and values deemed important, through cultural and educational capital enriched by freedom schools and community members (Bourdieu 1984; Sen 1999). The findings consisted of three themes that described the teacher-student encounters in relation to students' learning at the freedom project and the local public school. The first narrative, *Encounters between the teacher and student*, described a latent awareness of the

students' position in Rosedale's and the Delta's unique history. The second narrative, *Students as critical thinkers/sociologists*, described how the students are already practitioners, and the third narrative, *Space and exclusion*, described the students' awareness of what community means by living in the Mississippi Delta. Each theme provided evidence that Black students have created resilience by rejecting dominant perspectives about their lives, consistently shaped and re-shaped community to promote resiliency building and activated their own agency to overcome structural problems in their community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My first voyage from my hometown of Jackson, Mississippi to Cleveland, a town in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, took two hours on Highway 49. The drive was long, hot, and slow, like most Mississippi Sundays during the month of May, and I did not know what to expect. I played Solange. I ate gas station fried gizzards with a side of okra and hot sauce. The operations director at the Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP), where I would be working for the next two months, gave me information on the location, name, and monthly housing payment that would be due upon entrance into my summer home. With no face to the name, and just enough money to pay for rent, I was on my way.

While driving down Highway 49, I began to recycle thoughts about where I was going and what I was going for. I am a product of Mississippi. I have traveled many Mississippi highways filled with trees, small abandoned gas stations, and signs telling me to "Love Jesus" or I would go to hell. The South, the deep South, is a familiar place to me. It is home. However, this home had no face to the name, and just enough money to pay for rent, and it was beginning to feel more real and less familiar than my Jackson, Mississippi roots. I had questions. Some of them were practical. How was I going to teach my students with the reassurance I received and grown to love by studying Sociology? How was I going to make Marx relatable to 15-year-old Black students? Were they going to ask questions that I could not answer? Had I prepared enough content to pull from? What else, who else, how much else of these critical ideas did I need to teach my students?

Some of my questions were informed by training as a sociology master's student interested in student agency and activism. How do students become socially conscious? Are oppressed students more socially aware than others? How do marginalized students relate to oppression? How do Black students build a sociological imagination? What happens when we give teenagers tools to assess oppressive institutions? Will the students become empowered or lose hope? Are the students already empowered? What does voice look like for these students? Can the students speak for themselves? For their families? For their community? Do they advocate for their lives daily? I was once a Black high school student living in Mississippi, and I had questions about the world that my majority White advanced placement teachers could not answer. Much of my curiosity about my students were directly related to how I processed the social world as a Black girl living in Mississippi. Ultimately, it seemed, all of my questions boiled down to one: Is there agency in this place, and what does it look like?

I began to embark on my first real trip to Rosedale, MS with little sleep from the last night, but enough energy to last me through the day. While using my GPS to navigate the many stop signs and traffic lights of the neighborhood I was staying in, I started to familiarize myself with the turns and landmarks of the trip to Rosedale because I would be taking this trip every morning over the next few months. Delta State University was close by. There was a gas station, local Fred's, and public park after my first few turns. As I made it to the main street I realized that that day would be the first day of orientation as a summer teacher at the Rosedale Freedom Project. The first day of orientation was exciting, but unfamiliar to me. I had never taught anyone's child before, nor had I designed my own curriculum. But here I was, coming into a new place with little expertise. For the entire drive, I was thinking about teaching and learning, and how to do both over the span of two months—my "freedom summer."

I had naïve impressions about the Mississippi Delta, much like most people who are not from the Delta. I heard about this place multiple times in my life, but the descriptions were only surface level and informed by the news. I started my twenty-mile trek down highway 8 while listening to "Cause I love your smileeeee" by Shanice with a cracked window to help lighten my mood. I then began to see the many lives at play in this region. I started scanning the beauty of this area while smelling the fresh air and freshly cut grass of a Mississippi morning that I have grown to love and appreciate. I started to see lengthy fields filled with narratives, lives, and complex meanings, which marked the entrance into this small rural town.

Reminiscent of my parents' rural Mississippi hometown, the scenery was embracing. The vivid sun of a summer morning, the greenery in the agricultural fields, the tractors and farm equipment holding up traffic—which can be frustrating if you are on a two-lane highway rushing to work—and the people driving to either the factory, prison, or farm to complete a day's work. I had arrived in a place with a history both rich and broken, both familiar and unseen, both rural and distinguished, with Black faces and white teeth that could make anyone feel at home and out-of-place at the same time. The humanity had been taken away by the media, estranged books, and popular culture, but the people had never left. I wanted to know the people and the humanity they created, which serves as the basis for this research.

The rural Mississippi Delta is one of those forgotten places until it is necessary to talk about it as one of the poorest places in the United States. It is a region with a history that often undermines the Black residents who call the region home and discounts past community movements for freedom, equality, and social change. Through decades of economic advancement in the United States, this place, the Mississippi Delta, remains disconnected from abundant economic development opportunities. The unjust systems of slavery and Jim Crow

created uneven development for Black people throughout the region (Lyson and Falk 1993). The Mississippi Delta is known popularly as a blues destination and has received a lot of attention for its striking rates of poverty, economic inequality, and infrastructural decline (Cobb 1992; Duncan 1999; Fontenot et al. 2010; King 2011). What is lost in popular and academic commentary regarding these issues is the impact on the lives of the region's Black residents, and how they mitigate these disadvantages to sustain meaningful livelihoods.

This study begins with the following premise: popular depictions of Mississippi as being little more than the poorest and most backward state brings additional burdens and a sense of stigma to the state's residents, especially Black residents. Scholars have documented how Mississippi fought to keep Black people as second-class citizens while providing them with a basic education (Cobb 1992; Dittmer 1994; Span 2009; Anderson 2010; Hale 2016; McCord and Hamlin 2016; Sanders 2016). Yet, Black leadership and everyday folk challenged the dominant structures that impeded their livelihoods (Sojourner 2012; Hamlin 2012; Morris 2015). Mississippi Delta Black residents push for movements for change even today. There are multiple open lawsuits[1] against the Mississippi public school system for enacting segregation violations through racially divided school systems, where school districts that serve predominately Black students receive less funding, resources, and have a higher shortage of teachers than their White counterparts (CNN 2016; Clarion Ledger 2019; Mississippi Today 2019).

This thesis subverts the dominant discourse about Mississippi and the Delta by giving voice to Black agency, resilience, and everyday life. I ask how Black residents of the Mississippi Delta claim and deploy agency in their daily lives? In what ways do rural Black people from the

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[1] The US District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi ordered to desegregate the Cleveland, Mississippi school district in 2017 (CNN 2017); Segregated classrooms in the Brookhaven School District (Clarion Ledger 2019); The rise of segregationist academies in Mississippi (NBC 2018).

Mississippi Delta complicate normative definitions about what both individual and community resilience mean? To address these questions, I use an ethnographic approach where I primarily draw on participant and field observations at the Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP) in Rosedale, Mississippi, and in-depth interviews with both students and community members. I collected the data during my time teaching a sociology course to 9th grade students at the RFP as part of a new curriculum that I co-developed with the center's executive director through a partnership with the University of Mississippi McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement.

My research interest is straightforward: I want to know what Black people are doing and saying in their daily lives that counters the cultural deficit language imposed on the region. My questions are complicated by the many different factors—race, class, region, gender, religion, sexuality, and other social formations—and historical developments in the region (Davis 2016). Cobb (1992) argued that the economic development strategies from the 1930s to the 1960s worked to keep the Delta underdeveloped. Institutional practices, largely implemented and enforced by "pervasive global and national economic influences and consistent interaction with a federal government whose policies often confirmed the Delta's inequities and reinforced its anachronistic social and political order" have created ideas about Black residents being the cause of underdevelopment in the Delta (Cobb 1992:333). Rural Mississippi underdevelopment is perhaps most evident and has been most consequential throughout the region's education system.

Education and the Freedom School Movement in the Mississippi Delta

The Delta's education system historically reflected and supported the region's economic institutions (Bowles and Gintis 2002; Anderson 2010). White residents were persistent in their efforts to keep Black people "in their place" in the southern educational movement. The

pervasiveness of Whiteness could not have been more pronounced than at the turn of the 20th Century. The White planter elite believed that the "right schooling" would train Black students to be better laborers in order to ensure social stability and economic prosperity for White elites. According to Anderson (2010), in 1901, the President of the University of Tennessee made the following remarks in a speech about education and the economy:

> The negro is in the South to stay— he is a necessity for southern industries— and the southern people must educate and so elevate him or he will drag them down… We must use common sense in the education of the negro… We must recognize in all its relations that momentous fact that the negro is a child race, at least two thousand years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development. (p. 85)

Politicians and local stakeholders believed that public education should only prepare Black students for industry and sustaining the economic segregated order. The struggle for economic and political power was between the South's landed upper-class Whites, who depended on their wealth and power from a predominantly illiterate class of Black people, and a coalition of southern Whites and northern philanthropists (Anderson 2010).

Educational movements such as the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial education began to emerge as a result of the exploitation of Black labor by the White planter elite and a strategically limiting education system. Booker T. Washington created the Hampton-Tuskegee model to prepare Black people for trade jobs, which Washington believed would help support Black communities economically. W.E.B. DuBois considered the Hampton-Tuskegee model a second-class education that did little more than keep Black people in low skilled jobs to uphold the racial caste system. Yet, both scholars used education to increase their knowledge on how

social systems worked to overcome systemic oppression and a sense of fatalism and self-defeat, which was evident in Black communities (Cobb 1992).

The United States Supreme Court did not grant equal access to public education until the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. Mississippi schools were among the worst schools in the United States leading up to the Brown decision, and by the mid-1960s, Mississippi schools were still segregated with White leaders withholding equitable educational opportunities for Black students (Sturkey and Hale 2015). The Mississippi Delta's unequal education system did not change until ten years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision when the Freedom Summer Movement and the Freedom School curriculum were introduced in 1964 (Ibid).

Charles Cobb, a field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), proposed the idea of a freedom school in 1963, where organizers involved in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 adopted his idea and began constructing radical educational goals connected to the Civil Rights Movement. The Freedom School curriculum, developed by and for Black Mississippians, was designed to teach students basic education skills and develop a sense of self-worth and Black pride in order to mobilize and become community organizers. The curriculum was deemed radical because students were informed about institutional power structures and how to combat systemic racism. The official Freedom School curriculum contained three parts, with the most significant component being the "citizenship curriculum," which was to train students to be active agents in bringing about social change (Sturkey and Hale 2015; Hale 2016).

The 1964 summer initiative brought 41 official Freedom Schools to Mississippi, offering Black students their first opportunity at a meaningful and valuable education. Students learned about student activism, participatory democracy, issues of social justice, and how to demand their freedom. The Freedom Schools demonstrated that specially designated schools can be

powerful spaces for Black students and community members to make healthy and productive strides towards community empowerment and a collective, self-identified Black identity. The White power structures in the region began to recognize the success of the Freedom Schools and attempted to shut them down (Hale 2016). Black community leaders, however, continued to push for Freedom Schools because they gave Black students a space to become aware of their own agency, and to activate and exercise this agency in creative and dynamic ways.

This study is set in the Rosedale Freedom Project[2] (RFP) in Rosedale, Mississippi. RFP is one of three remaining Freedom Schools in the state.[3] I spent ten months working with the Rosedale Freedom Project to develop a 9th grade sociology curriculum (see Figure 1). I received support for this work from the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement[4] at the University of Mississippi. I spent two of the ten months (June and July) commuting to Rosedale, MS daily from my shared living quarters in Cleveland, MS to teach at the RFP. During this time, I took field notes of the class I was teaching, and observed and conducted interviews with students as a part of my thesis project.

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[2] Although formally called the Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP), the center operates as an after-school and summer school program for both middle and high school students from Rosedale, MS and surrounding towns. The center utilizes a separate curriculum independent from the local school system similar to the Freedom School curriculum of the 1960s.

[3] The sister Mississippi Freedom Projects are located in Sunflower County, MS, and Meridian, MS.

[4] The McLean Institute's mission is to create transformative opportunities for university students and to fight poverty through education. The McLean Institute's community engagement efforts developed strong relationships with the Freedom Schools in Sunflower and Bolivar Counties, Mississippi. These partnerships were first developed and brokered with the university's AmeriCorps VISTA program housed at the McLean Institute. The Rosedale community, along with other Delta communities, has experienced past injustices and persistent poverty. They benefit from these mutually beneficial partnerships. Likewise, the university benefits from this partnership and learning experience.

Figure 1: Rosedale Freedom Project
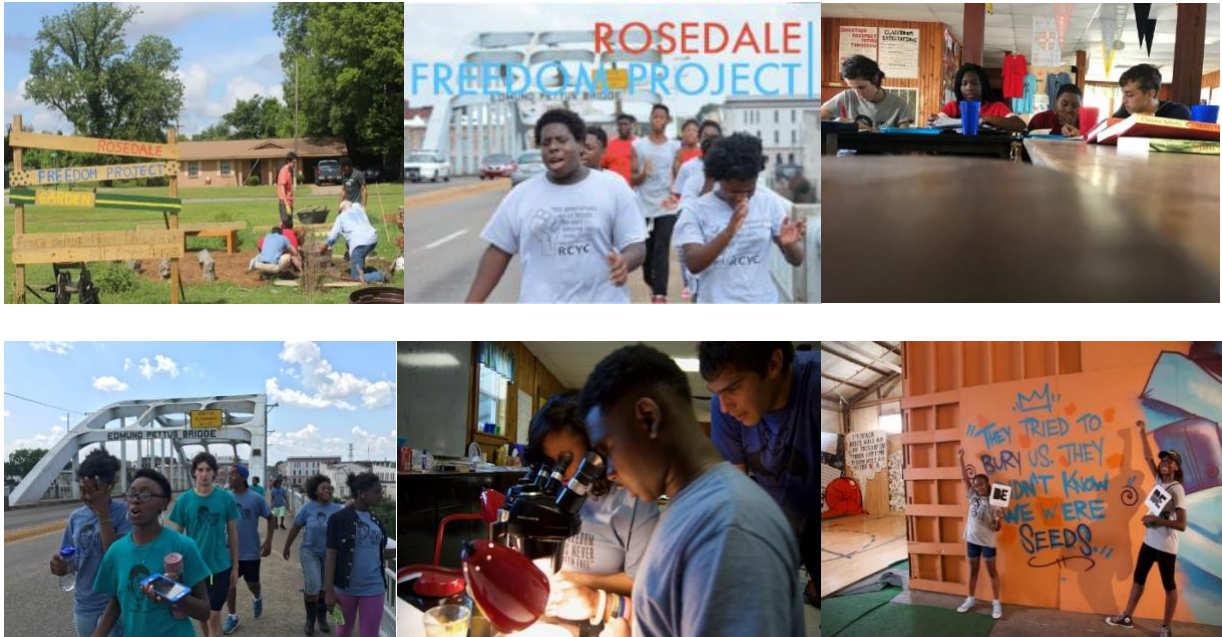
The pictures are from the RFP website, which lists the various activities and academic curriculums that the RFP provides for its students. The pictures above are from the RFP garden, march in Birmingham, Alabama, class-sessions, and social justice museums.

The Study Site – Rosedale, Mississippi

Rosedale, Mississippi is a quaint town of approximately 2000 people and a 90% Black population. It sits along the Mississippi River, 103 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee (see Figure 2). The town has one grocery store, a Piggly Wiggly, a gas station that serves many southern delicacies like fried okra and fried corn, a Chinese store that operates as a local quick-shop and Chinese restaurant, and a hot tamale cafe. The West Bolivar Consolidated School District is located in the town's core, which serves elementary through high school students in Rosedale and the nearby communities: Gunnison, Beulah, Pace, Benoit, and Shaw. High school graduates attend the local university, Delta State University, which is located 19 miles East in Cleveland, MS, or Coahoma Community College in Clarksdale, MS.
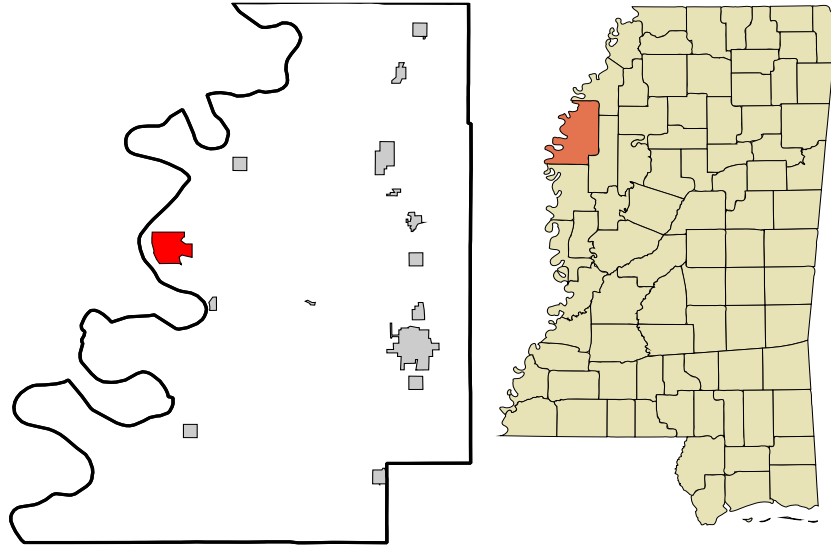
This map was created in 2007 and shows areas in Bolivar County, Mississippi, highlighting Rosedale in red. It was created with a custom script with US Census Bureau data and modified with Inkscape by creativecommons.org.

Rosedale's median household income was $18,195 in 2016, which is $24,457 lower than the state's median household income and $40,661 lower than the U.S. median household income. Sixty-three percent of the population held a high school diploma, with only 7% holding a bachelor's degree. The unemployment rate was 21.4%, while the Mississippi unemployment rate was roughly 6% and the United States was at 5% (Rosedale, MS 2017). The most common employment opportunities in Rosedale are located at the Port of Rosedale, local police station, public school system, farms, federal assistance programs, and the local double-quick or Piggly Wiggly (Mississippi 2016). Figure 3 is looking from south to north in Rosedale's downtown.

Rosedale serves this study's goals because it is a microcosm of many historical developments that have shaped the Delta. In Rosedale, and throughout the Delta region, federal agencies after reconstruction assisted in artificially maintaining a divided region. The wealthier planter class received federal subsidies in the millions to support restricted planting due to former Black slaves leaving plantations. Black residents, who were denied quality job

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opportunities, received limited government assistance (Cobb 1990). The education system maintained its segregated practices. Teachers prepared Black and low-income White students in the newly integrated public schools for trade-related jobs, while the wealthy planter-based families sent their children out of state for education (Cobb 1990; Lyson and Falk 1993).

Figure 3: Rosedale, MS

The picture above is a main street in Rosedale, MS and includes a Chinese store, gas station, and small food hub.

Poverty in Rosedale is deeply stratified by race and ethnicity, with poverty rates for Black people disproportionately higher than Whites who live in Rosedale (ACS 2016). Fifty-seven percent of the residents living in Rosedale are impoverished (Mississippi 2017) while Black residents are the overwhelming majority of residents living in poverty. Do the following rhetorical questions on how Black people respond to poverty deserve merit? Is the uneven development in the Delta deterministic for Black residents? Does the Black community assume the narrative of "hopelessness" and "deficit"? What are the aspirations of Rosedale's people? How do Rosedale's people see themselves?

This thesis explores how the Freedom School and community environments contribute to educational success for Black youth in Rosedale. I provide a case study of community and educational resilience among Black students and community members in the rural Mississippi Delta. There are no studies that critically assess resiliency in Black, rural communities by examining youth agency. There have been studies that examine community resilience and youth agency from a normalized framework where perceptions of community traditionally serve a White viewpoint (O'Connor 1997; Glandon 2008; Ford 2010; Sherrieb et al. 2010). However, research on resiliency has moved towards multi-cultural/ethnic/racial frameworks that also include other oppressed identities, as well as both urban, rural, and international communities (Frost and Meyer 2009; Gram-Hanssen 2018; Shilo et. al 2015; Singer et. al 2015). This study examines a rural, Black community's asset used to overcome past inequalities, and it explores a youthful approach to social change. I also present an analysis of the educational movement of freedom schools stemming from the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, and a research university's community engagement partnership to fight poverty through education.

This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1) *How do Black youth activate their agency and resilience in the rural community context of the Mississippi Delta's legacy of oppression?*

Numerous studies have examined rural sustainable development through a livelihoods and resilience approach in White or international communities and primarily from a macro-perspective. This study examines rural Black Deltans' livelihoods who inherited geographically and culturally predetermined positions that seem impenetrable to many outsiders. I will use

ethnographic observations, and student and community members' interviews to shed light on resilient characteristics that are embodied in this place.

2) *How do students increase their agency on civic mindedness and social justice by embracing additional education through the Rosedale Freedom Project?*

The Freedom School Movement of the 1960s created a curriculum that encouraged Mississippi youth to become community activists through radical education. Freedom Schools allowed students to embrace new forms of educational capital that highlight civic mindedness and social awareness in the struggle for equality. The work of the Freedom School Movement persists today at the Rosedale Freedom Project. I was immersed in the daily operations of the school in the summer of 2018, and I was able to conduct student interviews to explore how students embraced the instruction at the Freedom Project.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

History of the Mississippi Delta Region

Racialized segregation is an ongoing phenomenon in the Mississippi Delta. Duncan (2014) argues that there is still a White plantation society in existence that separates the "haves" from the "have-nots", where "the haves are the very wealthy planter elite and the comfortable, upper-middle-class Whites," and the "have-nots, who make up the great majority in the county, are Black people who struggle to provide for their families" (Duncan 2014:90). These two social worlds are separated by race and class, operating as markers for where people should live, eat, socialize, worship, attend school, and the like.

The region's settlement in the 1830's happened after Native Americans were removed from the land. White planters settled and produced cotton crops with Black slaves working the fertile soil. Slavery eventually governed the principles of the land including the economy, state, and civil society (Hyland and Timberlake 1993). After the Civil War, Black people remained stable with limited mobility to the north. This was especially true for areas that had labor intensive plantation crops including cotton and rice (Chay and Munshi 2012). Sharecropping, which replaced slavery, became a system that ensured Black people remained poor with limited social mobility and limited basic human rights such as voting, equal access to a quality education, and land ownership.

Systematic methods, including a limited labor market and underfunded schools, were introduced throughout the South to ensure inexpensive labor to maintain the segregated system. This was especially true for rural Mississippi Delta communities (Johnson 2014). Forced school

integration in the 1960s and the rise of Black elected officials led to an increase in separatist private academies to continue the patterns of segregation. Public schools were vastly different from the private academies. School conditions ranged from no air conditioning to mold infestation and falling ceilings. The local public schools also hired numerous unlicensed school teachers who were not prepared to equally educate Black and poor White students, leaving many students to find work in the local fields that employed their parents (Duncan 2014).

The public-private divide in the Delta's education system was intentional. White Mississippians opposed all educational opportunities for Black people (Span 2009; Anderson 2010). White supremacists used schooling to control the aspirations of newly freed Black people to maintain them as farm laborers or make them into industrial workers to support the economy. They did not want free Black people to receive an equitable education. Mississippi's history had been founded on Black creative culture— "verbal lore, rituals, crafts, dance, and music, which taught techniques of transformation, adaptation, and survival" (Walton and Carpenter 2012:78), and yet, these qualities have been rarely displayed on a state level unless appropriated for the majority's economic purposes—e.g., Mississippi's car tags that feature B.B. King's beloved guitar "Lucille" (MS Department of Revenue 2018).

Black people were forced to leave the Delta in significant numbers during the 1950s and 1960s, with thousands moving to areas such as Chicago and Detroit due to economic, educational, and social burdens. Those who stayed in the rural Delta communities confronted stringent minimum wage and welfare laws, a strategy employed by the White elite to maintain control over how economic benefits were distributed to Black people (Duncan 2014). Additional reinforcement strategies were developed to support Black families in a minimalist way when work was thin in the fields. It was withdrawn when agricultural labor was needed. These

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practices kept the population under control and dependent on the dominant White power structures, eliminating coalitions to form to challenge the dominant structures (Harvey 2013).

Community Development in the Mississippi Delta

Community development processes, inclusive of Black people, were imperceptible in the Mississippi Delta for most of the 20th century. White planters controlled the land and the wealth in the Delta, maintaining the planter-based class in the region and obstructing development for Black communities. Christenson and Robinson defined development as, "Social transformation in the direction of more egalitarian distribution of social goods such as education, health services, housing, participation in political decision making, and other dimensions of people's life chances" (1989:9). The dominant planter-based class maintained control and power over the Black population through rigid development agendas.

Brown, Nylander, King, and Lough (2000) argued that the goal of community development to improve the lives of everyone was rarely met in the political environment of the Delta because the powerful growth machines in the Delta held the majority of the economic and political power. Growth machines are the property-owning segment of the community that derives most of the financial benefits of community and economic growth (Logan and Molotch 2007). Property and business owners tend to get what they want, resulting in the community members' wants and needs being disregarded. The community development agenda from a growth machine perspective did little to benefit the majority Black, low-income families in the Delta (Brown, et al. 2000).

Other scholars have argued that racism in the Delta also prevented consensus-building for community development initiatives (Harvey 2013). Community development initiatives should

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reflect the voices of all residents, and be owned by the residents' common interests. Positive

community and economic growth occurs when there is trust between community leaders and

residents, shared interests for the values of the community, and use of collective assets available

for action. Assets, as defined by Kretzmann and McKnight are the "gifts, skills, and capacities of

individuals, associations, and institutions within a community" (1993:6). These opportunities

have developed unevenly and slowly in the racially and economically segregated Mississippi

Delta.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

Community Capitals Framework

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) provides an analytical tool for understanding how community development efforts operate at the systems level (Flora 2016). Community resilience involves "the ability of community members to take deliberate, purposeful, and collective action to alleviate the detrimental effects of adverse events" (Pfefferbaum et. al. 2003:251). Resilience is determined by how people and communities achieve and sustain healthy livelihoods within multiple sectors (Zatura et. al. 2010). Personal resilience and community resilience both incorporate "attitudes, thoughts, beliefs, behaviors, and resources" that community members value for sustainable livelihoods (Pfefferbaum 2003:1). Much of the work on resilience focuses on natural hazards and environmental risks coupled with social systems creating a bridge across literatures and disciplines. However, the research tends to prioritize ecological factors applied to social factors where both ecological and social factors are assumed to operate the same, thereby creating nuances and assumptions about the term "community resilience" that does not explain individual community capitals and assets.

Community Capitals framework situates a community's resources (or assets) as investments to sustain community members' livelihoods, wellbeing, and achieve resilience. Although capital can be analyzed on an individual basis, community-level research typically uses community properties to assess collective well-being. The community capitals framework includes seven types of capital—natural capital, cultural capital, human capital, social capital,

financial capital, political capital and built capital (see Figure 4). These capitals intersect with one another to form a sustainable and resilient community, and communities are assessed as having high resilience when the capitals are collectively determined to score high on numerous indicators (Flora 2016).

Figure 4: Community Capitals Framework
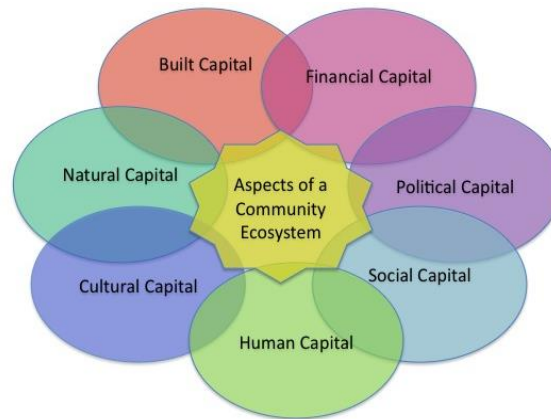
The Community Capitals Framework diagram is from Drs. Cornelia and Jan Flora's "Community Capitals Framework & Sustainable Communities" Rural Studies Research Seminar at the University of Guelph in 2006.

This evaluation process applies to all communities equally for them to be defined as sustainable. Vulnerabilities and long-term stressors, as proposed by Cafer, Green, and Goreham (2019), are not considered in dominant community capitals and resilience literature. Whereas resilience literature relies heavily on social-environmental factors that contribute to adaptive capacity, the research on normative processes does not fully account for how vastly different social institutions operate in diverse communities; thereby, making assumptions about how community members deal with stressors both individually and collectively (Holling 1973; Walker and Salt 2006; Carpenter and Brock 2008).

The term resilience in socio-ecological literature also appears as a normative process where ecological-stressors are essentially equal to social, intentional stressors (Pizzo 2014). For example, there is no clear distinction between communities disrupted by natural disasters versus

racist policies and/or institutions when trying to build or measure resilience (Ibid). Community resilience practitioners and researchers may make assumptions about causes of stressors that do not fit well with some community building strategies. As a result, practitioners and researchers who assume that resiliency can be measured equally across all communities miss certain nuances in "non-traditional" communities like Black communities in the Mississippi Delta.

The intricate ways inequalities are structured within all systems make resiliency building complex and confusing for those who are operating under a normalized framework. To better relate to communities whose cultural and social capital are considered non-dominant outside of that community, social equity becomes a distinguishable factor in explaining how participants build assets and mitigate resources. When measuring for resiliency and assessing resilient strategies, social equity has to be a core-segment of the framework that requires what Cote and Nightingale (2012) term a "situated resilience approach." A situated resilience approach calls on "cultural values, historical context and ethical standpoints of the kinds of actors involved" to be understood before analyzing the adaptive capacity of a community, where those who conceptualize resilience must check their own positionality before empirically studying resilience in different communities (Cote and Nightingale 2012:480-481).

Along with the ways in which my students complicate what classifies as true resilience, resiliency assumes that community members' successes and failures are dichotomized, thereby not incorporating ways people deal with stressors through skepticism and frustration (Pfefferbaum et. al. 2013). Consequently, community agents are standardized which frames non-dominant resilient strategies as non-resilient or non-existent (Gram-Hanssen 2017). Community members deal with stressors in complicated ways, and oftentimes resiliency building does not result in a clearly defined positive rehabilitation strategy as seen in dominant resilience literature

(Pizzo 2014). We must take into consideration how students and community members alike acknowledge their struggles, which gives them a sense of human agency to achieve academic success. In doing this, I hope to better define the non-dominant, critical ways using "successes and failures" assumes participants' relationships to systems are dichotomized, which becomes problematic when trying to understand community development in places like Rosedale. Assets that include code switching, Black vernacular, racism response strategies, and vocalizing agency when socialized not to are evident in Rosedale, Mississippi (Walton and Carpenter 2012). Such assets are not amplified in the literature that supports resiliency building strategies.

Black Resistance, Black Agency: The Role of Black Women as "Culture Workers"

Black Americans have fought decades-long battles for equal access to community development processes, education, and the economy. Many of these battles are organized by Black American women (Morris 2015), who are grassroots organizers and community activists that promote human and social capital towards resiliency. Black activism, specifically women's activism, is not recognized in social science research because the activism happens in private, seemingly invisible spaces in Black women's organizations (Collins 2000). Both public and private acts of activism are within the homes of Black mothers, churches, historically Black sororities, and the education system. My work as a teacher at the Rosedale Freedom Project fits well with cultural workers and Black women activists from the Mississippi Delta. I am an extension of Black women who came before me to regenerate Black culture into the lives of Black students, while holding their education and community experiences at the forefront of justice and equality.

Black Americans understand the role education plays in the Black community, and Black community leaders are seen as educators making "race uplift and education...intertwined" (Collins 2000:211). Pioneers such as Mary McLeod Bethune—founder of Bethune-Cookman University, Lucy Craft Laney—founder of the first school for Black children in Augusta, Georgia, Charlotte Hawkins Brown—founder of the Palmer Memorial Institute, Nannie Burroughs—campaigned for Black women's education, and Johnetta Cole—first Black woman president of Spelman College to name a few, all worked to transform the lives of Black youth in the racially divided South (McCluskey 2014). The sisterhood, as McCluskey states, created avenues for oppressed individuals to overcome structural inequalities that were not met by traditional venues of public discourse. Black women educators were community developers who created and transformed the Black community through what Bernice Johnson Reagon coined "culture work."

Cultural workers are women who refuse to hold standardized White, European knowledge as a normalized framework. Black American women cultural workers in education preserve certain customs with African and Black American roots as a form of resistance (Collins 2006). For students in the Mississippi Delta who are especially prone to institutionalized racism, efforts to preserve "Blackness" is highly significant and sometimes taken for granted. In relation to the Freedom School Movement and resilience, efforts to build resilience through education became intentional during the Freedom School Movement. Educators who took on cultural work at Freedom Schools were consciously cultivating Black assets relevant to Mississippi Delta communities that did not only help preserve "Blackness," but created community developers that would be able to collectively mobilize against oppression.

The Delta, fifty years after school integration, remains an evolving story of success and failures. Hamlin (2012) described a slow process of change for Black people in Clarksdale, MS. There are wonderful stories of Black progress, while at the same time, vivid images of despair and the remnants of extreme brutality due to the entrenched White power that still exists also are evident in the Mississippi Delta (Hamlin 2012). The Clarksdale and Rosedale story represent the Black Delta story—there is resilience considering the struggle for freedom has been only a generation in the making. Yet, the Civil Rights Movement is unresolved in the region. Hamlin (2012) recognized this reality but also desired to know how the obvious successes were to be captured when deep poverty persisted.

My work at the Rosedale Freedom Project follows the same cultural work traditions of the Black women and men who taught at freedom schools in the 1960s and who are active today in places like Clarksdale. Simply resisting White supremacy through community advocacy and asset building projects is not enough, and cultural workers of the past and present understand their task at hand as more than work outside of the classroom. The sole purpose of institutionalized racism is not only to undermine public advocacy, but to undercut any ideas that might spawn resistance. In the context of community development, I, along with other U.S. Black women who create spaces for our culture to be conserved and re-created, perform activism through our culture work to inspire and create pride in our Black students.

Cultural Capital in Education

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides an analytical framework for understanding how the education system reproduces or transfers the dominant class-based system to future generations (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Calarco 2018). In Bourdieu's

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theoretical framework, agency gives power to cultural capital by allowing for group formation to be common place between those who share similar capitals. The formation of these capitals thereafter produce habitus, constructing "classes [that] can be characterized in a certain way as sets of agents" (Bourdieu 1984:6). Bourdieu argues that there ought to be an acknowledgement of the social world that precedes the agent. The realities of the social world are the embodiment of these social structures along with the dispositions that orient "thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (Bourdieu 1984:6), which form habitus. Agency then is socially constructed with pre-existing practices of knowledge.

Bourdieu envisions schooling as a way of reproducing the existing social order as a maintenance of power, displaying the privileged dominant culture's status quo. This restricts minorities and other classes from acquiring resources for social mobility, reinforcing their racial and class positions. Schooling in the United States is governed by teachers within a classroom setting that is based on normalized standards of the dominant class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Modes of capital, such as social, educational, economic, and cultural, advantage the dominant class students who are more prepared to acquire these opportunities.

Marcucci and Elmesky (2016) argue that racial inequality as a form of institutionalized social stratification normalizes Whiteness in predominately Black and Brown schools. They examined visual ethnography in a predominately Black midwestern college that incorporated bans on sagging, slang words, and emphasized individual accountability, among other forms of social constructionism. This school was over normalizing forms of capital valuable to White people, while simultaneously regulating fewer dominant forms of capital significant in the Black culture. Their findings demonstrate that Black people in both White spaces and Black spaces are

expected to activate dominant forms of capital that coincide with the standardization of Whiteness while pursuing an education.

By making all groups adhere to the dominant group, minority students learn that their own cultural capital does not hold the same value as their dominant counterparts. The dominant group's ability to control the capitals within the educational institution attempt to supplant the less powerful group's agency; thus, maintaining the hegemonic forces of the existing power groups (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Hegemony through the achievement ideology is one way the administrative leaders in education convince underserved groups that their second rated positions are justified (Fleischer 2009). The normative structure of the public schooling convinces non-dominant groups' students that their exploitation is due to their own makings. This ideological hegemony, the dominant groups' superior position, is the accepted organizational and teaching practice of schools.

Standard educational aspirations remain important goals for most Black families and communities. Educational attainment is an empowering community norm for most Black people notwithstanding the educational history for Black people in the South and in the Delta, which has been used as a means for reproducing the existing dominant groups' superior positions. Traditional Black women spheres "foster a definition of education as a cornerstone of Black community development" (Collins 2000:210). As the cornerstone in Black communities, and this was evident during my time teaching in the Mississippi Delta, education has become an important institutional asset for advancing Black people's resilience.

Framing local assets as a form of resilience promotes an aspect of human capital that needs further exploring. Green, Cafer, and Goreham (2019) address the complex relationship between ecological and social systems through a traditional formulaic process. As seen in rural

Black communities, this process is not simple nor is it transferrable across different community lines. Applying the livelihoods approach to resilience building can "bring the interplay of social structure and agency into resilience work" that is taken for granted in traditional community resilience literature (Cafer and Green 2019:3).

Black actors' capital within a community and education system are often not elevated and endorsed because it counters the White, heteronormative standards. This does not make the capital any less important, especially for Black people within a rural education context. Complex, intersecting oppressions are difficult to understand through only secondary analyses. My experiences at the community level while teaching at the RFP allowed me access to a deeper knowledge of these capitals at work. I was able to immerse myself in a rural Black Delta community through teaching at the Freedom School to investigate how Black youths' agency and civic mindedness were inspired even in the face of historical underdevelopment. Next, I will share the methods used to examine how students activated their agency and resilience.

CHAPTER IV: METHODS

Research Design and Primary Data

This thesis provided me the opportunity to spend ten months working with the RFP to address this study's research questions by taking an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a methodological framework that requires extensive time in the field, detailed field notes, and interview evidence (O'Reilly 2005). During June and July of 2018, I directly engaged in teaching at the RFP, which is a non-profit, two-month summer and after-school program to educate middle and high school students on community activism and the Civil Rights Movement. The program aims to empower student leaders in the Mississippi Delta through academics, arts, and leadership training while expanding personal and civic responsibilities (RFP 2019).

My daily presence in the community over an extensive time allowed me to develop close relationships with the students, teachers, and their parents. The interactions created deep relationships with students and staff, building an empathic attitude of openness for everyone. My role was to teach and to observe. In ethnography, the researcher observes and listens to draw conclusions from a small, but deep set of descriptions and narratives (Becker 1992). The researcher becomes immersed in the story to tell a story. I began conducting this research in the spring of 2018 and completed it in early spring of 2019. This research included participant observations, student and community interviews, informal interviews, and document analysis.

I worked with all center students, but for this study, focused closely on six Black youth who regularly attended the summer program. The study participants were between the ages of 14

and 16 and had been referred to the program by their parents and local teachers at the West

Bolivar School District. I was the reading teacher for the study participants. I taught the

participants a co-developed curriculum based in community activism and sociology, and had

students read "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas during the months of June and July 2018.

Descriptions of the student participants are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Student Participants

D'Ebonee *is a 15-year-old girl who seems shy and reserved. She oftentimes struggles with reading and comprehension, which causes her to have self-doubt about her skills. D'Ebonee shied away from discussions in class for fear of peer ridicule and/or being labeled "incapable." If D'Ebonee was struggling with a concept or reading text, she would turn off and not work. However, once D'Ebonee realized her ability to make decisions that would benefit her overall personal growth, she began to open up and allow others to help. She enjoys doing hair and aspires to become a beautician after college where she will be a first-generation college student.*
LaShayla *is a 15-year-old girl who multi tasks her various extra curriculum activities such as dance and basketball, while also maintaining honor roll. LaShayla would frequently leave sessions early, but always came prepared with her homework done and A's on all reading quizzes. She is a natural leader where she would help other students after finishing her work, while taking pride in her peer relations and other's academic success along with her own. LaShayla was the most vocal in class and critiqued my instruction heavily as a voice for herself and her student peers. She aspires to be a lawyer and community advocate after graduating college.*
Jalen *is a 16-year-old boy who is a star athlete in the community. He oftentimes has to choose between school and sports but asserts his love for both equally. Jalen was my lowest reader; however, he possessed many leadership qualities during daily RFP operations and class sessions. He was always engaged in class but would not ask for help if he needed assistance. Jalen aspires to be an athlete after graduating high school.*
Ziondra *is a 15-year-old girl who is reserved and shy. She would not participate in class discussions unless prompted. She struggles with comprehension while reading but has creative writing skills which she enjoys to do. She was involved in a leadership club at her public middle school where she kept honor roll and good behavior. Ziondra also loves dancing and is a part of the local dance team and basketball team. She worked best in groups, and enjoyed interacting with student peers during pair discussions. Ziondra plans to attend college and become a cardiologist, making her a first-generation college student.*

Keisha is a 15-year-old girl who graduated salutatorian of her 8ᵗʰ grade class. She thrives in class settings and is not afraid to speak up about social issues or her likes and dislikes about a class discussion. She would help with other students if they needed assistance. Keisha would get frustrated with topics discussed in class and would become disengaged with the rest of the lesson. She is a community developer and jumpstarted a local "U-Pick" garden with another student and the help of the RFP to combat food insecurity in the area. Keisha made all A's on assignments, and kept up with all of her readings. She enjoys playing basketball for her local school and inspires to be a Sociologist after graduation.
Tyrone is a 15-year-old boy who made infrequent visits to the RFP. He is a star student at his local high school but was not as involved in RFP class sessions as his other peers. He plays basketball and would ask for sports related books during independent reading sessions. Tyrone enjoys leading student reading discussions and socializing with his peers. He responded well to independent assignment tasks and enjoyed making jokes with his peers.

Table 2: Community Members Participants

Ronald is a program manager for an energy company. He grew up in Pace, Mississippi in a single parent home and attended middle school and high school in Rosedale, Mississippi. Ronald joined the air force shortly after graduating to help his family's financial constraints. He now holds a master's degree in political communications.
Patricia is an Assistant Director at a University. She enlisted in the army after attending Delta State for a year, and later went back to Delta State to pursue a master's degree in education. Patricia was raised in a single-parent household.
Nicolas is a curriculum developer in Mississippi. He grew up in Pace, Mississippi and graduated from West Bolivar High School in Rosedale. Nicolas majored in education after attending school at Delta State. He comes from a family lineage of educators that dates back at least four generations.
John is a pastor in Mississippi. He was raised by his grandparents in North Mississippi, where the highest degree between both was a third grade education. John attended Mississippi Valley State University and graduated with a degree in mathematics and computer science.
Clarence is a pastor and systems administrator for a health company in Mississippi. He grew up in Rosedale. He was raised by his grandparents and received multiple scholarships to run track in college. He now has a master's degree from Belhaven University.
Addie is a nurse from Beulah, Mississippi. She was a first-generation college student raised in a single-parent home.
Tisha is a TA development and future specialist at a university. She is from Beulah, Mississippi and comes from a single parent household. She learned early on that she was passionate about reading and excelled in school.
Katrina is a district dean for a community college. She grew up in Rosedale as an only child in a single parent household. She completed her master's degree at Delta State with some doctoral training.
Kelvyn is a retired naval officer and engineer. He grew up with a single mother in Pace, Mississippi. After graduating salutatorian from high school, he attended Jackson State University on a full scholarship.

Ethnographic data for this project included 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with students and community members (see Table 2) who attended/attend the West Bolivar School District. Supplementary data were collected, which included 12 online surveys from community members who attended the West Bolivar School District. Thirteen of the interviews were with community members who attended the West Bolivar School District during the 1980s, and seven interviews with current students. My ethnographic approach generated more than 516 hours of participant observations at the RFP and 86 hours teaching sociology. An additional 430 hours were divided between lesson planning, co-teacher meetings, student reading interventions, and other project duties such as cleaning, arts assistance, and monitoring the 35 students at the school.

My Freedom School teaching experience was supported by the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement, which provides opportunities for university students to learn community engagement philosophies for engaging in underserved communities. The Institute's community-campus engagement methods are designed to establish mutually beneficial partnerships with community organizations. Community engagement creates innovative solutions to address poverty and support youth education programs like the Rosedale Freedom Project. This approach offers both the community and university programs an opportunity to improve societal efforts by creating knowledge that is applied, problem-centered, inclusive, and entrepreneurial. This form of community engagement creates applied knowledge that reflects community needs (Weerts and Sandmann 2008; Weerts and Sandmann 2010).

Higher education leaders use community engagement approaches to "emphasize a shift away from an expert model of delivering university knowledge to the public and toward a more collaborative model in which community partners play a significant role in creating and sharing

knowledge to the mutual benefit of institutions and society" (Weerts and Sandmann 2008:74).

This methodological approach supported my commitment to see the community and students as active agents in creating and discovering knowledge. Together, university professors, graduate students, community residents, and even the local youth, can mutually unite in the fight against poverty (Hodges and Dubb 2012:4).

Community-campus partnerships are tasked with creating avenues for unheard voices to thrive through community engagement strategies tasked at increasing resiliency (Stoecker, Tryon, and Hilgendorf 2009). The efforts to become resilient are instilled already in Black churches, civic organizations, and schools (Rogers 2006), so the methods used in this thesis will bring the unheard voices of Black youth to the forefront. Cultural experiences that provide agency to students to take action in support of their education can help scholars better relate to minority students in the Mississippi Delta. I was financially and educationally supported to complete this summer long project and to conduct in-depth interviews in the region by serving with a community-campus engagement center.

Phase One of Data Collection

The data collection phase lasted for eight months. The first-phase of the study was conducted at the Rosedale Freedom Project. Modeled after the Mississippi Freedom Summers of the Civil Rights Movement, the Rosedale Freedom Project (RFP) is a youth center that supports the Mississippi Delta's young leaders in the development of critical consciousness and the practice of justice through community building, artistic ventures, organizing, and studying social history and grassroots democracy. The RFP provides after-school tutoring sessions and restorative justice initiatives that supports students' social, psychological and academic

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wellbeing. The RFP operates as a summer program for 7th through 9th graders with class sessions running two hours a day Monday through Friday, and other extra-curriculum activities including art and drama classes, study sessions, silent reading, gardening and exercise blocks for the remaining five-hours.

I was immersed in the day-to-day teaching and learning environment of the center. In addition to the participant observations, I took field notes to analyze how students related to topics on racism. Fifty pages of field notes were taken that consisted of class discussions and one-on-one conversations between students and myself. The field notes were compiled after the day's teaching, when I could reflect on the lesson for the day and discussions that I was unable to note while teaching and/or doing other duties at the RFP. A typical work-day would last from 7:00 am – 6:00 pm. I was flexible with my time spent at the RFP because the center operated as a full-functioning academic, arts, community organizing, tutoring, fitness and gardening center. The overwhelming majority of staff members were teachers and co-teachers, where daily duties were divided among us. I also worked after hours throughout the week to help other projects/sessions that happened during the time that I was not teaching. Time was also spent preparing for the next day's lesson plan and to complete my journaling and fieldnotes for this research study.

I distributed pre and post-tests to the students during this phase of the project to assess the students' understanding of social institutions. The goal of the freedom project is to increase social awareness of institutions that oppress rural Black Mississippians. I assessed what social awareness looked like for the youth of this area, how student-centered classrooms promoted students' relationships in social organizations, and how students perceived organizations as barriers or producers of educational success.

Phase two of my study consisted of semi-structured interviews with students during July 2018. The main target of this phase was to assess how students activated capital in the classroom, and how students related to their current education system, both public school and the freedom school project. Student interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. I interviewed no more than two students per week. Students were comfortable throughout the interview because I had developed a relationship prior to the interviews by being their reading teacher, which allowed conversations to flow and content discussed to feel natural.

All of the interviews followed a theme: What is it like for each student in the classroom? I asked questions about how student interviewees dealt with problems involving their education, and how much of the problem-solving strategies were learned from parents or from their own sense of agency (i.e., capital activation) learned at their local public school or the freedom project. I evaluated their relationship to the current educational system, as well as how they think it could be better. The interviews were used to understand their experiences in the classroom and how the experiences in the classroom influenced their outlook on education.

I asked questions about the students' hopes and aspirations, and whether they thought their public school helped to build their dreams. We talked about their parents' relationship to the public school and if their parents participated in the parent teacher association (PTA) or visited the school to check on their school progress and grades. The student interviewees were confidential as students expressed feelings about their teachers, classes, and other aspects of the school that they did and did not like. Some of the student interviewees were comfortable sharing internalized discomfort about certain teachers and how they were taught, which did not align with how they were taught at the freedom project. Student interviewees shared an overall disdain

for Edgenuity and a lack of certified teachers, which was the most brought-up discussion topic for the majority of the interviews. Edgenuity is a virtual school that partners with public schools to offer courses not provided at the local district level.

Phase Three of Data Collection

I conducted community member surveys to complement the student discussions on community environmental factors. Community members were first recruited from students' parents and then through a snowballing sampling technique based on those who had attended the West Bolivar School District. Some community members' contact information came from ongoing community partnerships with the McLean Institute at the University of Mississippi and the Rosedale Freedom Project. Many of the community member interviewees relocated from the area. Respondents also came from a Facebook group page associated with the Rosedale community, which I gained access to from a past community member who had ties with the McLean Institute.

Community member interviews deepened my understanding of the West Bolivar County School District. The interviews assisted in learning more about how Black residents of Rosedale perceived the local public school district. The community member interviews also provided context for understanding how the community at large viewed the strengths and weaknesses of the educational system over the past 40 years. I asked about their own educational experiences and their views on education in Rosedale today. I also asked questions about how they navigated the structural inequalities in education to achieve their success. The interviews took about 30 minutes to an hour. Due to time, an online Qualtrics survey was constructed to complete the community member contacts. The first mailing went out on November 15, 2018, with seven

responses. Two reminders were sent, with five additional responses. The 25 community members were eager to participate and share their views on Rosedale because of their deep fondness for growing up in this town.

Next, I will present the findings of how Black youth take control over their own learning experiences in the Mississippi Delta. The Freedom School Project allows students to learn and engage in civic minded activities by focusing on social justice curricula and project-based education.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

Resource dependent communities like Rosedale and other Delta towns that developed their social structure around slavery and agriculture are characterized by single-sector economies based on producing that one commodity—historically it was cotton in the Delta. Through the mechanization of farming, the labor market shifted for the majority of the Black population, and without a diverse economy and access to opportunities, Delta communities faced difficult challenges in becoming healthy economies. Large scale drivers of change like farm mechanization, along with oppressive power structures, reduce the viability of healthy livelihoods. Yet, I have discovered that there is creative agency by my students fighting to thrive and survive in Rosedale.

The results are presented as three themes created from the data generated by observations and interviews (see Table 2). The narratives consist of themes that describe teacher-student encounters in relation to students' learning at the freedom and local public school. The first narrative, *Encounters between the teacher and student*, describes the latent awareness of the students' position in Rosedale's and the Delta's unique history. The second narrative, *Students as critical thinkers/sociologists*, describes how the students are already practitioners. The third narrative, *Space and exclusion,* describes the students' awareness of what community means by living in the Mississippi Delta. Growing up in poor neighborhoods in Rosedale and the Delta has made students intimately aware of the space (community), not only as a place where events unfold, but as a character in itself that has shaped and is being shaped by other actors.

Table 3: Themes of Internalized Agency

Narrative	Theme
Encounters between the Teacher and Student	*1) Forming a Latent Awareness*
Students as Critical Thinkers/Sociologists	*2) Students as Extant Practitioners*
Space and Exclusion	*3) Community Awareness*

Much of the literature on the Delta highlights deficits, deprivations, and inequalities. Yet, when talking to the people from the area, deficits, deprivation, and inequalities are not the complete story. The whole story must include the intricate ways agency, capital, and resilience emerge and are reinforced by human agents. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the story, I immersed myself in the community and its relationships. The questions that I am asking required attention to small details, conversations, emotions, side-remarks, intimate relationships, stillness and an array of voices that tend to go unnoticed in secondary-data, top-down approaches. In order to answer my most detailed questions, the process took patience, both in the field and outside of the field, considerable amounts of trust from my participants, and attention to notes that would have otherwise gone unnoticed if I did not know to pay attention to them.

The following research questions have guided my efforts: 1) In what ways do Black youth activate their agency and resilience in the Mississippi Delta, and 2) How do students increase their agency on civic mindedness and social justice by embracing additional educational capital through the Rosedale Freedom Project? I also explore the community capitals literature to examine what is often missing from those capitals in Black communities in the Mississippi Delta.

Based on the following analysis, both the public school and the freedom school play a pivotal role for the activation of agency. Agency is best expressed when capital that is relevant to a Black student living in the Mississippi Delta is embraced and cultivated. Although media outlets and deficit literature state implicitly that agency is difficult to observe in the Delta, I find agency in classrooms, written responses, discussions, and self-defining language used by both students and community members. I find that students' ideas about social justice issues and civic mindedness are related to their intersectional identities. They understand intersectional identities without knowing the concept "intersectionality" because they adhere to a social knowledge about themselves that fits well within their field. These questions are complemented with community members' perceptions of the concept of community in Rosedale, MS and how it supports student learning.

Field Immersion in the Mississippi Delta and Rosedale, MS

I take my usual route down highway 8 after spending the night before preparing for final papers. Students are preparing essays about activism in relation to "The Hate U Give," and sociological concepts learned throughout the summer. During my initial plan, I created time to discuss intersectionality after reviewing racism, sexism and classism. We spent more time, however, discussing racism and building a sociological imagination and before I knew it, two months swiftly breezed by. I started beating myself up about not giving students the tools to analyze intersecting oppressive systems that worked with racism in their lives. The beating I did to myself did not last long, because students had experienced concepts before learning the formal definitions.

Encounters between the Teacher and Student

Encounters between the students and myself as an "Ole Miss" graduate student involved different types of interactions, which resulted in our forming a deep relationship. The theme *Forming a Latent Awareness* describes a socialization process that unconsciously emerges among the Black youth in the freedom project where students are bridging embodied social knowledge with newly learned sociological terminology.

During one teaching day, I laid out sociological concepts that were discussed during previous sessions on the table and allowed students to choose three concepts to use in their papers. Each concept had a description and attached articles for students to re-familiarize themselves. The concepts included the sociological imagination, socialization, role conflict, racism, prejudice, double consciousness, police roles, positionality, among others. Students began discussing with one another what concepts they wanted to use and how it related to "The Hate U Give." They all had to use activism in some way to explain how they could use their voice like the main character, Starr, to fight oppressive systems in their community.

Students were completely invested in this task. They went through previous lessons and molded their papers with knowledge previously acquired, but now inserted a scientific name to the concepts that were most familiar to them. I began to circulate the classroom and preview papers for students who needed assistance. LaShayla showed me her introduction. She wrote:

Being a Black woman is stressful because a woman never did have the rights like they wanted; it was always giving to males. And being Black nobody listens to that race, even if they are wealthy and rich. They still look over us because of being prejudice and racist. That gives it a bigger reason to not listen to a Black woman. This makes it harder for me and also the people who are struggling with the same thing. (LaShayla, 15-years-old)

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In the above introduction passage for LaShayla's writing assignment, she recalled her own social status as inherently intersectional without discussing or being taught intersectionality. Lashayla was relating to not only her position of being both Black and a woman, and how those intersectional identities make it hard to experience life without the other, but also the way social class was connected to race and gender. She believed that being both Black and a woman were devalued social markers because they were interrelated in her life. LaShayla was explaining what many of us Black women know to be true: "Individual Black women do not need to encounter every instance of discrimination to understand collectively how we are treated differently than other [sub-groups] of people" (Collins, 2000, p. 26).

I was embarrassed that I did not pick-up on the students' experience with the concepts without knowing the formal definitions. In the next statement, Ziondra explained how she viewed racism:

> For ex a White policeman pulls over a Black person, then shoots him when they get out for no reason. In one of the articles I read it said that racism is someone who is "prejudice plus power." White people think they have the power over people, when Black people don't even have the chance to explain themselves.

Since the main reading book was about police brutality, the majority of the students made connections between systemic racism and the criminal justice system. As in the above example, students made connections with systemic and institutional racism, which they acknowledged was different from microaggressions and blatant, inter-personal racism. The last statement, "Black people don't even have the chance to explain themselves," was a constant reflection for many of my students. They made persistent comments about how they were perceived to the outside

world, and how they were frustrated with not being able to create their own narratives about who they were and where they came from.

In another example, Jalen related to Marx's analysis of the rise of capitalism and class-distinction:

> Jalen: So, if the bourgeoisie control everything, then that means they own the jobs?
>
> Me: Yes, Mr. Laymen, the bourgeoisie theoretically own jobs.
>
> Jalen: That means the bourgeoisie pay the proletariat. So the bourgeoisie make [social institutions] to their benefit. And the proletariats are not getting money but they respect and sometimes disrespect bourgeoisie laws. And the proletariats are basically forced to get jobs that you will make a low income from. Well why can't the proletariats own everything then? We would make it more equal. (Jalen, 16 years old)

Jalen was relating sociological theory to his own life and the unequal development in the Mississippi Delta that he observed in nearby communities like Cleveland. In relation to Jalen's response, Kiesha also amplified unequal class and racial discrimination in Rosedale:

> People in the world today are still doing racist and prejudice things like sending their kids to different schools from the Black and Brown kids because schools with mostly Black and Brown kids have less resources. (Kiesha, 15 years old)

As well as community members:

> While in elementary school, I was placed in remedial classes. These classes were attended by most of the Black students at my predominantly White school. I didn't know why, but now I do. I didn't know I was "smart" until I made it to Jr. High. At Jr. High, the students from all of the district's elementary schools converged in one location. At this

time, most of the White students chose to attend a neighboring private school called

Bayou Academy. (Rosedale community member)

Bayou Academy still exists today as a private academy for White, upper and middle-class residents. My students as well as community members acknowledged Bayou Academy, and oftentimes refer to it as "the White folks school." In relation to Jalen's statement, the community member and Kiesha were both associating race and class distinctions in their community to unequal education categorization[5] and intentional segregation between Black, Brown, and White students.

On the contrary, not all students and community members showed a latent awareness about their positionality and social systems. When discussing Black families and domestic violence in relation to police brutality in "The Hate U Give" with D'Ebonee, she wrote in her assignment:

Iesha and Seven (mother and son) didn't have a good bond because of domestic violence [between Iesha and Seven's step-father, King]. Seven did a lot for Iesha and she seem like she didn't care. They were always arguing about who did the most for each other. Although Seven always tried to protect his mother, he feels that Iesha never reciprocated his love. It affected Iesha and Seven relationship because Iesha was dealing with King always abusing her. What I will do is talk to people going through domestic violence and convince them to call the police and tell them what is going on. (D'Ebonee, 15 years old)

Before writing this piece, D'Ebonee listened to Dr. Bernadine Waller of Adelphi University School of Social Work talk on Black women and domestic violence. During this discussion, D'Ebonee and I discussed how Waller connected police brutality, inflicted primarily on Black

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[5] In reference to Black students being labeled "remedial" and mentally incapable to learn standard curriculums

men, to Black women protecting Black men from the police at the expense of Black women's pain and abuse. We also talked about families with children, and how Iesha thought she was protecting her children from the police and social services by not contacting authorities. However, D'Ebonee made no connection between Black women's power struggles with both Black men and the criminal justice system. In a much longer response, D'Ebonee continued to find fault in Iesha for the domestic violence that was inflicted on her by King.

Students demonstrated, through conversations, interactions, discussions, and written assignments that they understood or experienced social concepts without being formally taught the meanings. However, as shown through D'Ebonee's written statement, not all encounters elicited a latent awareness about social institutions, power structures, and self-identification. Students showed clear signs of developing a sociological imagination without the jargon and terminology used by social theorists. Students were critiquing social systems before I became their teacher, but their critiques were not valued capital that can be easily defined in prominent community capitals research. Students used this form of knowledge to understand social systems, and to become advocates on behalf of themselves and their community.

Students as Critical Thinkers/Sociologists

Another theme emerged while I taught at the freedom project—*Student Practitioners*. This describes the students' ability to understand social concepts due to their social positions and locations as Black youth in the Mississippi Delta, making them student and community practitioners already. LaShayla wrote:

Every problem that a Black person goes through isn't a personal problem. Like when

most of my people are drug dealers. This is not a personal problem. Like when most of

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them don't have a job and if so, the job is far out. This was the only position open for us. There aren't jobs in our community; we have a lack of income and the place is full of Black people. I think this was brought up to set us all up so we can, a) kill ourselves or b) get killed for doing something that the White people say is "illegal." None of this is a coincidence. And not only am I thinking like this. (LaShayla, 15 years old)

LaShayla recognized the social forces that create barriers in her community that cannot simply be passed off as "personal problems." She understood that the world is socially constructed where those who create tend to hold the top positions, and those who are not recognized for their creations are strategically left out of knowledge production conversations. LaShayla is a born sociologist, which is as relevant as saying Sojourner Truth was an intellect with no formal education.[6] What we deem intellectually important is connected to our culture. LaShayla embraced what she knew to be true, and she capitalized on her knowledge of systems as culturally connected to how she thought about social systems.

Along with Jalen's response to Marx's work on social class and capitalism, he created a survey on job availability in his community. Weeks after his statement about proletariats being better resource distributors than the bourgeoisie, he began to interview his community and their relationship to the job market in Rosedale. Jalen found that the majority of his participants worked outside of Rosedale and commuted an average of 30 minutes to 2 hours. Later in the summer, Jalen began advocating for more local jobs for community members, where he joined a Leadership Club that sponsors community service days and fundraisers. He was also a prominent advocate for student paid workers and internships at the RFP, where students who attended the RFP could be hired as staff members and work directly with full-time RFP staff members.

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[6] Abolitionist and suffragist Sojourner Truth, a former slave with no formal education, critiqued society's blanketed understanding of what womanhood and femininity means as not all-encompassing and inherently flawed.

Ziondra made frequent connections between her public school and resource distribution. When asked what she did not like about her school system, Ziondra stated:

I would change Edgenuity[7] because we don't learn with that and it's boring. I used to like math and participate in math class before they had Edgenuity. And then we had teachers that would switch out all the time so I didn't really like science either. Like in the beginning of the year we stuck with just one teacher and then another teacher will come and tell you one thing from the other teacher and it kept going and going until I just didn't really like science. (Ziondra, 15 years old)

Towards the end of the summer, Ziondra did a student project on the community's response to Edgenuity. She began to press her concerns about her grades that she felt were related to teacher shortages and Edgenuity classes at her local high school. In all of her conversations, she was adamant about the education system's responsibility to the students, and not the student's personal responsibility to get work done. She wanted her education system to educate her better and was vocal in her responses that limiting resources in school was strongly correlated to students' performance levels.

Another broad example of students' understanding of social concepts related to their ability to be practitioners occurred during an earlier session on racism. During this pre-test/post-test session, I asked students to define racism. Some of the students offered a typical response, as if this is what they believed I wanted to hear. "[Racism] is a dislike of someone based on their race." They were restating a faulty definition about racism that many Americans use to desensitize the complex and pervasiveness of systemic racism. My students experienced life in a

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[7] Edgenuity is an online curriculum and virtual school located in Arizona that teaches middle school students ELA and math. My students were using Edgenuity for core-classes such as ELA where many of them struggled to keep good grades because they did not have a teacher to teach them in certain classes.

difficult environment compared to most students. In relation to the freedom project's mission to teach students critical consciousness about the social world, students were directly connected to racist institutions in their own community.

In another discussion about racism, the terminology fit well with chapters in "The Hate U Give." The time was 9:00 am and class had officially begun. The opening slide showed:

Prejudice: Prejudice refers to the beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes someone holds about a group.

Racism: A stronger type of prejudice used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others; it is also a set of practices used by a racial majority to disadvantage a racial minority.

I asked the class, "Can anyone tell me what I mean by "racial majority" and "racial minority?" Kiesha responded, "You mean like White people the majority and Black people the minority." I started to dig deeper into the discussion by stating, "Okay, yes. But what do you mean by that? Do you mean that there were more White people than Black people?" Keisha said, "No, like White folk have more power than Black people." I then asked, "Power to do what?" Keisha said, "I don't know. Like power to make laws and they all in the White House. They just got power because they're everywhere and make the decisions."

I did not have to convince students that racism involved power relations (i.e., minority vs. majority). The students posed "power majority and minority" comments in the above definition when referencing a minority versus majority group. Students knew instantly that I was not exclusively talking about population size, but most importantly how group membership related to who holds power in our country. Although students initially vocalized an elementary definition of racism (i.e., "it is a dislike of someone based on their race"), when prompted with a

sociological definition of what racism is versus prejudice, students took the initiative to incorporate power relations in the definition of racism. I knew then that students were not given the opportunity in traditional school settings to move beyond a "socially acceptable" definition of racism. The students made a sociological connection that racism was indeed a social force with power relations before I could teach them about racism because they observed how powerful racist institutions operate in their lives as minority students. Teaching my students about institutional racism was easier than teaching freshman college students at the University of Mississippi.

I did not always have pleasant lessons that ran smoothly. In one lesson on "White fragility," I prompted the students by having them watch a video of "BBQ Becky"[8] and "Permit Patty"[9] to start the discussion. The main objective of the day was to inquire why White people are fragile around conversations about race. The students read about Hailey, a character in "The Hate U Give," who is racist but is more upset with being called racist than upset with people who commit racist acts. My co-teacher and I thought that a lesson on "White fragility" seemed fitting. They initially started laughing at the clips, as many of us did when the videos initially showed up on our twitter feeds. However, the laughs did not last long. The students grew silent, with their eyes slowly rolling and eventually slightly closed. Their eyes began to now gaze at the screen, as if what I was showing them was something that they had seen personally and were highly disinterested in seeing it again on screen. LaKrisha, now completely turned off from my discussion, was disengaged and my co-teacher took her to the director and project manager's office for a discussion. I am distracted by this because everyone laughed at the videos at the start

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[8] A White woman, Jennifer Schulte, who called the police on a Black family barbecuing in a park that gained social media attention in 2018 for her racist attack against the Black family.
[9] A White woman, Alison Ettel, who called the police on a Black girl selling water outside of her apartment complex that gained social media attention in 2018 for her racist attack against a Black girl.

of class. After the class session,[10] the project manager and director asked to meet with me. The director informed me that LaKrisha was not upset with me or anything that I had done, but was becoming overwhelmed and filled with emotions about White people (a power majority) being called "fragile." She was angry about White privilege and racism.

That next day I noticed that a student, D'Ebonee, felt uncertain and frustrated about the previous class lesson as well. She wrote on a notecard to me:

It made me mad when you talked about race. It made me mad when you talked about how Black people don't have anything because of their race. It makes me feel uncomfortable when you say that White people have control over Black people. It's irritating when y'all talk about people in society and how the classes are. I know that's the world but half isn't. (D'Ebonee, 15-years-old)

Much like Sharon in Carla O'Connor's 1997 study on Black student resilience, D'Ebonee was not "resigning herself to the power differential between Black people and Whites" (O'Connor, 1997, p. 595). The normalized framework of resilience building positions D'Ebonee's response as neither an asset nor stressor. After multiple conversations to understand D'Ebonee and Kiesha's frustration, they were both highly critical about Black people in their community and at home that they did not understand the agency that resides in them. D'Ebonee and Keisha, like many of my students, were aware of the many ways racism, sexism, and classism shape their lives; however, they were also critical about the ways people in their community created change and the individual power of agency that prompted people to make change.

In an interview after the "White Fragility" class session, Jalen wrote:

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[10] We spent time operationalizing White fragility through Dr. Robin DiAngelo's piece, "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism."

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Some may think that White people killing Black people is a racist thing but in actuality I honestly don't think White people actually understand what racism is.

Jalen was associating what he knew about his position as a Black teenager in the Mississippi Delta, who sees a lack of job opportunities in his majority Black community, to how he can acknowledge and define racism as something more than microaggressions against two people of two different races. Jalen sees racist and classist institutions at play every day, which allows him to understand a socially conscious definition of racism that his White counterparts may not see as easily.

Resiliency building in education can include accredited teachers versus student ratios in a school or PTA presence. However, what is missed in the discussion on school infrastructure and education resilience is how minority students who do not respond to racism with positive responses are also using resilient qualities because students are expressing feelings that help them navigate racial situations and discussions. Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker define resilience as a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et. al. 2000:543). Non-positive responses to racism also help students move past racial discussions and towards action fueled with passion and anger. Students who were angry and frustrated were also leaders in their respective community groups. Students who were angry and frustrated could explain the war on drugs in three coherent sentences. Students who were angry and frustrated supported voting registration drives that they organized for their community.

Students are building resilience while simultaneously redefining what resiliency looks like and making conscious efforts to be active agents over their lives. Like many rural Black people, my students were not only tired, but frustrated and exhausted with oppression. My

students were responding with anger and frustration to an unjust system that continuously impedes on their lives. In Keisha's written essay on police brutality, she wrote:

In my opinion, law enforcement in America, against Black people, has been going on for a very long time. Law enforcement in America is just being shown in different ways. Back then in the old days, Black people were slaves and they were getting hung, and now they are being killed by the police. I honestly think that nothing will be done because nothing has been done so far. In the world today, Black people like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown were killed by police and nothing was done about it, when Whites are doing the exact same thing as the Black and Brown people [like using drugs]; it's just that nothing happens to the White people.

Their responses, whether disengagement or saying, "It made me mad when you talked about racism," were strategies many young Black students used to deal with topics about racism. Students did not respond in a traditional "positive" manner that fits well in resiliency literature and definitions. Students were responding to what racism had given them – anger, frustration and disengagement – which allowed them to express the same skepticism as Ruleville, Mississippi's Fannie Lou Hamer's famous battle cry, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

However, like my students, Fannie Lou Hamer was a community organizer and mobilizer. In the conclusion of Keisha's written statement, although frustrated and skeptical about progress and social change, she stated:

I can address issues by advocating like I did in Washington D.C., a place where people will listen to young people like me. If I just sit around and don't do anything, then nothing will happen and everything will be the same, more people will be killed and more people will be locked up for the same crimes as Whites, which is not fair. I've recently

heard that Black people can't stand up for what's right but Black people not standing up

for freedom isn't right either, like J Cole said, "All we wanna do is be free."

Keisha was a part of a larger group that lobbied their local state officials in Washington, D.C.

She was mobilizing with her voice, knowledge, and agency, like the social activists and

practitioners who came before her.

Students showed social awareness knowledge, which is a form of cultural capital that is

not critiqued in resilience literature. In many instances, social awareness knowledge was

connected to their sense of agency and habitus. Habitus, as described by Bourdieu, refers to

embodied cultural capital which explain deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions due to

our social status and lived experiences (Bourdieu 1977). Students' agency was not centered in a

manufactured, idealist framework that produces positive levels of achievement. How my

students activated their agency was distinctively different in varying class spaces. Because I

allowed my students to relate to their biography and multiple identities within a critical

framework, thereby embracing the cultural capital that aligned well within their habitus, their

agency looked different than in a traditional classroom setting.

Whereas in a traditional class setting D'Ebonee saying, "White teachers be racist," and

the rage felt when internalizing and discussing the internalization of racism during our discussion

on racism, would have been classified as either inappropriate, or the classroom would not have

been inclusive to D'Ebonee's uncertainties and feelings about her past teachers. However, by

giving students tools to more effectively combat racism in their own lives and communities, and

acknowledging that Black students have some understanding about social institutions would help

researchers and educators better relate to people in this region. Practitioners, educators, policy

makers, and researchers need to understand that minority communities possess different types of

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capitals before assessing minority communities as low in resilience due to institutional systems that fail minority people.

Space and Exclusion

The third theme that emerged while teaching at the freedom project was Community Awareness or *Shaped by Other Actors but Controlling My Own Identity*. This describes the students' awareness of growing up in a community space and region that has not been the most welcoming as a regional identity—*the Delta*. In the words of the great Civil Rights icon and Deltan, Fannie Lou Hammer, *"I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."* This space, the Delta, is both a product of material and social relations that have been integral to shaping the relations among its people. In my teaching, I observed students detaching themselves from the historical oppressions and divisions created in the region. They were cognizant of how other actors were reconceptualizing the past social ills.

This space/place for many Americans represents the home of the blues. Throughout the Delta, communities have opened museums and blues-themed restaurants. Fans, mostly middle-to-upper class Whites, come from all over the world to experience the "real America" (King 2011). The businesses they patronize are primarily White as well, which has created a blues tourism divide between Black people and Whites in the Delta. My students showed clear awareness of the broader economic development agendas in which they were not necessarily beneficiaries. Yet, they were confident in their own identities and agency.

In week five I began formal in-depth interviews with the students. I established rapport with my students in order to make the interviews as fluid and conversational as possible. Many students were hesitant since I was their teacher and being their teacher was how they saw me, not

as an interviewer. As I brought the first student in, D'Ebonee, she was doubtful and paused for a while because she assumed the interview would be a part of her grade. D'Ebonee had insecurities about her reading level and academic performance. She often shied away from class discussions because she fears saying the "wrong answer." I continued to reassure D'Ebonee that the classroom space at the Rosedale Freedom Project was indeed a judgement-free zone and a trustworthy community.

D'Ebonee began her interview smiling and asked if I showed her face during the interview. I reassured her that I only recorded her voice and hid any identity markers about her. The interview started slowly. I initially asked her "what do you want to be when you grow up?" She shrugged her shoulders in responded by saying, "I don't know," still smiling, still shy, and still hesitant. I recommended several conversational points to open up the dialogue. I suggested, "a teacher," which she abruptly shook her head in refusal, and later I said "a lawyer, president, or governor." She rolled her eyes, with the same smile, because she knows I can be pushy with high expectations about their career choices. She finally said, "I like working at a hair store," expressing that she wants to be a beautician after high school simply because, "I like doing hair."

I then asked if she was interested in college. D'Ebonee, like all of the students, was interested in college. While D'Ebonee found interests in cosmetology, LaShayla wanted to be a lawyer, Ziondra a doctor, Jalen an athlete, and LaKrisha a cardiologist turned future sociologist after the class. All of the student interviewees' parents did not go to college, which would make them all, if they should attend, first generation college students. While all of the students stated that their parents not only supported higher education, but pushed them to look at careers that would need some level of higher education. Only two students expressed a deeper desire to attend college, with one having an extensive seven-year plan and hoped to create her own law

school. I then asked, "What are some of your biggest inspirations for all of these goals?" LaShayla stated, "Myself." LaShayla furthered her point by saying, "I was planning all of this ever since I was 7-years-old. I made a promise [to myself and my community] and Imma keep it."

Like many of the community member interviewees, students were critical about their relationship to their community and local education system. They expressed deferring relationships to their community while also making me aware that their community was unique and somewhat responsible for their growth as students. I realized the term "community" is fluid and depends on the time, place and person, and how they implicitly defined community. When talking about peer groups as a community, Ziondra stated, "I would use my voice for racism at school mostly. I will use it by like bringing everybody together, well some people together" to clarify that certain people in her school and/or school district were a part of her community while others were not. Jamal, on the locality of his community, stated, "It's a lack of jobs in the community." And on the connection between language and community, he said, "People in my community talk the same," which is in reference to the distinct Black southern dialect that he grew-up around.

During LaShayla and LaKrisha's interview, we discussed if their teacher's cultural background (race, gender, nationality, class, rural-status etc.) needed to match their cultural background. LaShayla stated, "I mean I prefer Black because she will be easier to talk to," stretching her community definition to include "other mothers"—aunts, cousins, sisters, and grandmothers; extended family members including Sunday school teachers, mentors, neighbors, local store owners, cooks, and teachers. In connection to LaShayla's definition, LaKrisha made a clear distinction between the RFP and her public school classrooms when talking about her

community, asserting that both were a part of her supportive community, but the RFP allowed her to show her authentic self, much like "other mothers" in LaShayla's definition. Connecting "other mothers" to the RFP and teachers with similar backgrounds to their rural Mississippi Black woman roots implied a stronger connection to one community over the undefined other.

Community members also offered varying meanings to the blanketed term "community." Along with the "other mother" role many of my students desired from their teachers, Tisha recognized a difference in class status between her blue-collar working mother and siblings, and her college educated teachers. For Tisha, "The majority of my teachers were African American and it was never articulated that they were college educated. It wasn't until adulthood, until I started questioning what made my teachers different from my blue collar working siblings." Like many of the community members I interviewed, Tisha admired the social and cultural capital her college educated teachers had and related to her teachers as the "standard" in her community. All other community members deemed the teachers during this time period as gatekeepers to a symbolic form of capital that they admired (Farkas et. al. 1990).

All of my students had traditional aspirations of success and getting a "good job," although they were aware of the obstacles facing them, particularly in relation to education. Students and community members were both critical of the public education system and ways higher education could support them and their family's escape from poverty. Some community members' values are in line with traditional American values and middle-class culture that prioritizes self-motivation to gain access to the job market. For example, a community member stated:

> There have been plenty of people from the Delta who have utilized education to pull themselves up from poverty. The success of these individuals is not widely known or

publicized. If more was done to share this information then others would be inspired and gain confidence to be successful themselves.

A constant reflection for some interviewees was that anyone can "pull themselves up from poverty" if that person tried hard enough and was truly inspired to do so. However, some of my students would question this assumption by showing skepticism. Kiesha stated, "I honestly think that nothing will be done because nothing has been done so far" (Kiesha, 15 years-old).

Students and community members were inspired by those who were able to escape poverty and gain symbolic capital, especially for those "educated in the Mississippi Delta [because] it is known that we did it with not as many resources as our counterparts from bigger towns and cities" (anonymous community member). However, they were also critical about "efforts [being] made to bring qualified teachers to the Delta, [where] initiatives have failed in bridging the culture gaps that prevent these teachers from cultivating the relationships needed in schools." There are concerns of culture insensitivity between incoming teachers, who are not of the community, and local teachers. Community members, parents, and students are pushing for more teachers who are culturally aware of their students. Community members admired native Deltan teachers because they were invested in the community long-term. One community member responded that "teacher shortages and teachers who are not of the community is a recent issue in Rosedale that is coupled with aging and dilapidated school facilities, inadequate technology and dwindling resources" (community member).

Community member interviewee Katrina used "the Delta" in instances where she described her community as a local place that she grew up in with distinct cultural influences, as well as Kelvyn who described the Delta as "close-knit," "utopian," and "elite" in reference to his

community. Clarence included his high school coaches and school staff as a part of his community, stating:

> "I couldn't get in trouble because my high school coach and community members stayed on top of me. They would snitch to my grandparents if I ever did something I had no business doing. We were very community centered...teachers didn't work for a check and were from surrounding towns in the Delta."

Students and community members alike were aware of the structural forces that were imposed on their lives and their community. However, they were adamant about their community being "theirs." From teachers to grocery store owners to café runners to community organizers, students and community members maintained a cohesive "village" definition about their community and the Mississippi Delta.

Marcus Hunter and Zandria Robinson's village term is not just a distinction in size, but it centers the unitedness of Black people in the form of Black geographies, which the authors call "chocolate cities" (Hunter & Robinson 2018). Rosedale, Mississippi, with a nearly 90% Black population runs as a chocolate city, where community members operate in varying degrees to sustain viable capital distinct to Rosedale. Even throughout migration, where Black folk relocated from the deep-south to "other souths,"[11] the many villages of Black towns, neighborhoods, rural communities, and Black sections produced cultural, social, and human networks that spread into other chocolate maps such as Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, Washington, D.C., and Compton. Community members and students related to their chocolate city as a

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[11] Sociologists Hunter and Robinson propose a Black map with a non-White perspective that shows the continued migration of Black people from the deep-south to "other souths" including: out-south, west-south, mid-south, up-south and down-south. The authors contend that everything below Canada is "The South," where Black communities emerge in different areas producing powerful "place-making" strategies while creating/re-creating Black culture.

"community-family," where they made place by embracing tight-knit community networks that proved to be powerful markers of cultural, social, economic, and political power in many Black communities.

Rosedale, MS Assets and Capitals

The Rosedale Freedom Project is a powerful asset for the Rosedale youth. My participation in this project validated that this educational initiative is one to keep and build on for future generations. Capital, as defined by Flora (2016), is any type of resource that produces additional resources. The Freedom Project is investing in Rosedale's human capital through the freedom project's culturally-specialized curriculum. My students are creative and innovative thinkers who are becoming Rosedale and the Delta's future leaders, which speaks to the powerful levels of resilience in this place.

Black youth students' voices bring a unique agency and human capital that amplifies multiple differences. The many variations of who is, what is, when is, and where is community from both students and community member interviewees show how Black students and community members strategically form community through educational inequality. Student participants and community members asserted that their education field was a primary field that helped them to form community and build resilience, which seems fitting to insert education as a community-level structure that influences this town's resilience. In Cafer, Green, and Gorehams' "Community Resilience Framework," the education system is listed as a community system with Flora's seven capitals and their relevant structures. As stated previously, I will be using cultural, human, and social capital, and the ways these capitals influence educational resilience.

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Table 4: Rosedale, MS Extended Educational Capital

Emphasized Community System	Cultural Capital	Human Capital	Social Capital
Education system	-Curricular choices *that provide instructional learning* -Extracurricular activity types *that emphasize cultural cultivation through artistic ventures such as documentary work, poetry, music, visual arts, plays etc.* -Community education programs	-Students -Teachers/staff *with accreditation* -Educational levels -Skill levels -*Specialized programs* -*Cultural workers*	-PTA -Extracurricular participation -Volunteers -*Out-of-school networking events* -*Community trust level to education system* -*Locality of teachers*

According to Cafer et al. (2019), the Community Resilience Framework mandates the inclusion of non-dominant voices in the community development process. The lack of non-dominant groups in these processes is a major critique in the literature. Acknowledging the non-dominant voices of students was essentially a matter of understanding what they deemed as a hazard and an asset within their communities, and how they elevated forms of Black cultural capital[12] to promote resilience. A lack of literature that critically assesses the way non-normative forms of cultural capital mitigate how Black students achieve success and resilience plays a crucial role for this research.

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[12] Although authors who write about Black cultural capital (Carter 2003, 2007; Derron 2016) refer to it as a non-dominant form of capital that Black students use to navigate through social fields (Bourdieu 1986), I do not contest Black cultural capital as a non-dominant form. Within the participants lives, Black cultural capital is the dominant form of capital that helps them navigate through social spheres. I will be referencing Black cultural capital within a dominant framework.

Cultural Capital

Flora and Butler define cultural capital as "how we see the world and what we value," where the unseen and the seen, collective and individual, and who we are versus "the other," are used as cultural identity markers (Flora and Butler 2018:73). The Rosedale Freedom Project students' curricular choices, extracurricular activity types, and community education programs were not being met at the students' local high school. Their curricula were standardized by the Mississippi Department of Education with exceptions to online classes, in which students, parents and local community members were firmly against. However, the RFP provided a student-centered curriculum based in restorative justice initiatives to not only pick-up where student's local education system failed through tutoring programs, but to also create spaces for students to critique the curriculum they were learning from, as well as provide feedback through grassroot democracy. Extracurricular activities included sports teams for both students who attended the public education system now and community's interviewees that attended in the past. Community education programs were largely supported by the RFP. Although community member interviewees described their public education system as vigorous and a place that helped "mold our minds to get us ready for the world" (Nicolas), current RFP students were supported to "develop critical consciousness and practice justice through community building, exploration, artistic creation, organizing, and the study of social history and grass-roots democracy" (RFP website).

Although helpful for practitioners to better evaluate resiliency through stressors and assets in a community and specific system, understanding how rural Black students capitalize on their culture for social mobility further complicates the either/or dichotomy of stressor versus asset. For my students, assessing how they were socialized to understand racism through "the

talk" many Black parents have with their children on ways to act when approached by law enforcement was a matter of life or death. In the Mississippi Delta, where the powers of White structures are separated by train tracks or a field, students have to navigate how to act and when to act in different spaces quite often. At the RFP, where my students' culture was celebrated and capitalized, authenticity and empowerment became the standard that they were used to. However, when talking about the shared Black knowledge of how to react when being approached by the police or interact with school teachers, conversations would allude to "do as they say" or "don't make the situation worst." Although a stressor, in terms of mental exhaustion between who to trust and who not to trust, navigation can also be characterized as a valued asset that moves Black people in the face of pain and uncertainty.

Black people have always moved, made space, moved, and re-made space in another place again. In relation to Hunter and Robinson's critiques on Black cities and place-making strategies, "withdrawal or exit is a direct way of expressing one's unfavorable views" (2018:175). Whether students and community members retreat to other locations in the face of inequality, silence their voices when tired and frustrated with racism, or build community outside of formal institutions, they are using agency to live or to simply be heard. Students and community members' relationship to systems are faulty, because so often these systems are made by White hegemonic structures to oppress Black and low-income people. However, how students and community members move in the presence of systemic oppression is not fatalistic. Students and community members are powerful agents who utilize community and resistance in order to sustain their culture and livelihoods.

As John explained when asked about his hopes and aspirations for his Rosedale community, "Knowledge is power. One of the things that started a great revolution in the delta is

the mindset. There is a different mindset in Rosedale and in the Mississippi Delta in general than anywhere else." John, along with many of my students, took pride in his culture and education, while teaching future generations how situated knowledge has created and continues to create resilient people. Because of their social position, community participants saw the world differently and were encouraged to learn in a world that they did not always feel welcomed in. Community members began to embrace their cultural knowledge and deemed it a social asset that eventually created avenues for shared dispositions and a united front against oppression.

Community education programs such as the RFP and cultural workers who work in the public school district and RFP both emphasize the significance of the Mississippi Delta's Black culture in relation to surface level perceptions about the Mississippi Delta. Whereas the Delta is perceived to be always backwards and always deprived, cultural workers embrace traditions and situated education that is relevant to the Delta youth in their communities. Community education programs allow cultural work, although culture work has not always been welcomed by some White, more affluent community members. Student leaders are following in the footsteps of past freedom project students by learning about cultural knowledge that is relevant to their lives and academic end goals.

Cultural knowledge that teaches students about their social position and consciousness is a tradition in many Black communities. Systems that oppress students daily push students to understand social structures critically. Cultural workers in Black educational spheres teach students about blackness while also relating to internalized feelings of twoness many Black Americans experience. My students were aware of their social position and consciousness about the social world because they are a product of a weak system. Students activated their agency by

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embracing their situated knowledge. Their agency is situated in their ability to understand social systems, critique said system, and become active voices that promote change.

Social Capital

Flora and Butler define social capital as a group level phenomenon where community members "form groups, collaborate within and among groups, develop a common view of a shared future, form or reinforce collective identity, and engage in collective action" (Flora and Butler 2018:160). Social capital is evaluated by PTA presence, extracurricular participation, and volunteers who support the social growth of students. In both community member and student interviews, it was common for parents to attend meetings only when necessary. Oftentimes, especially for participants who come from a low-income household, parents became aware about their students' behavior or academic problems by talking to teachers who lived in Rosedale or local towns near Rosedale. A stronger relationship was created between teacher and parents for past community member interviewees because "teachers were tenured and had the respect from the community" and "were people who were concerned" (Nicolas). "They were counsellors, bible teachers, etc. They even provided clothes for kids, combed their hair, and were from the area so it felt like family" (John). Parents trusted the public schools and the teachers who taught their students. Although there may not have been a strong formal PTA, informally, parents and teachers were more like neighbors, friends, brothers and sisters than associates.

Students who did participate in extracurricular activities were most notably involved in sports. Although artistic and STEM classes were voiced as being something community members would have liked to seen in their past and current school system, they were however supportive of coaches and the pride they felt through their school sporting teams. The

community of Rosedale then and now has strong ties to basketball and football. For some community members, playing basketball inspired career choices including physical therapy and athletics. Others like Clarence prioritized schooling over sports stating, "Because my dad's side of the family were all teachers, they were a part of my spiritual upbringing and me taking school serious. I didn't care about sports, school was first. I made sure I got good grades because of them."

Current students spend much of their leisure time at the RFP aside from the local public school. Although not formally recognized within the public education system that they attend, extracurricular activities including creative writing, film-making, acting, and sustainable gardening are a glimpse into what students create through both the summer months and school year outside of their public school system. Through these ventures, students are being exposed to internationally recognized filming projects, have published creative writing works, and are gaining business etiquette credentials that elevate their social capital.

Since my students continue to experience teacher shortages, they relied on volunteers from local and distant colleges and the RFP, which provided social networking opportunities for students. Social networking opportunities connected students' artistic work to film festivals, authors, documentarians, poets, writers, and other professional artists where the Delta's Black culture was on display for anyone to see, hear or observe from a student's point on view. Students created art daily with little outside help aside from training sessions and assistance from RFP staff members. However, students gained notoriety through out-of-school networking events that pushed their work to broader audiences.

Students were also leaders in their community through leadership clubs, documentary clubs, sustainable farming initiatives, creative writing and poetry slams, community fundraisers,

and more. Student led community projects linked organizational affiliation to interpersonal skills, social bonds, and development initiatives. Student led projects and initiatives promoted feelings of cohesion and social harmony in Rosedale where community members and students marched, ate, socialized, interacted with neighbors, attended monthly community meetings, and criticized local school officials. Where trust was lost for current students of Rosedale, it was regained through the RFP and student led community work that promoted group cohesion and collective activities to strengthen motivation to promote social change.

Human Capital

Flora and Butler define human capital as assets that a person possesses in relation to health, formal education, skills, knowledge, leadership, and potential (Flora and Butler 2018: 110). After interviewing community members, the human capital that was available to them through their education system elevated both their cultural and social capital. As stated previously, the social capital that community members received through familial connections between teachers, parents, and students were described by all interviewees. This allowed the teachers and administrators, who were described as human capital, to pass down both cultural and social capital to their students.

What participants valued about their education system was how human agents in their school system were supportive and nurturing to them. Aside from "productive wealth embodied in labor, skills and knowledge" that human capital provides, community members stressed the importance of college-educated and critical teachers that helped them prosper in an environment that did not have access to advanced placement courses and basic resources (OECD 2001). Critical teachers operated as cultural workers, where they were from the community, lived in the

community, received a formal education from the community, and were a critical asset to the "village" that sustained educational advancements for students.

To understand the value placed on school administrators and teachers, the context of rural education is especially important. The educational skills that were valued in the community were seen in the teachers for community member interviewees. "The school is one of the major employers in that community. The only other major employer is the steel plant" (anonymous community member). Like many participants, the school was not only a place to advance social and cultural capital, but it was one of the few places of employment for community members. For rural Black students, school was the center of their community's job market, educational training, recreational activities, etc. To embrace the all-encompassing nature their school system seemed to have had community member interviewees drew upon their education system to provide everything in what many would consider a field of nothing.

While 63% of the Black residents have a high school diploma and 7% a bachelor's degree, students and community members pass on informal knowledge and skills that expand students' situated education and resilience. Students and community members both agree that educators who were from the community and of the community were responsible for their continued growth as students and citizens, where many of the agents were described as teachers and community developers who gave students' knowledge that surpassed a traditional education.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

Being here, place, is a reoccurring thought central to this thesis. Oftentimes, this place is given a tone of "villagelike neighborhoods" with a "faceless mass known in the media as 'the Black community'" followed by statistics of high crime, poverty and food insecurity rates (Tisha). Included in that discussion is the low job availability and unchallenging academic performance levels. Dixie, plantations, the blues and the Civil Rights movement also fit partially well with this story. But when we think about this place, should it only be a space evaluated by a "setting, backdrop, stage, or context for something else;" or can it be exclusively "racial proportions of neighborhoods, unemployment rates in cities, birth rates in nation-states," or should we keep honing-in on high-crime rates, food insecurity, educational disadvantages, and unhealthy livelihoods (Gieryn 2000:471-472)? Growing up, that is what I thought about this place. The media and migrating family members moving anywhere but away from the Mississippi Delta painted this picture for me. While living in Jackson, Mississippi, the Delta and I were only separated by 141 miles of land, trees, crops and churches. However, this place had been described as fatalistically oppressive for Black folk who look like me.

As stated by Gieryn, "A place is remarkable, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences" (Gieryn 2000: 471). There are no words or descriptors that could fully explain the interpretative understandings or experiences that I witnessed while working at the RFP. This makes my own understandings of this place as not all-knowing or visually representative. I cannot paint the picture that so many

rural Mississippi Delta, Black community members see when they walk outside every day. I am not from this place, so my connection to it is not concrete or complete. There is no absolute thought or understanding that could give a thorough representation of this place. However, I can challenge the narrative that lay people think about this place.

As shown through this research, deficit language should not be the complete thought when talking about this place. Discussions about the Mississippi Delta should always include how Black people are mitigating the effects of strong institutional barriers. Along with systemic disadvantages, the Mississippi Delta is a place that challenges narratives about rural Mississippi. A place that grounds leaders. A place that birthed Civil Rights activists and became the soil for their seeds to grow. A place where students have internalized thoughts that matter and that they want to vocalize.

The history of Rosedale is a story of the importance of place. Rosedale is situated in the delta region. Rosedale is in the same region that flooded in 1927 dislocating 637,000 people. Black community members became refugee laborers and were housed in campsites in nearby Cleveland where they were prohibited to leave by the local White plantation owners for fear of losing valuable workers. The children of these workers formed community in what is now Rosedale. Workers who formed community through struggle created collective struggles that have since been passed down to the current generation. Through interviews, community surveys, and participant observations, I have seen, critiqued, analyzed, and described the collective struggle that reinforces community and shared dispositions to produce human agency.

On being from the same place as me, writer Kiese Laymon states, "We [are] the kinfolk of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells, and Medgar Evers. I assumed we [are] wittier, tougher, and more imaginative than White students, administrators, and faculty because we [have] to be"

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(Laymon, 2018:121). We have always adjusted our movements to do far more than necessary to make "it." We have always told stories that clash with existing normative approaches about what community means and looks like. I have no words for the impact this place has had on my life. I have all of the words for why this place should be considered a model representation of rural Black communities and how they support agents of change.

The U.S. education system is a vessel for cultural reproduction that stratifies different groups of people, allowing the voices of rural minority residents to not be heard and their wants and needs not met (Bourdieu 1987; Duncan 2000; Marquez-Zenkov et. al. 2007). When looking at statistical data, we see how rural Black students compare to their White counterparts (Johnson 2014). Consequently, top-down data questions the level of resiliency that predominately Black communities have to offer. The story of rural Mississippi Black people is complex. However, in order to tell a story about Black Deltans, we must discuss the varying degrees in which the experiences of Black people living in the Mississippi Delta shape how they learn, what they learn, and where they learn.

Themes of Internalized Agency

Black youth in Rosedale's freedom project expressed their intellectual curiosity and agency in ways uncaptured through formal studies. The students were intimately aware of their positions in Rosedale and the Delta's unique history and were critical thinkers on how to overcome these forces collectively. Along with their ability to be critical thinkers in an environment that systematically strips them away from resources that cultivate critical thinking skills, they were also student practitioners who were actively connecting cultural knowledge about who they are and where they come from to ways that they can create personal and

community-level change. Both student interviewees and community members were adamant about re-writing their stories. Stories that are true to people who live in the Delta region, but often go untold outside the Mississippi Delta. Stories that captivate the "village" that they grew to love and appreciate and noted as central pieces to their on-going narratives of resilience, agency, power, and blackness.

In line with how community members and students relate to capital and community development processes, community member participants described their teachers as community developers. However rural, oppressive, systemically disconnected from development strategies, community members related to their community as a safe-haven in a drought, as an oasis in despair, as a producer of capital in an uncertain field. How do we explain such resilience? How do we feasibly understand through normalized frameworks and standards a pathway to success when this place has been described as unsuccessful? Through my analysis of intimate conversations and interviews between peers and myself as a teacher, and conversations and surveys with past community members, I have analyzed the complexities of this process. My analysis shows that the resiliency detected is correlated with (1) a strong sense of identity, (2) connection to community, (3) supportive teachers, administrators, coaches and "other mothers," and (4) consistent rebuttals to outsider judgement.

Community members and students understood the intricate ways institutions worked to oppress them. All participants made connections that escaping oppression was a conscious thought towards achieving success. While reviewing their symbolic capital in traditional classroom settings, their activation of social and cultural capital was stagnant because of internalized thoughts about their twoness of being both American and Black for some, and American, Black, and woman for others. For some, questioning this feeling was met head on; for

others, the superiority of the teacher discouraged them from speaking out; and for those who were critical about the communal aspect of schooling, being critical of administrators, teachers, parents, peers and themselves was a part of the journey.

Unlike community member interviewees, the students expressed distrust in their current public education system. The students are distrustful of the public education they are receiving and the conditions that they are receiving it in, which questions the level of social capital that is in the community. What happens when an education system loses the human, social and cultural capital that was evident in the community members' responses? Community members created the freedom school. Community members who were frustrated with the school district began to create a place for students to extend and embrace social and cultural knowledge that generations of people who lived in this area hold true. The resilient nature of this community allowed them to build new trust in a new structure that would hopefully socialize their students into success stories that they witnessed while growing up.

Resiliency Building Strategies

In relation to resiliency, secondary data involving community capitals such as food security, environmental sustainability and economic security are traditionally explored. However, the listed outcomes do not fully define rural Black communities' ability to be resilient, neither do they present primary data that generate new understandings about what resiliency is. Black people have fought for equal access to education for decades especially within their own communities, which as I argue, is a form of community resilience.

As a result of racial segregation and economic oppression, efforts to become resilient are instilled in Black churches, civic organizations and for this research, in their schools (Rogers

2006). Students' cultural experiences allow them to activate agency and take action in support of their education. Understanding this can help scholars better relate to minority students in the Mississippi Delta and consider culture when accounting for community resilience. Although individual resilience is significant in many Black families, resilient Black communities have not been capitalized in current research. I noticed that in this place, resilience looks conflicting at times, but stable in others; it looks persistent in most cases, but skeptical in others; it looks cohesive in some instances, but individual in others; it looks like a both/and phenomenon, both/and successes and failures; both/and assets and deficits; both/and Black, poor, and conscious. The complex ways in which institutionalized deficits create asset building strategies are not always clear, and oftentimes conflict with each other in nature. However, whether people decided to adjust or readjust when faced with obstacles was met with an almost same response: "We gotta work with what we got" (Carla).

Resilience building strategies have long been a part of this place. Community development initiatives that promote resiliency building, however, have been influenced by power structures that no longer identify with the people in the community. Whereas for the past community member interviewees, educators were thought of as community developers. For my students who attend the current education system, teachers are brought in from outside places and do not relate to the community in the same manner. Teachers in this district have stretched themselves thin and cannot feasibly serve the community at the capacity needed to sustain educational resiliency through the public school system due to a lack of pay and housing instability.

Collectively, the students along with community member participants were not only prideful about their roots but were consistent in their motivation to attend school and receive a

higher education. Even with a school system that they deemed flawed in many aspects (current student interviewees), they were reluctant to move away from the town and were making efforts to change and support the community through student led community projects. For past community member interviewees, even those who enlisted into the military shortly after graduation, education was a top priority and they deemed it necessary in order for them to attend college to ensure a better life.

However, some community members were adamant about the group cohesion that I saw in Rosedale. One interviewee stated:

As I look at African American communities today, I'm saddened that we are no longer striving but simply existing. There is no pride in our neighborhoods, education or family values. The behavior that is exemplified in our young people is disturbing and nobody is paying attention. Our culture as a whole has forgotten what those before us stood for and we have become oppressors of our own communities.

Although rare, community member interviewees who were no longer in the community were distant from community work that was being done. These community members were operating from a distant narrative captured by the media and/or hear-say assumptions passed along by other community members. My students would argue, along with other community members, that their struggles were real and their voices were loud and consistent, much like the community leaders who came before them.

The above interviewee's understanding of the "oppressed" versus the "oppressor" did not mirror students' understanding of who can be oppressed and who can be an oppressor. Whereas my students, who were operating as student practitioners, had questions and critiques about the role of the oppressed in relation to systems that oppress them, they were knowledgeable about

power relations between groups of people even within their own communities. Many students understood that their White counterparts had power that they did not have access to; however, they also saw Black superintendents and officials who had power that they nor their families had access to. In relation to the oppressed versus oppressors, students were conflicted about who was actually oppressing them. Students could see oppression in their homes and schools that were run by Black people, which often differed with how they understood power structures between Black and White people.

Although the Delta is influenced by multiple levels of oppressive systems which oftentimes create conflicting narratives about who is the oppressed and who is the oppressor, I argue that the group-level agency that was present in all participants is influenced by generations of community resilient strategies. Group-level agency allowed participants to use education as a social status builder within this place. The education that both students and community members were experiencing was community centered, a central part of their culture, and comes from a direct result of the community's positionality of being both Black, poor, and rural. This thesis reaffirms the "structure-agency dialect" evident in many rural, Black communities, and the transformative power participants displayed that is distinctly connected to how culture is related to group membership and resiliency building.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

"Bye Ms. Bradley, when are you coming back up here?" "Soon! I can't miss the preview [The Hate U Give] without y'all." "Okay. Well we're gonna miss you. Hope to see you soon." "Me too, I'll be back." As I continue to pack my car after spending a week at Jackson State University with the Rosedale Freedom Project for a college emergence trip, I start to remember the times I said "I'll be back" to places and people that I avoided saying good-byes to, because saying good-bye seemed too real and too much like forever. After I got in my car, I turned on "Sunflower" by Rex Orange County because it was one of the last morning songs one of the co-teachers played to jumpstart our last morning together. I drove off hoping that I would beat the Rosedale Freedom Project van, because after spending a summer with Rosedale students, seeing the RFP van trail away to Highway 49 while I stayed behind was like leaving a part of my community.

While driving after saying my last good-byes, I began to reflect on the hair show I put together with RFP students at Jackson State University that showcased the various Black hairstyles, both African and Black inspired, and how excited the students were to embrace their natural hair textures in an artistic, self-produced way. I started to reason with myself about how I had grown up in Mississippi, Black and sometimes rebellious, and used my own natural curls to protest and embrace my existence. I began to remember how powerful it felt to use my own culture, both Black, female, and southern, as an empowering ritual that I looked forward to every morning. And now, I had given students a space to embrace a ritual that we do in Black homes

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every day in an educational setting that was devoted to learning about historical and sociological contexts connected to everyday Black customs such as hair care practices.

On a micro-level, the everyday convictions learned by being Black in Mississippi seems natural because they are embodied, which sometimes make it difficult to understand how we do, what we do, why we do, and when we do it. On a macro-level, it is the how in how we do, the what in what we do, the why in why we do, and the when in when we do that makes researching predominately Black spaces not only necessary, but indicative of what it means to promote the human in the structure. Most importantly, in order to get to the how, what, why, and when, we must assume that the do exists. We must assume that Black rural community members and students [do] promote agency and resiliency in numerous ways and places in order to research how, why, what, and when.

Oftentimes, the "do" has been overlooked because they are either hidden behind Black spaces where those who do not have access to those spaces do not acknowledge that whatever "it" is exists, or the action has become such an embodied part of a group of people's existences that asking "does agency and resiliency exist in this place" seems trivial. However, as both an outsider[13] and insider[14] in relation to the Mississippi Delta, I came to terms with both the unseen and trivial sections of this place. I made a conscious effort to not look at this place through a surface level lens, which I show can be problematic for practitioners, policy makers, researchers, and educators who diagnose and "fix," to avoid unseeing how community members view themselves and their home.

In order to reconcile the unseen with the familiar, I went physically and metaphorically into this place and looked at the day-to-day lives at play. I saw Zaire, a reserve student who

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[13] In reference to me not being from or have ever lived in the Mississippi Delta for long periods of time.
[14] In reference to me being Black and from the deep south.

oftentimes is outspoken in classroom discussions, ask a visiting scholar whether he supported Martin Luther King's nonviolence movement over Malcolm X's pro-Black movement during a casual conversation about Civil Rights movements. When the visitor sided with Martin Luther King, Jr., assuming Zaire would agree and save face as a reluctant and non-argumentative student, Zaire abruptly critiqued the scholar's position and vocalized with clarity why a pro-Black movement was, and still is, needed on her own merits and sense of agency. I saw Jamal, a student athlete whose athletic abilities are praised throughout the community, consciously decide to vocalize his opinions about creating a positive classroom culture without the influence of his peer group. Through many encounters with Jamal, I saw his conscious effort to learn for his own benefit without the input of peer groups and sometimes family members. In order to understand a quiet, reserved student like Jamal, I had to see him every day for a summer to understand that the freedom project gave him, and many others, space to display agency that he longed for and was often denied in his public school system and in his home.

The transformative potential my students have to make, change, and re-create community through service and action is deeply rooted in their collective experiences. Many of my students were connected to community member interviewees not by ancestry alone, but by a lineage of human agents who created unbelievable utopias in fields of despair. In relation to *1) How do Black youth activate their agency and resilience in the rural community context of the Mississippi Delta's legacy of oppression?* I find that although my students are in a public school system that lacks the necessary resources to be resilient and overcome stressors influenced by racist institutions, their resiliency is based in communal advocacy and lineages of perseverance fueled by skepticism and love for their "community-family" that transcends the structure of a physical school building. Although community members and students are skeptical, frustrated,

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and angry with the countless amount of people who "use the Delta as a steppingstone or to pay off a student loan and then move on to bigger and better things" (Timothy), participants contained an almost universal connection to this place, where students and community members "didn't think of it as a place I needed to get away from" (Addie), but instead a place that gave them hope and aspirations that promoted social change and agency.

In relation to *2) How do students increase their agency on civic mindedness and social justice by embracing additional education through the Rosedale Freedom Project?* I find that specialized education has been a part of their lives long before I came. At times when I assumed that limited agency and civic mindedness existed, I had to re-focus myself towards the people and what they were saying about agency. Students are receiving additional educational capital at the Freedom project that most closely connects to their habitus as Black, rural students. Students are embracing freedom school curriculums based in the 1960s that created and continue to create more inclusive avenues towards equal education and social justice movements in rural Mississippi. Not only are students embracing additional educational capital that elevates their social knowledge, they are connecting their families' Civil Rights history to current movements. Because the additional education students are receiving is specialized and connected to historical movements that helped shape narratives about Black life in the Mississippi Delta, students feel more powerful to critique, respond to, and push-open closed doors that seem inescapable as student practitioners.

Limitations

The ethnographic study is based on twenty interviews. Primarily, the data comes from six student interviewees at the Rosedale Freedom Project. A limitation of this study is the amount of

student participants that were available to me and how they are involved in the community. In order to describe a truer picture, I needed access to more students in the freedom projects, and more students outside of the project. If I had access to more students in the freedom project (the project served roughly 30 students during summer 2018), I would be able to critique my own generalizations about students' statements and relationships to their community. If I had access to students outside of the freedom project, I would be able to understand how community members outside of the freedom project relate to their community and agency. Interpersonal relationships and intimate conversations that were happening outside the space of the freedom project would have given me access to data in order to make broader generalizations.

Seeing the Unseen

On the last day of class, I knew I had to send the students off with one last person to admire and show them the potential they have to be advocates in their own community. My students have terminology to help them understand and articulate what "the system" means and how it relates to people like them, but now they needed hope. My students needed a chance to feel inspired. One of my inspirations was Angela Davis, so I tried to fill them up with her same spirit. Angela Davis' speech on social change gave them a place to be natural organizers. The narrative they/we are usually told is one that situates older, educated Black men as the core leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. However, Angela Davis is someone who is just as outspoken as my students saying that the real organizers of the Civil Rights Movement were everyday people who saw dreams that they wanted to make into realities. The organizers of the Civil Rights Movement were Fannie Lou Hamers, Joyce Ladners, Anzie Moores, the Tougaloo nine, Jewel Sanders, Barbara Popes, and other everyday people from rural Mississippi who made

social change and practiced resiliency by simply living and existing unapologetically in a region that profits from their continued oppression.

Whether calculating a domain's resources, or planning disaster management strategies, we must continue to find the human in the macro in order to understand communities like Rosedale, Mississippi. The concept of "conscious community," as proposed by Tracey Coates (2014), requires an outsider to make a conscious effort towards the "social, the spatial and the cultural elements as those are inextricably interlinked" (Coates 2014:64). While embracing a conscious community, we must also note that, "we cannot see or measure phenomena accurately if the tools themselves were not designed with the oppressed and marginalized in mind" (Hunter and Robinson 2018:177). Before assessing a community like Rosedale as non-resilient, we must gain access into the community to see how they capitalize certain capitals differently than dominant frameworks and re-define toolkits with oppressed and marginalized folk in mind.

Rosedale is a powerful place that clings to a close knit Black community with both strengths and contradictions. As I show through this thesis, Black community spaces mirror the resilience that have sustained Black communities, Black success stories, and Black culture for generations. Rosedale is a part of that network, and communities like Rosedale must be looked at in a clearer frame that recognizes Black people's power in the organization of American landscape, culture, and progress. Our success is connected to our internalized and activated agency, and our students are a product of our collective agency and resilience. We will continue to produce transformative spaces and descendants who understand the powerful agency that reside in them.

The Rosedale story like many Black stories is always evolving, but it continues to question theoretical and methodological assumptions that do not represent our stories well.

Internalized agency pushes people to "do", especially those most impacted by oppressive systems. Researchers and practitioners must understand that the "do" does exist in order to see places like Rosedale with a fuller vision, where seeing the unseen internalized and collective agency comes more natural than before.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Interview Questions

Interviews will be semi-structured. I will use the questions listed below as a guide but will build off of the questions based on how the interview is going. If participants are not answering the questions with relevant information, I will restructure how the question is being asked during the interview. If an emerging idea is being repeated, I will ask more questions to dig deeper into the idea.

Students:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

    a. What do you want to achieve in life?

    b. What are some of your biggest inspirations for these achievements?

    c. How much of your aspirations were developed at home and how much at school?

2. Tell me about your cultural background.

    a. Do you plan on attending college?

    b. Tell me about your parents/guardian's outlook on attending college?

    c. How did your background influence whether you want to attend college or not?

3. Describe a typical day for you in the classroom.

    a. Are you engaged with the lecture? Why or Why not?

    b. Do you ask questions about the lecture?

    c. How often do you participate in class discussions?

      d. Do your teachers encourage student engagement? Why or Why not?

4. Do you think your teacher is "all-knowing" and cannot be questioned? In other words, have you ever questioned your teacher before?

      a. Provide a time when this happened if so:

      b. If it did not happen, why not?

      c. How did/would your teacher react?

      d. What would your parents/guardians say about your reaction or lack thereof?

      e. Do your parents/guardians encourage you to question the teacher? Why do you think so or why don't you think so?

5. If you are stuck on a problem in class, what would be your initial response?

      a. Ask the teachers for help.

      b. Ask your friends for help.

      c. Ask no one and figure it out yourself.

      d. Move on to the next question, the problem is not worth your time.

6. What is the relationship between your parents/guardians and teachers?

      a. Do they ask about progress reports?

      b. How often do they visit the school?

      c. Do they attend parent-teacher conferences? Why or why not?

      d. What would they say if you were being disruptive in school?

      e. How do you feel in regards to their relationship with your teacher?

      f. Describe an interaction between your parents/guardians and how they responded to a report your teacher gave them:

7. Describe your perfect teacher?

    a. What does he/she look like?

    b. How often does he/she provide one-on-one help?

    c. Is he/she easy to reach when you have a problem?

    d. Do you think his/her cultural background should match yours? Why or why not?

    e. Did his/her cultural background matter to you in regards to your education?

8. Are you thinking about attending college?

    a. What influenced this decision?

    b. What do you think it takes to get into college?

    c. What are some "good student" tips you would give someone who wants to go to college:

9. What do you not like about your school district in comparison to other school districts?

    a. What is the name of your school?

    b. If you could change anything about your school, what would it be?

    c. If you could go to any other school, which would it be?

    d. Why would you go to this school or why not?

10. What are some of your hopes and aspirations for your school? Your community?

11. Do you have any comments that have not already been addressed?

Community Members/Snowball Sample:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.

    a. What do you want to achieve in life?

    b. What are some of your biggest inspirations for these achievements?

2. How much of your aspirations were developed at home and how much at school?

3. What was the education system like when you lived in Rosedale? Was the curriculum vigorous? Were teachers available to assist?

    a. What is it like now?

4. Tell me about your cultural background.

    a. Did you attend college?

    b. What influenced this decision?

    c. Tell me about your parents/guardian's outlook on attending college?

    d. How much of your background (race and class) influence whether you attend/attended college or not?

5. Did you think your teacher is "all-knowing" and cannot/could not be questioned? In other words, have you ever questioned your teacher or another authority figure before?

    a. Provide a time when this happened if so:

    b. If it did not happen, why not?

    c. How did/would your teacher react?

    d. What would your parents/guardians say about your reaction or lack thereof?

    e. Do/did your parents/guardians encourage you to question the teacher? Why do you think so or why don't you think so?

6. What was the relationship between your parents/guardians and teachers?

    a. Did they ask about progress reports?

    b. How often did they visit the school?

    c. Did they attend parent-teacher conferences? Why or why not?

    d. What would they say if you were being disruptive in school?

    e. How did you feel in regards to their relationship with your teacher?

    f.   Describe an interaction between your parents/guardians and how they responded

        to a report your teacher gave them:

7. What were some of the obstacles that you had to face while growing up in Rosedale?

    a.   How did you know that you were a triumph of your struggles?

8. What are some of your hopes and aspirations for your school district? Your community?

9. Do you have any comments that have not already been addressed?

10. What is your email? Do you mind if I send you a quick electronic survey at a later day?

Qualtrics Survey Questions

Hi, I'm a graduate student in sociology at the University of Mississippi. I would like to ask you some questions about the Rosedale community's educational experiences. The information you provide will help me better understand how the education system has prepared you and your students for success.

Benefits: By participating in the study, we hope to gain information that will help us understand perceptions of education success for African Americans in the MS Delta region. Your ideas will help improve the understanding for African American experiences.   Risks: No known risks. Voluntary nature of the study: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Even if you agree to participate, you can change your mind and stop at any time or choose to not answer any question.   Confidentiality: Your participation in this research will be kept confidential. Questions: If you have any questions or concerns, would like a copy of the questionnaire, or want to learn more about the study, please contact Denae Bradley at 662--915--2050 or dlbradle@go.olemiss.edu.

Institutional Review Board Approval: This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at 662-915--7482.

Thank you,

Denae Bradley

1. I have read and understood the above consent form and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

    ○ Yes (1)

    ○ No (2)

2. Do you live in the Delta region?

    ○ Yes (1)

    ○ No (2)

Skip To: Question 5 If Do you live in the Delta region? = No

3. How many years have you lived in the Delta region?

    ○ Less than a year (1)

    ○ 1 to 5 (2)

    ○ 6 to 10 (3)

○ 11 to 20 (4)

○ More than 20 (5)

4. How many years have you lived in your current community?

○ Less than a Year (1)

○ 1 to 5 (2)

○ 6 to 10 (3)

○ 11 to 20 (4)

○ More than 20 (5)

5. What is the population of your community (or nearest community)?

○ Less than 100

○ 100 to 499

○ 500 to 999

○ 1,000 to 4,999

○ 5,000 to 9,999

○ 10,000 to 19,999

○ 20,000 to 50,000

○ Over 50,000

○ Don't know/not sure

6. Describe your educational experiences while in school in Rosedale.

7. Based on your educational experiences, describe how you think educational opportunities in the MS Delta can be strengthened.

8. Describe any educational obstacles you experienced while in school in Rosedale.

9. Describe the importance of the schools for the town of Rosedale, and for the African American community.

10. Describe what others might know about African American success through education in Rosedale or the MS Delta.

11. Describe how the African American community continues to strive to overcome past inequities.

12. What are some resources needed in Rosedale, and in the African American communities across the MS Delta to assist in the continued success of its students and growth?

13. In conclusion, we would like to ask a couple of demographic questions.

14. What is your gender?

○ Male (1)

○ Female (2)

15. What is your highest level of education?

○ Less than high school (1)

○ GED, High school diploma (2)

○ Some college, no degree (3)

○ Associate's degree (4)

○ Bachelor's degree (5)

○ Master's degree or higher (6)

16. Please use the space below to share any final comments that you wish to add about educational issues in Rosedale or in the MS Delta. Thank you very much for your time and participation!

VITA

Education

2012 – 2016 University of Mississippi Bachelor of Arts
     Major: Psychology
     Minor: African American Studies

Work Experience

2016 – 2017 AmeriCorps VISTA – University of Mississippi Office of Sustainability, McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement
University, MS
- Served students from low-income communities in under-served schools
- Taught self-sustaining gardening/farming techniques and conservation practices
- Improved awareness of food injustice through a research study and focus groups
- Expanded Lafayette county, Mississippi's access to local food through programming

2013 - 2016 The University of Mississippi Family Literacy Program
Oxford, MS
- Assisted students in targeted subject areas via individual or group tutoring
- Work-study Employment
- Sites include: Mary Cathey Headstart, ABC Learning Center and Della Davidson Elementary

Research Experience

2016 – 2017 Office of Sustainability at the University of Mississippi
University, MS
- Interviewed and designed survey questions for the Office of Sustainability
- Organized a round-table discussion that focused on food insecurity in Lafayette county
- Trained and recruited round-table facilitators and documenters
- Assessed results of survey and provided action plan steps

2010 – 2015 University of Mississippi Medical Center, Mississippi Cancer Society, & Geographical Information System (GIS) research team member
Jackson, MS
- Compiled public records of mammography and colorectal screening sites in Mississippi
- Provided correlation reviews of distances between screening sites
- Assessed major incidence and mortality rated areas for breast and colorectal cancer

Combined findings into a GIS map for public records

Teaching Experience

2017 – 2019 Sociology Department Teaching Assistantship (in progress)
University, MS
- Intro to Sociology (165 students); African Americans and the Criminal Justice System (23 students); Race and Ethnicity (30 students); Race, Place and Space (50 students)
- Facilitate guess lectures for each course
- Lead discussions un-supervised
- Grade assignments and meet with students about progress in class and grades
- Proctor students during test days

2017 – 2019 Rosedale Freedom Project Summer Teacher and Curriculum Developer
Rosedale, MS
- Designed a 9th grade reading and math curriculum for the Rosedale Freedom Project
- Focused on building a sociological imagination, community activism, inequalities and civic engagement for the reading section
- Included basic statistics for the math section
- Taught students the designed course during Summer 2018 and 2019, which is included in my M.A. thesis data

2014 University of Mississippi Psychology Department Teaching Assistant
University, MS
- Facilitated service learning project with students at the Oxford Lafayette Humane Society
- Assisted Professor in creating and grading assignments
- Facilitated discussions involving service learning from summer study abroad trip

Publications

Faruque, Fazlay S., Xu Zhang, Elizabeth N. Nichols, Denae L. Bradley, Royce Reeves-Darby, Vonda Reeves-Darby and Roy Joseph Duhe. 2015. "The Impact of Preventive Screening Resource Distribution on Geographic and Population-Based Disparities in Colorectal Cancer in Mississippi." *BMC Research Notes* 8(1).

Nichols, Elizabeth N., Denae L. Bradley, Xu Zhang, Fazlay S. Faruque and Roy Joseph Duhe. 2014. "The Geographic Distribution of Mammography Resources in Mississippi." *Online Journal of Public Health Informatics* 5(3).

Presentations

2018 – Three Minute Thesis Presentation (3MT)
        Oral Presentation: "Agents of Change – An assessment of cultural transmission, place and agency amongst African Americans in the Mississippi Delta"

2018 – Mid-South Sociological Association (MSSA)

Oral Presentation: "Agents of Change – An assessment of cultural transmission, place and agency amongst African Americans in the Mississippi Delta"

2018 – Alabama-Mississippi Sociological Association (AMSA)
Oral Presentation: "Residential Segregation and its effects on educational achievement gaps in Mississippi"
Honors and Awards

2019 Larry W. DeBord Award Recipient
- Recognized as the outstanding graduating student in the sociology M.A. program

2018 Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society
University, MS
- Inducted into the University of Mississippi's Gamma Beta Phi Honor society chapter
- Recognized for service and collegiate honor

2016 Society for Collegiate Leadership and Achievement Honor Society at Ole Miss
University, MS
- Personal mentorship with a collegiate individual
- Individualized development planning

2016 Who's Who Recipient
University, MS
- Selected for The University of Mississippi's Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges