Between Protest, Compromise, and Education for Radical Change:

Black Power Schools in Harlem in the Late 1960s

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ABSTRACT

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In response to stalled struggles for equal and integrated education by African American students, parents, teachers, and activists, Harlem in the late 1960s saw a number of independent schools emerge that drew inspiration and rhetoric from Black Power ideas. This dissertation investigated the reasons for these schools’ emergence in Harlem; what goals these institutions pursued; how they translated their goals, purposes, and ideas into pedagogical practices and curricula; and how these were adapted to the specific challenges faced by the schools by closely examining three such initiatives: West Harlem Liberation School; the storefront academies run by the New York Urban League; and West Side Street Academy, later renamed Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE). All of these schools incorporated values and ideas that were central to the philosophy of Black Power, such as an emphasis on self-determination, self-sufficiency, self-reliance, Black history, and cultural pride. However, the ways in which these core ideas of Black Power were interpreted and put into practice varied significantly between different initiatives, especially as they had to navigate daily necessities such as applying for funding or making compromises with corporate donors, foundations, or the New York City Board of Education. Thus, while some of these educational institutions explicitly pursued activist agendas—by positioning themselves as a means to pressure the public school system into fundamental change or by conceptualizing education explicitly as a tool for collectively
dismantling systems of oppression—others came to favor approaches designed to uplift individual students rather than pursue more radical social change.

While scholars have extensively studied the fights for desegregation and community control of public schools in Harlem and New York City, the establishment of these Black alternative educational initiatives outside of the public school system as an extension of the movement for quality and equitable education—and as a part of social justice movements, including the Black Power Movement, more broadly—has rarely been considered. These schools and their approaches also provide a unique lens through which to study and re-evaluate Black Power ideas: They reflect the diversity and contradictions of the movement, the different goals and avenues for change that activists within that movement envisioned, and how the theories and ideas of Black Power were translated into practice on the local level in specific issues.
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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

“We decided that we’re through with that same old plantation bit where the master can
tell the slaves who can come to [the] big house and talk with him,”\(^1\) Sidney Jones, a
spokesperson for the Parents Association for Public School 125 (PS 125), said, referring to
negotiations the Parents Association had with the Board of Education. In 1967, PS 125, a Harlem
school with a student body of 1,800, saw 1,700 of those students not attend for several weeks.
Instead, those 1,700 students attended a so-called “liberation school” that was initiated by
parents and community members and which operated outside of the public school system.
Numerous attempts to reform this particular public elementary school with a majority Black and
Puerto Rican student body had failed.\(^2\) After being denied more control over and participation in
their children’s education, more than 3,000 parents and community members not only boycotted
the school and withdrew their children as a response, but parents, community members, and
retired teachers also provided the kind of education they wanted to see implemented in the
curricula of the public school system. Parents and community members who provided education
in the liberation school emphasized the value of meaningful education that allowed students to
identify with what they learned and to be proud of their heritage. In addition to the usual
academic subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, students studied the history of the

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\(^1\) Sara Slack, “‘We Won Our Point,’ Say PS 125 Parents,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 8, 1967,

\(^2\) ‘Black’ is capitalized because it is used as a proper noun and reflects a self-identification of people of
African descent, similarly to ‘African American,’ ‘German,’ ‘Italian,’ and others. At the same time, ‘white’ is not
capitalized because it has not been an indicator of ethnic origin, but one of privilege and does not refer to a people.
In this dissertation, I will use ‘Black’ and ‘African American’ interchangeably.
fight for community control as well as the fight for educational justice and equality. Thus, regular textbooks were complemented by a ‘Liberation Notebook’ written by the parents. The chairman of the liberation school committee stated that the liberation school’s purpose was “to show the Board of Education that we, as parents, can have the kind of school that doesn’t presently exist for us. While we recognise that our children are different from other children, we want to give them an appreciation of their differences.”

This case represents only one example of schools that operated outside of the public school system in Harlem in the 1960s. Several of these schools’ names referred to Black liberation and a focus on Black education and, in doing so, referenced Black Power ideas. Thus, this case illustrates the central struggle that is at the core of this dissertation, namely, the schools and educational initiatives that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem in the late 1960s. In this study, I answer the following research question: What were the goals and purposes of these schools? I investigate the reasons these schools emerged in Harlem, what they looked like, and what their purposes and their goals were. Thus, this research situates Harlem at the crux of education and Black Power.

Although segregated public schools in New York City were unlawful since the early twentieth century and the 1954 Supreme Court decision that ruled segregation unconstitutional merely reaffirmed this vision, the reality was that during the 1950s, “only two of Harlem’s schools were less than 90 percent black.” In addition, students were taught by the least experienced teachers in overcrowded classrooms. In other words, educational opportunities for


Harlem’s children were not only for the most part still separate but also very much unequal. In response to failed struggles for equal education and desegregation, in the 1960s Harlem saw a number of schools and educational initiatives emerge out of the Black Power Movement, such as the school launched in 1964 by Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU); the early Harlem Black Panther Party’s Malcolm X Liberation School, established in 1966; and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS), founded in 1965 by Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) as part of the Black Arts Movement. These initiatives varied in terms of purpose, methodology, ideology, and curricula, but they each have their origins within the Black Power Movement. In addition to these schools tied directly to Black Power organizations and principles, other educational initiatives were founded that did not necessarily explicitly identify as Black Power initiatives but that were nevertheless influenced by and in conversation with Black Power ideas.

Three of these schools form the core of this research. Specifically, I investigate the short-lived West Harlem Liberation School founded in 1967. This school provided an opportunity for elementary school children to receive an education that embodied Black Power while their parents and community members boycotted the public school in which they were enrolled. In addition, I discuss storefront street academies and focus on the academies organized by the New York Urban League on the one hand and West Side Street Academy, which later was renamed the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE), on the other. ABLE recruited Black and Latinx dropouts, provided education, and prepared youth for college. While the three institutions

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differed significantly, they all emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem and reflect different practical attempts at implementing the philosophical underpinnings of the various branches of Black Power ideas such as raising awareness, political engagement, self-sufficiency, focus on group advancement rather than individual success, identity, and pride. Thus, these schools not only exemplify how widespread and diverse Black Power was, but they also demonstrate how theoretical Black Power concepts and principles were put into practice in the real world in distinct and, at times, disparate ways.

Scholars have studied public education in New York City extensively. While concentrating on the struggle for desegregation or the fight for more control over public schools, these scholars have rarely considered education outside of the public school system in the context of the Black Power Movement in Harlem. I examine educational institutions in Harlem

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7 The term dropout is problematic as it stigmatizes and blames students for consciously deciding to drop out of school. This connotation ignores the various reasons for why students may not finish school. Other terms used that try to avoid this stigma are, for example, ‘push-out,’ which directs the responsibility away from students towards the public school system. Nevertheless, in this dissertation, I continue to use the term ‘dropout’ because the primary documents themselves, including those by activists running the schools, referred to students as such.


Kwasi Konadu, A View from the East: Black Cultural Nationalism and Education in New York City (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009); Donna Murch, Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Russell J. Rickford, We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Elizabeth Todd-Breland, A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018) present exceptions. Konadu, however, examined a single school in Brooklyn, New York, while Murch investigated the Oakland Community School in Oakland, California. Similarly, Rickford did not focus on Harlem either, but studied Black independent schools all over the country. Finally, Todd-Breland investigated independent Black schools in Chicago.
that were not part of the public school system and that related to Black Power principles of self-determination, self-sufficiency, Black pride, and community responsibility. While these institutions may not have been part of nationally recognized Black Power organizations, they nevertheless emerged during the Black Power era, representing Black Power ideas. Therefore, I identify these educational institutions and programs as Black Power schools. In this context, ‘school’ refers to educational initiatives and workshops operating in addition to public schools or, in some cases, as substitutes for public schools. Some of these schools were in existence only for a few weeks while others persisted for several years.

This study investigates schools that were initiated and run by activists in Harlem. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term ‘activist’ does not necessarily refer to a person who demonstrates or protests in public. Rather, I use a broader and more comprehensive definition of activist which includes educators, parents, and community members who were conscious of social inequity and who tried to change conditions and opportunities for the children in their community not only through marches, boycotts, and protests, but also through education.

This dissertation explores Black Power schools in Harlem. In order to do that, I closely examine the issues that spurred these educational initiatives. After discussing the goals and purposes of Black Power education, I explore concrete examples of Black Power schools in Harlem, demonstrating how Black Power theories and ideas can be translated into practice in a specific context. Last but not least, this research will contribute to the definition of Black Power. I argue that these schools, just as the Black Power Movement itself, represented a radicalization of the Black Freedom Struggle more broadly and of earlier efforts for quality education for Black children in particular. Radical in this context means that activists became unapologetically Black, consciously embracing their Blackness and developing a pride in their heritage. As a result,
activists changed their political ideas and beliefs and sometimes reflected that change in their activities. This radicalization becomes apparent in the cases discussed in this research, in which students, parents, and community activists stopped asking for desegregation, but moved on towards power and control over their own education. Students, parents, and community activists demanded to be represented in the curriculum and requested their right for meaningful education to be fulfilled. Consequently, these schools and the activists involved not only highlighted educational inequality within the public school system, but they also exemplified what Black Power ideas and theories can look like in practice.

Several issues and events sparked the movement towards more radical activism, Black pride, self-sufficiency, and self-determination within the Black community. The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, which declared segregated public schools unconstitutional, for example, divided the Black community into those who hoped that integration would allow for educational equity and those who feared that the decision would destroy Black schools and merely reinforce the status quo.9 White backlash as a response to the decision and the refusal to actually desegregate public schools also had a great impact on race relations in the United States and radicalized many activists.10 The War on Poverty and the Moynihan Report in 1965 created an image of African American families being broken and needing help by the government in order to function in society. The Moynihan Report and subsequently the policies to fight poverty did not blame unequal social conditions as the reason

9 Gill, Harlem, 351.

for broken families—Black and white. Instead, the report reinforced the idea that the reason for
the majority of African Americans being poor in the United States was their allegedly
malfunctioning families and matriarchal gender ideology, emasculating African American men.
The report and the policies thus considered African Americans themselves responsible for being poor.\(^\text{11}\) This context is important in order to understand the changing race relations in the United
States and the increase of Black Power activism. Additionally, the assassination of Malcolm X
in 1965 and of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 fueled the turn towards a more radical
movement.

The unique status of Harlem as a diverse Black community sets the stage for the equally
complex and diverse schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in
Harlem in the late 1960s and which were a response to educational injustice within the public
school system.

In scholarly and literary accounts, Harlem is often referred to as “Harlem City,” the “city
within a city,” the “capital of Black America,” or the “mecca of Black America.”\(^\text{12}\) As Langston
Hughes described in his poem “Down Under in Harlem,” Harlem does not represent a monolithic
neighborhood within a city, but rather a racially, culturally, and socio-economically diverse Black
community in the United States:

If you are white and are reading this vignette, don’t take it for granted that all
Harlem is a slum. It isn’t. There are big apartment houses up on the hill, Sugar
Hill, and up by City College—nice high-rent-houses with elevators and doormen,
where Canada Lee lives, and W. C. Handy, and the George S. Schuylers, and the

\(^{11}\) Daniel Geary, *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War

\(^{12}\) For example, in his 2011 history on Harlem, Jonathan Gill referred to Harlem as the “Capital of Black
America” and Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts called Harlem the “Mecca of Black America.” Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem Is
Walter Whites, where colored families send their babies to private kindergartens and their youngsters to Ethical Culture School.\textsuperscript{13}

Starting out as a white neighborhood, Harlem had become racially, culturally, and socio-economically diverse in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s and 1930s, the number of Black people moving from the U.S. South, from other parts of New York City, and from the Caribbean into Harlem increased dramatically, while the number of white residents in Harlem decreased. The concentration of a large number of Black people in one neighborhood allowed for economic and cultural opportunity and creativity, offering Black artists and writers, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, the intellectual space and the support to create the so-called Harlem Renaissance. During this time, Harlem became “a symbol of black cultural success and independence.”\textsuperscript{14}

Additionally, Harlem was also a haven for Black political life that allowed for diversity in political pursuits and ideologies. Black people in Harlem not only supported Black politicians who tried to attain governmental offices and advocated for civil rights from within the system, such as Adam Clayton Powell, but Harlem also offered room for Black nationalist movements, such as Marcus Garvey’s in the 1920s or the Communist Party. Despite cultural success and political diversity, the community had to endure constant economic hardship and distress which increased further during the Great Depression. In addition, systemic racial injustice and police brutality were daily issues the Black community in Harlem had to face, which eventually led to riots in 1935 and again in 1943, 1964, 1965, and 1977.\textsuperscript{15} While Harlem saw a more militant and

\textsuperscript{13} Langston Hughes, “Down Under in Harlem,” \textit{The New Republic} 110, no. 13 (March 27, 1944): 404-5.


\textsuperscript{15} Martha Biondi, \textit{To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 11.
radical approach to politics in Malcolm X in the 1960s, it would later also give rise to the first Black mayor of New York City, David N. Dinkins, in 1989, again reflecting the ever-changing diversity of ideas, approaches, and methods towards politics in Harlem’s Black community struggling for justice within and outside the system.¹⁶

As a unique community within the broader social context of New York City, Harlem is both a national and an international symbol of a strong Black community, with its own infrastructure, institutions, and leaders. Despite its historical significance, Harlem has not been considered an important locus for studying the Black Power Movement and the innovative educational institutions that emerged during the height of that movement. Instead, Harlem is often associated with the Harlem Renaissance or the Civil Rights Movement, but rarely with the Black Power Movement.¹⁷ Instead, Black Power is often linked to the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California. This study will fill this gap and challenge this assumption by showing that Harlem has been an important place for Black Power activism from its inception. Thus, the culturally, socio-economically, and politically diverse Black community in Harlem provides the background for this study.

Despite current, more comprehensive studies on Black Power, it still remains an often-misunderstood set of principles and ideas. As a result, there are multiple definitions of Black Power which have changed over time. Even among Black Power activists, the ideological

¹⁶ Gurock, “Harlem,” 573-75.

orientation of Black Power has differed, with some having espoused a nationalist approach while others supported socialist ideas. While traditional historiography has defined the Black Power Movement as the timespan between 1966 and 1975 and often focuses on Black Power ideas of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, current historians have broadened the definition of Black Power and the Black Power Movement in terms of time, space, and membership. Current Black Power scholars have included earlier activists and organizations, such as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, as part of the Black Power Movement as well as various Black Power groups in different places beyond Oakland, California, such as Seattle, Washington; Houston, Texas; and Des Moines, Iowa. Similarly, recent scholarship has also developed a more complex understanding of activism and has made visible women and mothers as active representatives of the Black Power Movement, for example. In addition, scholars have shown that the tenets of Black Power ideas were not only relevant for Black people, but also influential for Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, poor people, and other oppressed groups.

Influenced by Black Power ideas, Puerto Ricans, for example, went on to form the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican organization that was modeled after the Black Panther Party. Similarly, Fred Hampton from the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party formed the Rainbow Coalition in

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1968, in which Black people, Puerto Ricans, and poor people collaborated to fight racial tensions and for unity among oppressed groups.\textsuperscript{21}

Drawing on this scholarship, I define Black Power as a strategic response to persistent social inequity that called on activities that pursued an active approach. For the purposes of this dissertation, Black Power embodies ideas and principles that are anti-integrationist, self-determined, community-supporting, empowering, and action-oriented rather than protest-focused.\textsuperscript{22} It does not, however, necessarily pursue a separatist ideology.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, Black Power incorporates principles that can be summarized as self-determination, independence, and cultural pride. However, these ideas and principles have been interpreted in different ways, depending on the context, time, and resources. The Black Power Movement, on the other hand, refers to sustained activism by Black people drawing on and seeking to fulfill Black Power ideas. In the late 1960s, “Black Power had coalesced into a worldwide movement” and Black people en masse tried to achieve these principles and ideas.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Since integration had failed in the past, Black Power activists moved away from the struggle for integration towards a movement for power, control, and self-determination, without relying on the consciences of other ethnic groups, particularly of white people, and without relying on access to white institutions. Instead of focusing on protesting inequity, Black Power activists focused on finding alternatives with a concentration on action. For example, in order to guarantee quality education for Black students, Black Power activists formed their own schools rather than protested segregation and attempted to get access to white institutions.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Farmer, \textit{Remaking Black Power}, 1.
\end{itemize}
These definitions of Black Power and the Black Power Movement can be applied to the schools in this study: they did not teach or work toward a separate Black community or a Black state. The schools nevertheless taught Black pride, community responsibility, self-respect, and self-love, and saw a need for education or schooling outside of the white public school system after fights for integration and community control had failed. Similarly, these schools did not only serve Black students, but also addressed the needs and demands of other oppressed groups such as Puerto Ricans. Consequently, while this research focuses on Black people, it also contains information about Puerto Rican students. This dissertation moves beyond the perceived militancy of the Black Panthers as representative of the Black Power Movement and Black Power principles to a more complex understanding. In order to do this, I look at schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem. While activists in this research may not have explicitly identified as Black Power activists, they nevertheless pursued Black Power ideas and consequently broadened our understanding of Black Power both in theory and practice.

There were several Black Power schools nationwide. The Oakland Community School, for example, was a Black Panther-run liberation school that operated in Oakland, California from 1973 to 1982. The Harlem Black Panther Party initiated the Malcolm X Liberation School in 1966. Additionally, there were also other programs in almost every Black Panther chapter that related to education, such as the breakfast program. The Panthers organized free breakfast for school children in order to guarantee that every child was fed before going to school. The Panthers also organized free health clinics, which not only provided health care to people in the
Black community, but also educated people about health issues. Last but not least, they also had programs that supported the Black community in issues of employment and housing.\textsuperscript{25}

Beyond the schools and initiatives organized by the Black Panther Party, several other models of Black education emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement, again highlighting the diversity of Black Power both in theory and practice. During the Black Power era, more than sixty independent Black educational institutions emerged in cities throughout the entire country pursuing a Pan-African nationalist approach from preschool to higher education that operated outside the public school system. Russell Rickford argued that this sub-movement of the Black Power Movement exemplified one approach towards more radical activism. Black educators moved away from reforming the public school system and instead provided alternative education “not simply to bolster the academic skills and self-image of inner-city African-American youth but also to ‘decolonize’ minds, to nurture the next generation of activists, and to embody the principles of self-determination and African identity.”\textsuperscript{26} One of those independent African-centered schools emerged not far from Harlem, in central Brooklyn, New York City, called ‘the East.’ This school’s goal was to provide education towards self-reliance with an emphasis on academic excellence and cultural literacy. Founded in 1969, the East provided education both for children and adults under the leadership of Jitu K. Weusi and the community.\textsuperscript{27}

Earlier Black Power scholars have often placed the Black Power Movement within the historical context of Black resistance, understanding Black Power as an intensification of the

\textsuperscript{25} Murch, \textit{Living for the City}, 3-14.

\textsuperscript{26} Rickford, \textit{We Are an African People}, 2.

\textsuperscript{27} Konadu, \textit{View From the East}, xix-xxxiv.
broader Black Freedom Struggle. Floyd B. Barbour and John McCartney began their histories of Black Power with Black resistance struggles in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{28} While more recent scholars have not extended their conceptions of Black Power that far into the past, they often believed as well that the Black Power Movement was longer than often presumed in popular or earlier historical accounts, and more recent scholars have often challenged the idea that the Black Power Movement merely lasted from 1966 until 1975—allegedly Black Power’s classic period. The reason for including earlier groups, organizations, and activists is that the ideas and characteristics of Black Power existed before there was a name for these ideas.\textsuperscript{29} This dissertation nevertheless focuses on the late 1960s because that is when the Black Power Movement generated a number of schools in Harlem and because these decades are generally considered the pinnacle of Black Power’s prominence. Beyond being a time rich with a variety of social movements, the late 1960s also generated a kind of Black movement that was unique: radical Black activists challenged the political system, the status quo, capitalism, and integration in a highly visible and action-oriented fashion and embraced Blackness. This radical and critically important movement, with its innovative representation and ideas, gave rise to schools and educational initiatives that would spread these ideas. At the same time, the perspective of these schools and educational initiatives allowed a broadening and diversifying of how Black Power and its historical context are understood.

More recent scholars have focused on challenging the popular account of the “bad” Black Power Movement as being responsible for the decline of the “good and noble” Civil Rights


While these scholars have contributed to a more complex understanding of the Black Power Movement, few have included the perspective of schools that emerged from this movement within a diverse Black community such as Harlem, nor have they looked specifically at schools that navigated education outside the public school system. My research fills this gap by focusing on schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem in the late 1960s. These schools exemplify how widespread, overlapping, broad, and diverse Black Power ideas were.

In order to answer my research questions, I studied the scholarship on the fight for equal education, including literature on desegregation efforts as well as the demand for community control. I also examined the scholarship within the field of Black Power Studies to contextualize my case studies within Black Power ideas and activism. In addition to secondary literature, I drew extensively on archival collections in order to inform and eventually answer my research questions. I used standard historical methodology by collecting primary source materials, critically analyzing them, and presenting a synthesis of my findings. I subjected the primary sources to external criticism by asking who wrote them, when they were written, and where and why they were produced in order to select and categorize relevant evidence. I then subjected the documents to internal criticism by assessing their meaning, reliability, and significance. I eventually developed a narrative that addressed the important issues related to the research questions posed.

This research relies on primary sources, such as newspaper clippings, newsletters, and reports related to Black Power schools, as well as correspondence between administrators, educators, activists, and parents. I looked at archives and collections of educational activists and

organizers, teachers, parents, community members, Black newspapers, youth organizations, as well as collections of white allies that relate to Black Power schools in Harlem to learn about the schools’ approaches, philosophies, methods, and politics. Additionally, I looked at FBI files and mainstream white newspapers to learn about the responses and reactions to as well as thoughts about these schools and the influence or impact these schools had on structural change within society. I also examined these documents in order to understand outside factors which help explain the decline or short-lived nature of the educational institutions. In order to fill potential gaps and to give people whose experiences have not been preserved in archives the opportunity to share their knowledge, I included evidence from oral histories that have already been conducted. Oral histories of educational activists, organizers, teachers, parents, and community members who were involved in these schools were of particular interest.

The primary sources drawn from in this dissertation are located in a number of different archives and collections. Collections by community activists and educators who were involved in Black Power schools in Harlem, in youth organizations, or in educational and community activism more broadly were examined at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s archives. This included, for example, the Preston Wilcox Papers—Professor Wilcox having been the principal of West Harlem Liberation School, which is one case study I investigated—as well as the records of the New York Urban League, which contain information about their Street Academies, another central study in my research. The Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University provided access to additional collections of educational activists, youth and educational organizations, as well as Black educational institutions in Harlem. The records of the Morningside Area Alliance, for example, include information on the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE), another independent Black educational initiative examined in my
research. Documents from these collections were supplemented by outside perspectives on schools I studied, such as the records of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) at New York University’s Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Collection. These provided evidence on how public school teachers responded and reacted to these independent schools in Harlem.

I based my research on the aforementioned archival sources and grounded my findings in the literature on education activism on the one hand and newer histories of the Black Power Movement on the other. As a result, I was able to piece together the trajectories of several educational initiatives with a specific focus on their engagement with Black Power ideas. When I first started working on this research, I intended to write three evenly spaced chapters, with one chapter on each school. However, archival material on these schools was not extensive enough in order to fill three separate chapters and I consequently changed the focus and the narrative of this research accordingly. Similarly, given the archival material available, this work cannot represent an exhaustive history of the three schools nor of Black Power education in Harlem. Instead, this work aims to provide a history that demonstrates how local activists on the ground in the arena of education translated Black Power ideas into practice, highlighting the diversity of both Black Power ideas and practice. As such, this history challenges us to rethink, broaden, and redefine Black Power principles, ideas, and activities. I discuss open questions and offer suggestions for further research in the conclusion.

This dissertation investigates what it looks like when educational institutions emerge out of a radical movement that is fragmented and contradictory. Thus, I answer the following research question: What were the goals and purposes of the schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem in the late 1960s? In Chapter II, I look at the
issues that spurred the Black Power schools in Harlem. Drawing on primary sources and contextualizing those within the scholarship, I investigate why African American activists and educators in late twentieth century Harlem thought that their goals could not be achieved in the public school system. In order to do that, I provide a brief history of Black education in Harlem: on the one hand, there was inequality in public education, but on the other hand there were parents, teachers, students, and community activists working against this inequality. In Chapter III, I summarize and analyze the purposes and goals of schools that were directly tied to Black Power organizations; how they differed from each other; and to what extent Black Power activists, educators, and community members thought they could improve their local communities and change conditions for African Americans. Based on primary and secondary sources, I contextualize these schools and, after providing a more detailed definition of Black Power, describe how these schools fit into Black Power ideas and practice more broadly. In Chapter IV, I look at specific independent schools and educational initiatives in Harlem in the late 1960s that were not connected to Black Power organizations but nevertheless incorporated Black Power ideas or rhetoric. I describe what these schools looked like and discuss the different collective and political ideas, philosophies, politics, approaches, methods, and expectations African American activists envisioned and developed in and for these schools. In the conclusion, I discuss the different practical implementations of Black Power theory in the realm of education and propose potential avenues for future research.

Despite its historical significance, Harlem has tended to be neglected as an important locus for studying the Black Power Movement and the innovative educational institutions that emerged during the height of that movement. This research fills this gap by explaining what it looks like when educational institutions emerge from a radical movement that demands control,
power, self-determination, and Black pride. In addition, this dissertation provides a more thorough understanding of the Black Power Movement and also contributes to academic debates on segregation, integration, and inequality in American public schools. Not only does an investigation of Black Power schools thus help to understand social inequality and oppression in American society and in public schools more specifically, but it also sheds light on the different responses of Black Power activists and their visions of and approaches to educational justice.
Chapter II
EDUCATION IN POST-WAR HARLEM

Introduction

“We will go to jail and rot there, if necessary, but our children will not go to Jr. High Schools 136, 139, or 120.”¹ This unsettling statement was made in 1958 by Viola Waddy, one of numerous parents who boycotted several junior high schools in Harlem; it highlights the seriousness with which parents approached the struggle for equal education.

Although segregation in New York City’s public schools became unlawful in 1902, Black students in Harlem experienced inequality in public education throughout the twentieth century.² In addition to a brief history of educational inequality in Harlem’s public schools, this chapter examines the several attempts by parents, teachers, community activists, and students themselves to fight against segregation and for justice from within the public school system.³

Regarding Black education in the United States and the development of Black Power ideas in the late 1960s, Harlem is of particular importance: Harlem is often portrayed and perceived as a city of its own. In scholarly, literary, as well as popular accounts, Harlem is referred to as “Harlem City,” the “city within a city,” or the “capital of Black America.”⁴ It has a long and rich history of being home to both Black southerners and northerners, as well as to


² Gill, Harlem, 353.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See, for example: Gill, Harlem; Rhodes-Pitts, Harlem is Nowhere; “Harlem On Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968,” exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 18-April 6, 1969; “Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro,” magazine cover from 1925.
Black people from the Caribbean, constituting a diverse and complex Black community. Particularly during the Great Migration in the mid-twentieth century, millions of Black people came to New York City, hoping to escape segregation and violence. However, Black people were often excluded from certain neighborhoods and consequently had to realize that even cities like New York were not truly integrated. As a result, Black people were forced to settle in specific neighborhoods such as Harlem and live in de facto segregated conditions. This housing discrimination then transformed Harlem into a unique Black community with its own infrastructure, institutions, and leaders. As a result, Harlem constitutes a significant place to investigate in order to understand inequality in Black education in the United States and the multiple attempts by activists to fight for a more just system.

Several issues in the twentieth century sparked and influenced the struggle for equal education in general as well as in Harlem specifically. The 1954 decision in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* declared segregated public schools unconstitutional. While many civil rights activists celebrated the NAACP’s victory of *Brown*, several activists were more cautious and critical towards the decision. Not only did the decision imply that Black schools were inherently inferior, but Black teachers also feared losing their jobs if Black schools were closed due to integration efforts. In addition, activists also realized that the ruling to desegregate public schools “with all deliberate speed” was most likely a measure to maintain the status quo rather than promote meaningful change. Segregation has been divided into ‘de jure’ and ‘de facto’ segregation, with de jure referring to segregation that exists as a

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result of law and is thus constitutional. De jure segregation has often been used to describe segregation in the South. De facto, on the other hand, describes the kind of segregation that emerges as a result of something else than the law, such as housing or zoning patterns. The historiography has often described segregation in the North as de facto.\textsuperscript{8} While the \textit{Brown} decision outlawed de jure segregation in the South, it did not challenge de facto segregation.

In Harlem in particular, community members and activists were well aware that outlawing segregation did not necessarily lead to integration: segregated public schools in New York City were unlawful since the early twentieth century and the 1954 decision reaffirmed this vision. However, in the early twentieth century, Harlem parents had already complained about the inferior education that their children received in public schools and

\begin{quote}
[i]n the aftermath of the 1935 Harlem Riot, Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem confirmed these grievances: The schools were antiquated (no new schools had been built in Harlem for over 20 years), poorly equipped, overcrowded, and staffed with too many substitute and inexperienced teachers.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Despite the fact that segregated public schools were unlawful in the North even before \textit{Brown}, housing discrimination not only led to segregated public schools but also to inferior and overcrowded ones. In addition, between 1940 and 1960, large numbers of people migrated to New York City, and as a result segregation patterns and overcrowding in New York City even became worse after \textit{Brown}.\textsuperscript{10} In addition to segregated housing, school zoning patterns reinforced segregation and overcrowding in Harlem’s public schools. Confirming this observation, Jonathan

\textsuperscript{8} Several scholars have discussed the problematic distinction of de jure and de facto segregation and how this binary approach to segregation has obscured struggles of African Americans in the North. See, for example, Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, \textit{The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 25-48; Theoharis, \textit{A More Beautiful and Terrible History}.

\textsuperscript{9} Back, “Exposing,” 69.

\textsuperscript{10} Ravitch, \textit{Great School Wars}, 251-266; Theoharis, \textit{A More Beautiful and Terrible History}, 36.
Gill explained that the reality during the 1950s was that “only two of Harlem’s schools were less than 90 percent black.”

School leaders responded to these conditions not by rezoning and thus relieving overcrowded schools in Harlem, but by staggering the school day, so that some groups of students attended school in the morning and other groups in the afternoon. Thus students attended school part-time. In response to criticism of this practice, the Board of Education acted as if zoning had happened naturally rather than being man-made by school officials, and thus segregation in public schools was something over which they had no power. As a result, despite protests and complaints, the Board of Education refused to create a meaningful desegregation plan. Instead, in 1955, shortly after the Brown decision, Arthur Levitt Sr., the president of the Board of Education, requested a report on the state of New York City’s public schools to find out what actions the Board of Education was required to undertake in order to contribute to the desegregation of New York City’s public schools. The report of the independent Public Education Association (PEA) stated that “on average, facilities in predominantly Black and Puerto Rican schools were older, had fewer adequate classrooms and materials, and were not maintained as well as facilities of predominantly white schools.”

While the PEA report confirmed that unequal conditions existed for white and Black students in New York City, and while the report also admitted that the zoning patterns contributed to this inequality, the report nevertheless described zoning lines as given and natural, and as too complicated and complex to be changed. As a result, while the subcommittee of the board’s commission on integration requested a change to the city’s zoning policy, the Board of Education rejected this proposal, since the PEA report had confirmed the board’s assumption that segregation in Harlem’s public

11 Gill, Harlem, 353.
12 Theoharis, A More Beautiful and Terrible History, 39.
schools is a given due to people’s preferences of living among those alike, which in turn resulted in certain housing patterns. Thus, the Board of Education adopted the attitude that the *Brown* decision applied to schools in the South but not to them, and consequently did not require the New York City Board of Education to change conditions by redrawing zoning lines or creating a comprehensive desegregation plan.\(^\text{13}\)

While the ruling in *Brown* had confirmed that segregation was inherently unequal, the decision mainly focused on non-tangible factors and argued that “[s]egregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children” and segregation “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, the results of research psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, who had studied the harms of segregation on “the hearts and minds” of Black children in the *Doll Study*, highlighted the psychological and non-tangible impact segregation can have on Black children.\(^\text{15}\) However, when parents and activists in Harlem challenged segregation in their children’s public schools, they did not focus on the psychological impact segregation could have on their children alone. Instead, parents and activists realized that segregation automatically meant fewer resources for predominantly Black public schools due to the unequal distribution of tax money. Thus, segregation was indeed inherently unequal, but on many more levels than merely psychologically. Black people in Harlem did not fight for integration so that their children could learn alongside white children, but for them integration meant equal opportunities due to equal and more just access to


resources. The Brown decision, nevertheless, was right when it argued that segregation affected hearts and minds. However, segregation did not affect the hearts and minds of Black people alone but of all people, since segregation allowed for dividing people into allegedly superior and inferior groups. Consequently, in addition to unequal distribution of resources, parents, activists, and students had to fight against several other aspects related to segregation, such as racism towards Black people. Outlawing segregation did not automatically resolve white people’s attitude towards Black people. Black children in Harlem’s public schools in particular had to fight against a stigma of cultural deprivation which was used to justify segregation; even teachers bought into this stigma in order to avoid teaching in Harlem. As Adina Back has shown,

the majority of the city’s 40,000 public school teachers were also invested in maintaining the status quo. The teachers used phrases like “problem children” and “difficult schools” […] to discuss the city’s African American and Puerto Rican schoolchildren. In public testimony, their characterizations of these “problem children” ranged from frankly racist descriptions of “primitive children” to more subtle descriptions of children coming from “culturally deprived homes” and suffering “cultural handicaps.” […] Most of the teachers’ groups opposed desegregation recommendations that threatened to force them into schools with predominantly black and Puerto Rican students. From their perspective, they had the most to lose by desegregating the schools. […] The combined impact of Northern-style liberal racism, ethnic solidarity, and class fear created a formidable obstacle to desegregating New York City’s public schools in the 1950s and 1960s.16

As a result, students in public schools in Harlem were often taught by the least experienced teachers, or very often substitute teachers, in overcrowded classrooms. Similarly, even when teachers were assigned to public schools in Harlem, many of them did not live in the neighborhood and preferred to escape Harlem each weekend, as Max Weinstein, principal of Public School 180 (PS 180), explained in an interview. Thus, most teachers at this school were not involved in cultural events in the neighborhood nor were they familiar with their students’

living conditions outside of school.\textsuperscript{17} Although the majority of public school teachers tried to avoid teaching in Harlem, those who did nevertheless were predominantly white due to hiring discrimination. Teachers with a certain accent, for example, were often turned away; thus, Black teachers from the South or Puerto Rican teachers tended not to get hired.\textsuperscript{18} These discriminatory hiring practices negatively impacted students in several ways. On the one hand, the lack of positive role models in the form of teachers contributed to an inferior self-image of the students. On the other hand, the stigma about Black children being inferior that white teachers brought into the classroom very often channeled Black children into vocational or trade schools instead of providing them with the option of going to college. The few students who graduated from high school were often not able to fulfill college admission requirements with their diplomas and had to pursue other options than college.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, educational opportunities for Harlem’s children were, for the most part, not only still separate but also very much unequal, despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

\textit{Educational Reforms in Harlem’s Public Schools}

The unequal education in Harlem’s public schools was recognized by some individual school officials who tried to reform education for their students, not by desegregating their schools but by other measures. In 1960, Public School 180 (PS 180), with an all-Black student body of approximately 1,000 students, was founded. The school was located at 370 West 120th Street and was a campus school of Bank Street College of Education, Columbia University, and


\textsuperscript{18} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 350-363; Theoharis, \textit{A More Beautiful and Terrible History}, 35-36.

\textsuperscript{19} Gill, \textit{Harlem}, 353.
City College, which meant that these colleges and universities collaborated with PS 180. In collaboration with these professional educational institutions, PS 180 incorporated several innovative programs into its curriculum and additionally allowed student teachers from Bank Street College, Columbia University, and City College to gain classroom experiences at PS 180. Beyond that, volunteers from the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), parent groups, and community members provided assistance to teachers at PS 180. In other words, PS 180 was supposed to be a progressive model school, open for change and innovation with much outside support from both educational and professional institutions as well as community members.\(^{20}\)

As PS 180 was a school particularly interested in innovative educational approaches and working with educational experts at a number of teacher education institutions, there were several programs at the school that intended to improve their students’ education. For example, in 1967, PS 180 had a student body that was entirely Black. In response, the school provided an afterschool study center on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 3-5 p.m., which offered, among other subjects, Black history. The center invited speakers, showed films, or organized field trips. The curriculum of the afterschool study center was based on guidelines provided by the Human Relations Division of the Board of Education. Based on these guidelines, students in the afterschool study center learned, for example, that “as early as 700 B.C. African rulers made slaves of those men who were uneducated so that Negro children realize that schooling defeats slavery in the U.S., too.”\(^{21}\) While the idea of providing Black students with a course on Black history might have seemed to fulfill the community’s and parents’ expectations for their

\(^{20}\) Interview with Mr. Weinstein, May 9, 1967, PS 180.

children’s education, this specific kind of history set a certain tone and transmitted a specific understanding of Black history from a white perspective. This history not only taught students that slavery was a common and legal practice from early on which normalized the institution of slavery to a certain degree, but students also learned that Black people practiced slavery as well, minimizing the blame of white westerners who had enslaved Black people. In addition, students exposed to this kind of history also learned that people could choose whether they wanted to be slaves or not: according to this history, education defeats slavery and those who are not free are to be blamed themselves for not being educated; only uneducated people could become slaves and slaves must, therefore, automatically be uneducated. In addition, the curriculum for the afterschool course on Black history was developed by the Board of Education rather than by the community or from a Black perspective and, based on the aforementioned example, thus reinforced a portrayal of Black people as inferior. Last but not least, rather than integrating a Black history course into the regular curriculum and thus emphasizing the importance and relevance of Black history, the course was offered in an afterschool study center, reinforcing the perception that this history was not relevant enough to be part of the regular curriculum. This practice of not integrating Black perspectives and experiences into the regular curriculum then not only challenged the idea that Black history was part of US-American history, but also assumed that it was something in addition to ‘regular history’ which can be studied in the afternoon—after school.

Additionally, in 1967, PS 180 implemented a Language Development Project, which was created in San Antonio, Texas where it had been tested on Mexican children who had to learn English as a second language. The teacher who presented the project, Miss Hesselbacher, argued that the project worked equally well with Black children: while Black children may not have to
learn English as their second language, according to supporters of this project, Black children had acquired Southern slang dialects and bad speaking habits at home, from family and friends—again projecting the idea of cultural deprivation onto Black children. In New York City, the Language Development Project was tested in schools with Puerto Rican and Black children. While teachers who used the method of the Language Development Project argued that Black children at least understood what the teacher was saying although their speech may be very poor, Puerto Rican children allegedly barely understood English.\(^\text{22}\) Again, while designers of projects like the Language Development Project may have intended to improve educational opportunities for students, projects like these reinforced the idea of Black and Puerto Rican children being “problem children” and thus pathologized Black and Puerto Rican people. The project also blamed children and their families for their poor education rather than the unequal school system and the stereotypical and racist thinking of teachers and school officials who reinforced the stigma of cultural deprivation when it came to Black and Puerto Rican children. The mere idea that Black students’ education could be improved by developing the students’ language skills was already problematic as it taught Black children that something was wrong with their language and that they needed to learn basic skills that white students did not need to learn. Thus, this project encouraged Black and Puerto Rican children to internalize an inferior understanding of themselves.

Both efforts to improve the education of the all-Black student body at PS 180 were designed and implemented by white people who were not familiar with the community’s needs. The Black history course was developed along guidelines of the Board of Education and the Language Development Project was neither developed within the community nor for the

\(^{22}\) PS 180: Max Weinstein, 1966-1970, Box 55, Folder 25, Subseries 11.5.
community in Harlem. Parents and students at PS 180 were not involved in the development of these programs. However, there were also other projects implemented at PS 180 which at least attempted to involve the community in order to contribute to educational equality. In September 1967, for example, the NAACP sponsored an experimental program, the Community Participation Education Program (CPEP), for “disadvantaged schools” in order to improve education in poor areas. The program had been approved by Dr. Bernhard E. Donovan, Superintendent of Schools, and was supposed to be implemented into other schools’ curricula as well. The program pursued three objectives: community participation, curriculum development, and classroom control. The idea was to include the community more in the schools and so the program called for volunteers to be community representatives who would assist and support the teachers in the classroom and mediate between the institution and the community. The volunteer representatives would be selected by the NAACP and trained by the City College School of Education. They would assist regular teachers in clerical work and help with individual students and discipline matters. The community representative would, for example, contact parents regularly to evaluate the child’s learning and encourage parents to be more involved in school affairs. The program also intended to redevelop the curriculum to provide more identification for the students, hoping that community representatives and a more stimulating curriculum would automatically improve classroom control. However, in his report to the Board of Education in January 1968, Max Weinstein, the principal of PS 180 at that time, negatively evaluated the program, arguing that there have not been any community representatives to support teachers and to mediate between schools and community so far.²³ Additionally, the program sponsored by the

NAACP had also planned to organize regular conferences for supplemental training of teachers in the program. This training was supposed to be conducted by experienced and so-called ‘gifted’ teachers. However, in his evaluation of the program to the Board of Education, Principal Weinstein explained that those teachers who attended PS 180 as part of this program were neither sufficiently trained nor experienced. Consequently, this project was not successful either.

There are a couple of reasons why this particular attempt to establish community participation at PS 180 did not work. While it could be argued that this program met all the demands parents and community members could ask for, such as community involvement in public education, looking more closely at the program challenges this assumption. While the NAACP helped design this program and thus developed the program from a Black perspective, the community itself was not involved. Thus, while the community was supposed to support and enable the program eventually, the creation of the program was a top-down approach.

Additionally, the community volunteers were expected to act merely as assistants to the teachers and they were supposed to act according to the school’s and ultimately the teachers’ guidelines, which neither resembled meaningful participation, power over, or involvement in school affairs, nor did it reflect respectful appreciation of the community’s expertise. Last but not least, from a very practical perspective, community members also had to make a living and thus could hardly volunteer at schools in addition to their regular jobs.

The example of PS 180 and its educational reforms, initiatives, approaches, and projects, such as the After School Study Center, the Language Development Project, or the Program for Disadvantaged Schools, including the Community Participation Education Program sponsored by the NAACP, revealed the sentiment and assumptions about Black children at public schools in

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New York City at that time. In these compensatory programs, Black students learned more about white people’s perception of Black people rather than about themselves and their own history. Schools with a predominantly Black student body were seen as ‘problem schools.’ Instead of blaming the public school system, discrimination, housing or zoning patterns, and the overall unequal distribution of resources, the problems in such schools were often portrayed and treated as rooted in the family backgrounds and environments of the students. Thus, something had to be wrong with the children, such as their language, that needed treatment. Adding to the stigma of cultural deprivation and consequently pathologizing Black children even more, PS 180 also collaborated with the Department of Child Psychiatry at Harlem Hospital in order to solve the problems at public schools. This collaboration between ‘disadvantaged schools’ and hospitals underlined and reinforced the assumption that Black children and their cultural background were the problems that needed to be cured through psychological treatment.

*Educational Activism in Harlem’s Public Schools*

Harlem has a long tradition of social movements and community activism fighting for fair employment and housing, as well as for educational equality throughout the twentieth century.25 The methods and approaches of this activism for equal education had different forms and changed over time in response to broader social changes as well as local conditions. As mentioned before, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision sparked several attempts at transforming the public school system and providing Black children with quality education through the means of integration. This was not only true for public schools in the South, but similarly for schools in the North. As a response to continued segregation and

inequality in Harlem’s public schools and the refusal of school officials to contribute to meaningful change, several parent groups, community activists, students, and teachers attempted to change these conditions within the system.

With the support of experienced civil rights activists such as Ella Baker, many parent groups organized protests, marches, and boycotts in order to speak out on and change educational inequality in their children’s public schools. In 1957, for example, several Black parents organized the group ‘Parents in Action Against Education Discrimination’ in order to fight for integration, as they believed that integration was the only way to guarantee quality education for their children. Drawing parents from across New York City, Parents in Action organized a protest in front of City Hall, where they and the 500 parents they had mobilized called for a concrete desegregation plan, smaller classes, experienced teachers, and an end to staggered schooling.

In addition, in 1958, several mothers in Harlem, known as the Harlem Nine, started to boycott the public schools their children attended after they were told that their children’s cultural background was to blame for the lack of education rather than unequal conditions in

26 Ella Baker (1903-1986), originally from Virginia, moved to Harlem in the 1930s where she quickly became involved in progressive politics. She was an activist from the 1930s until the 1980s and was involved in over thirty different organizations in the North and the South, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). While she moved to the South to work with the SCLC in 1958, she moved back to Harlem in 1965 and continued working with civil rights organizations nationally and internationally. Baker believed in the power of the people rather than the power structure and strove to support grassroots activism and activists on the ground. In the 1950s, she was affiliated with the New York Public Schools Intergroup Committee, as well as with Parents in Action. In this capacity, Baker traveled through New York City urging parents to become involved in their children’s education. Baker also served on the subcommittee of the New York City Board of Education’s commission on integration, urging the board to rezone school districts in order to contribute to desegregation.


27 Ibid., 40.
public schools. Determined to fight this stigma of cultural deprivation and to expose segregation and its impact on Harlem’s public schools, these mothers not only boycotted the schools and tutored their children, but also went to court. The parent activists argued that it was segregation in northern public schools spurred by liberal northern racism rather than ‘separation’ or ‘racial imbalance’ that led to the unequal education their children received. Thus, they argued that segregation in Harlem’s schools was not natural, innocent, or accidental, but intentional and strategic and thus similar to segregation in the South. In order to avoid violating New York State’s law on compulsory education, parents and community members organized tutoring for the fifteen boycotting children themselves. For over a month, these students were taught by licensed teachers in community spaces, such as churches.

As a result of this boycott, the case of the Harlem Nine was brought to court by the Board of Education. Alfred Nussbaum, the principal of JHS 136, one of the public schools that were boycotted by the Harlem Nine, “testified at the hearing that of the 85 teachers in his school, less than half were regularly licensed. Forty-three teaching positions were filled by substitutes, and often the substitutes were filling positions in subject areas that they were not trained to teach.” Eventually, Judge Justine Polier dismissed the charges of the Board of Education and sided with the mothers. She agreed that the students received inferior education due to de facto segregation, but Judge Polier did not support the claim that segregation in Harlem’s public schools was the Board of Education’s fault. While Judge Polier did not hold the board responsible for the

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28 Theoharis, A More Beautiful and Terrible History, 41-42.

29 As many other northern cities, New York intended to distance the allegedly liberal North from the openly racist South. Thus instead of speaking of ‘segregation,’ a term usually associated with the South, education officials used the less-loaded term ‘separation’ or ‘racially imbalanced’ when they described schools in New York City. Theoharis, A More Beautiful and Terrible History, 37-38.

30 Back, “Exposing.” 75.
segregation in Harlem’s public schools, she blamed them for discrimination in teacher
assignments which led to inferior education. Judge Polier additionally agreed with Brown,
arguing that segregation is inherently unequal, whether de jure or de facto, and argued that the
North as well needs to do something against segregation. As a result, the case of the Harlem Nine
was not only the first court case decision against de facto segregation, but it also raised
awareness about educational inequality and segregation in Northern cities. In this particular case,
the parents and the Board of Education agreed on an interim solution: the children would not
return to their initial schools but would attend JHS 43, which was also located in Harlem and had
special programs for Black students. In the meantime, however, the Board of Education appealed
Polier’s decision, which created an even larger gap between the board and the community and
also supported the suspicions of Black parents in Harlem that the board did not truly try to
provide equal education and create meaningful change for Black people in Harlem.

Since conditions did not improve despite Brown v. Board and despite the verdict in the
case of the Harlem Nine, ten years after Brown, Harlem parents continued boycotting public
schools, still demanding integration. They demanded the rezoning of school districts in order to
guarantee a more just education for their children in Harlem’s public schools. While the Harlem
Nine case was sparked by racist attitudes of teachers, and while many white teachers tried to
avoid teaching in Harlem and thus opposed desegregation, several teachers also supported the
integration efforts of parents and students in Harlem. For example,

[unlike other organizations of teachers in the city, the radical Teachers Union (TU) had joined Black community calls for teacher rotation (calling for the board

32 Ibid., 69-77; Gill, Harlem, 350-63.
of education to establish a policy of rotating better, permanent teachers into Black schools) and increased hiring of Black and Puerto Rican teachers.\textsuperscript{33}

In 1964, after frustration with the Board of Education’s refusal to develop a meaningful desegregation plan had increased even more, both students and teachers decided to boycott.\textsuperscript{34}

On February 3, 1964, pickets marched at 300 of the city’s 860 public schools; 44.8 percent (460,000) of the city’s pupils did not attend school […]. About 3,500 demonstrators, including many children, marched to the headquarters of the Board of Education, where they demanded instant integration and the ouster of Board President James Donovan.\textsuperscript{35}

While this time parents and students were supported by teachers, protesters did not just have to fight against the unwillingness of the Board of Education to create a meaningful desegregation plan. Instead, teachers, students, and parents who fought for equal education also had to struggle with the opposition of white New Yorkers who opposed desegregation. As a response to protests for integration, white New Yorkers formed groups, such as Parents and Taxpayers (PAT), organized to protect and preserve segregated public schools. While the parental opposition against desegregation may have been smaller in number, it was larger in terms of power and consequently was able to use the media for their advantage as well. As historian Jeanne Theoharis has shown, “these white parents commanded a great deal of political power both locally and nationally, and garnered a tremendous amount of media attention. […] This white counterprotest was widely and sympathetically covered on the newly emerging television news.”\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{33} Theoharis, \textit{A More Beautiful and Terrible History}, 45.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 35, 45.

\textsuperscript{35} Ravitch, \textit{Great School Wars}, 276.

\textsuperscript{36} Theoharis, \textit{A More Beautiful and Terrible History}, 45-46.
Several boycotts against segregated and overcrowded public schools were smaller and less public than the one in 1964, but some of them were successful nevertheless. Junior High School 43 (JHS 43), located at 509 West 129th Street in Harlem, was initially constructed to hold 1,200 students and was then renovated to accommodate 1,400 students. However, in 1965, the school was highly overcrowded with 1,800 students attending that school. The student body at that time was approximately 50% Black and 40% Puerto Rican. While the problem of overcrowding was already evident in 1965, no measures were taken to solve the problem. As a result, in 1966, parents wrote letters to Mr. Hillary Thorne, head of the Central Zoning Branch of the Board of Education, as well as to Borough President Percy Sutton, requesting a meeting. Since both letters remained unanswered, parents decided to pursue a more active approach and prepared to boycott for a day on November 29, 1967 in order to attract attention from the press, politicians, and other parents. However, negotiations worked eventually, and before parents and teachers were even able to boycott, a meeting with Mr. Blumenthal, head of the Planning Division of the Board of Education; Mr. Thorne of Zoning, the president of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA); Mrs. Serina Gaynor as well as other parents was organized. Since parents felt that one cause of overcrowding was the admission of students from Public School 192 (PS 192), it was decided that, from now on, students from PS 192 would be rezoned. Additionally, students who already attended JHS 43 would be able to transfer to Junior High School 120 (JHS 120) on a voluntary basis.\(^{37}\) This case exemplifies that the choice of methods for educational activism not only depended on a community’s conditions and needs, but also on reactions the community received. In this case, parents and activists moved from writing letters to the authorities asking for change, to a more direct action of boycotting, to later on demanding to have a voice and thus

more power over and participation in their children’s education. While this approach may have worked for this particular case, it was not the right approach for every activist in every case.

The case of JHS 43 exemplifies a successful fight for rezoning and ultimately against overcrowded classrooms. However, the conditions at JHS 43 were not an exception and activists in School District Four, in which JHS 43 was located as well, decided to do something about it. For example, District Four had been without a local school board between 1966 and 1968. Influenced by community organizing in Central and East Harlem, parents and community activists decided to organize individual community representatives in order to have a voice in their children’s education. Instead of protesting and hoping that authorities would change conditions, these activists requested more control and power for themselves. This example, therefore, highlights how different Black communities who struggled with similar issues influenced and supported each other in terms of approaches beyond district lines and how diverse activism was depending on outside forces.

As the example of the 1964 boycott has shown already, not only parents, community activists, or teachers but also students, together with their parents or their teachers, fought for change from within the public school system. In the 1960s, there were protests in several public schools in Harlem, in which students requested changes and improvements to their education. In 1966, for example, students of Louis D. Brandeis High School requested in an open letter to have more experienced teachers, more student involvement and responsibility, a school newspaper as well as better means of communication, and last but not least Black Studies. Students also asked for a more democratic approach in schools, with more agency and more power for the students.39

Similarly, four years later in 1970, there were some conflicts between students, their parents, and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) at George Washington High School. The school was predominantly Black, with 75% of the students being Black and 25% being white. Several students at that school were not satisfied with the curriculum and thought that their interests were not supported by the existing parent association. So in exchange of the existing parent association, students requested a “Parent Table,” which was supposed to support students in their actual concerns and to mediate between students and teachers. The Deputy Superintendent of the Board of Education, Dr. Seelig Lester, accepted the students’ requests and the new parent group was organized. As soon as the newly founded parent group began operating, more than 100 student grievances were collected. However, teachers did not support the new parent group and, with support of the UFT, walked out. As a response, the Board of Education requested the parent group to withdraw, upon which parents protested against the board’s decision. Responding to the parents’ protest, teachers called the police and the case then went to court. From then on, the police was a regular presence at the school, leading to several complaints of police harassment.\(^\text{40}\)

While there is not much evidence for student activism overall, some examples like this one highlight that students were well aware of the inequality in their schools, trying to change conditions from within. Students in these cases did not seem to demand integration, but instead requested more control over and participation in their own education. Whether this was a response to earlier, failed attempts to integrate their schools or perhaps a reflection of a more radical Black Power sentiment at that time, particularly among youth, is unclear.


Many initiatives for educational justice, such as boycotts, marches, or protests, were organized by parents, students, or teachers. In addition, community activists who did not necessarily have personal stakes in these fights were at times also involved in the struggle. Community organizations such as the Harlem chapter of the Black Panther Party, for example, supported and cooperated with parents in their fight for educational justice. In 1966, the early Black Panther Party in Harlem initiated *Operation Shut Down*, which demanded three basic changes to Harlem’s public schools. They requested that students in all public schools in Central Harlem should learn about African and African American history and culture, and that all principals in Harlem’s public schools should be Black. Last but not least, the Panthers asked the Board of Education to change the names of the public schools so that the names represented the achievements of the community. In case the board would not comply with the community’s requirements towards quality education, the Panthers threatened to shut down public schools and instead teach Harlem’s students in public spaces such as churches, transformed into liberation schools. The activism of community organizations supporting parents and students highlighted the importance of the idea of uplifting the entire community rather than single individuals. While the Harlem Black Panther Party was not necessarily personally affected by educational inequality at that time, they nevertheless fought for justice for the entire community.

In another case, several years later, parents, students, and community members had felt that school officials at Benjamin Franklin High School had not been concerned about and

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41 In 1966, Sam E. Anderson, Muhammad Ahmed (formerly known as Max Stamford), David White, Al Patella, and Ted Wilson founded a Black Panther group in Harlem even before the well-known Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. Woodard, “Rethinking the Black Power Movement.”

responsive to the needs of the mostly Black and Puerto Rican student body. Since Benjamin Franklin High School was without a principal in 1970, parents, students, teachers, and community organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, sought the opportunity to change leadership at the school and formed the Franklin Improvement Program Committee (FIPC) in order to select a Black or Puerto Rican principal. However, shortly after the committee was formed, the Board of Education passed a law on July 1, 1970, stating that nobody from the community could select a principal of a school. “[T]he FIPC can only serve as davisors [sic] for the parents who will select a principle [sic] and then turn their recommendation over to the superintendents, who may or may not accept their recommendation.” 43 Instead of respecting and involving the community in the decision-making process, the Board of Education nominated nineteen white people for principal of Benjamin Franklin High School. Of those nineteen nominees, only three were willing to serve as principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in the first place, highlighting again the stigma Harlem residents and therefore children in Harlem’s public schools had to deal with. 44

These examples show that students, parents, activists, and community members attempted to change the public school system numerous times over several years. Sparked by Brown, which ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional, activists focused on integration and turned to boycotts and reforms from within the public school system. However, despite cases like Brown v. Board, the Harlem Nine, as well as several smaller and less public attempts at transforming public schools in Harlem, conditions did not improve apart from minor


successes. Overall, the reforms and desegregation efforts were unsatisfactory and far from meaningful or empowering. Therefore, more radical approaches were necessary. The aforementioned examples highlight how parents and community activists have applied more radical approaches in their attempts for integration already, moving away from integration towards more control and power over their children’s education. Students became more radical as well and, instead of asking for integration, demanded more power and control as well as courses revolving around Black Studies. However, this development towards more radical measures did not seem necessarily to be an entirely chronological one. While there are certain dominant aspects, it is too simple to say that all Black activists pursued the same ideas and approaches. Not all activists fought for integration in the 1950s and then moved on towards other approaches. Instead, parents and community members reacted to outside factors and responses—or the lack thereof—they received from school officials or other citizens while fighting for integration. The fight for equal education exemplifies the long process and development of activism and organizing, and it also highlights how complex and sometimes overlapping demands and attempts for change can be.

Many parents had fought for equal education through integration. Some continued to pursue this approach while other parents and community activists moved away from the pursuit of integration and moved on towards different approaches to educational justice. If school officials refused meaningful integration, in many cases, parents demanded more control over and participation in their children’s education. If schools stayed segregated, parents at least wanted to have a say in what their children would learn. Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1964 school boycott in New York City, also “felt that the movement had carried protest to its logical

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conclusion and that blacks now had to enter a new phase, the acquisition of political and economic power.”

Activists and parents moved towards community control, the control of the schools’ finances, curricula, and personnel. In the case of education, activists changed from pursuing an approach that intended to change conditions for African Americans from within the system—and which had failed so far—towards a more critical perspective, suspicious of the system.

The radicalization of parents and activists is very apparent in the community control movement in general and the case of Intermediate School 201 (IS 201) in Harlem in particular. Instead of integrating New York City’s public schools, the Board of Education continued building new schools that usually were segregated as well, despite the board’s claim that the schools were supposed to be integrated. The construction of IS 201 began in 1964, and although originally planned to be integrated, “[i]n early 1966, the board revealed the sort of ‘integration’ that would prevail at the school: 50 percent black and 50 percent Puerto Rican.” After further failed attempts to receive a comprehensive integration plan for the newly constructed intermediate school from the Board of Education, parents changed their approach and demanded more control over and participation in the school’s affairs. After rigorously denying the parents’ demands at first and threatening to end negotiations altogether, the board eventually agreed to

46 Ravitch, Great School Wars, 277.
Bayard Rustin, originally from Pennsylvania, attended the City College of New York and was involved in and co-founded numerous civil rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He played an influential role in both the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott as well as the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin served as executive director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in New York City from the 1960s to the 1980s. In 1964, Bayard Rustin co-organized the city-wide school boycott in New York City, in which about half a million students and thousands of teachers stayed out of school.


create a plan which would involve the parents’ participation. As a result, negotiations between
the board and the parents continued into the fall of 1966.

Decision-making processes in New York City public schools had been centralized since
1901. However, in the early 1960s, as a response to the increasing size of the school district,
there had already been efforts to decentralize the public school system and to divide the large
school district into smaller community boards with elected membership, in order to meet the
communities’ demands for greater control over their children’s education and to meet the needs
of the diverse neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{48} However, the governing community boards in predominantly
Black neighborhoods, such as Harlem, realized that decentralization alone would not provide
enough power as it would not allow the community board to select a school’s principal or
teachers, which was a crucial way to influence the direction, the ideology, and the racial as well
as socio-economic make-up of a school.\textsuperscript{49} The idea behind hiring more Black teachers and
principals was also that this approach

might generate a new sense of self-worth and community among blacks; where
black and Puerto Rican children could receive a positive self-image by contact
with adult models of their own background; where parents could gain a sense of
dignity by playing a part in their children’s schooling; where jobs and contracts
could be consciously used to improve the economy of the surrounding
neighborhood.\textsuperscript{50}

In the case of IS 201, after numerous negotiations, the board and the parents finally agreed on
establishing a Community Educational Council, which would be responsible for the screening
and evaluation of teachers and staff as well as the curriculum. However, at this point teachers
refused to accept this agreement. As a response, and despite the teachers’ disagreement, Mayor

\textsuperscript{48} Lewis, \textit{New York City Public Schools}, 15.
\textsuperscript{49} Ravitch, \textit{Great School Wars}, 329-380.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 346.
John V. Lindsay and the Board of Education, with the support of the Ford Foundation, established the IS 201 demonstration district—an experimental district, in which the former chairman of the Parent Negotiation Committee for IS 201, David Spencer, became executive secretary. “[T]he difference between the experimental districts and the existing districts was that the Board of Education granted residents in the experimental districts the right to elect a school-governing board.” Thus, due to failed attempts to integrate schools in Harlem, and IS 201 in particular, parents then fought for community control rather than integration, pursuing a more radical approach. As in the fight for integration, the turn to community control reflects a local development due to specific conditions in Harlem and the unfulfilled promises and responses of the New York City Board of Education to provide equal education in particular. At the same time, however, the fight for community control did not only happen in an isolated vacuum in Harlem, but highlights the growing national sentiment of Black Power, and also exemplifies a response to broader national policy developments, such as, for example, the War on Poverty.

The various cases of educational inequality and fights for equality introduced in this chapter show that meaningful change toward educational equality rarely happened without the involvement of the community. Based on the cases discussed here, between the 1950s and the 1970s, unequal conditions in Harlem’s public schools had not changed significantly despite promises of integration by the Board of Education. In most cases, involvement of parents, teachers, students, and community activists was necessary to bring about change. Boycotts,

51 Lewis, New York City Public Schools, 14-30.

52 Ibid., 5.
marches, and other activities for educational change occurred again and again over a long period of time and were often a response to local conditions. While parents fought for equal education for their children in the 1950s because that was when their fight was necessary, other parents and activists became active in the 1960s due to continued inequality in their schools. These examples then highlight the idea that activism within the framework of integration was not necessarily confined to a specific time period, but that methods and approaches of activism depended on the responses and reactions activists received. This becomes clear in the struggle over community control. The community control movement exemplifies a fusion of integrationist and Black Power ideas of self-determination. Indeed, some community control supporters did not oppose integration, but instead thought that having control over their own community was a prerequisite for true integration and equality.\(^{53}\) However, while the demands for integration and community control did not contradict each other, the turn to community control represented a broader development towards more radical requests and approaches. Thus, the idea of community control and self-determination within the area of education both mirrored and influenced a radicalization of the Black Freedom Struggle more broadly.

The next chapter further discusses this development towards more radical activism. After discussing the history and theory of Black Power more thoroughly, I discuss the role of education for Black Power before introducing examples of Black independent schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement and were directly linked to Black Power organizations.

\(^{53}\) Rickford, “Integration,” 294.
Chapter III

BLACK POWER AND EDUCATION

In the era of Black Power, African Americans ceased to be “Negroes” and became something far more affirming and complicated: “Afro American,” and, ultimately, “black.” This conversion captured the hope and determination at the heart of the contemporary revolution in education.¹

Introduction

Early scholarship tended to treat the Black Power Movement as distinct from and antagonistic to the Civil Rights Movement.² More recent scholarship, however, has challenged this strictly binary narrative and has instead illustrated the complexity and diversity of Black activism; it has also highlighted that the people involved in these movements developed, changed, and responded according to context and their environment.³ Although current scholarship in the field of Black Power Studies has begun to address the nuances of Black Power ideas from an educational perspective, these scholars have focused on educational initiatives that were directly linked to Black Power organizations. I argue that Black Power was more complex: Approaching Black Power through an educational lens and understanding it through educational initiatives that were neither part of the public school system nor strictly affiliated with


recognized Black Power organizations enlarges our understanding of Black Power and its impact.

This chapter introduces and discusses the complexity and the breadth of Black Power. I examine the role of education within Black Power and, more specifically, discuss the goals and purposes of schools and educational initiatives of nationally and internationally recognized Black Power organizations. Next, I discuss educational initiatives outside recognized organizations in Chapter IV in order to broaden the concept of Black Power even more. Thus the educational initiatives discussed in this chapter were directly linked to Black Power organizations.

Drawing on the current Black Power scholarship, I define Black Power as a strategic response to persistent social inequity that involved activities pursuing an active approach. For the purposes of this dissertation, Black Power embodies a movement that is anti-integrationist, self-determined, community-supporting, empowering, and action-oriented rather than protest-focused. Black Power, thus, stands for self-determination, control over one’s life, communal responsibility, Black self-love, and Black pride. It does not, however, necessarily pursue a separatist ideology.4

4The following is the body of literature from which I drew my definition of Black Power: Jeffries, On the Ground; Joseph, Waiting ‘til the Midnight Hour; Lazerow and Williams, In Search of the Black Panther Party; Murch, Living for the City; Ogbar, Black Power; Rickford, We are an African People.
Black Power

Scholars have offered several different definitions for Black Power. The early historiography and popular accounts, for example, have portrayed the Black Power Movement as a violent, militant, and masculine movement between 1966 and 1975, taking over the allegedly peaceful but failed Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s. In contrast, scholars in the emerging field of Black Power Studies have argued that ideas, strategies, and traditions unify the Black Power Movement beyond their work in a tightly defined timespan between 1966 and 1975. Ideas, principles, and strategies such as Black pride, self-sufficiency, self-defense, and the fight against poverty and economic injustice are what unites Black Power activism and helps us to better understand the varied roots and diverse developments of the Black Power Movement. Thus, the Black Power Movement stands for sustained activism by Black people drawing on and seeking to fulfill Black Power ideas. This, however, does not mean that Black Power ideas are easily defined and categorized. Instead, Black Power is extremely complex and diverse.

Historians have argued that Black Power, or at least the slogan “Black Power,” was born out of a speech by Stokely Carmichael during the Meredith March Against Fear in June 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi. At that time, Carmichael was an activist within SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which had emerged during the Civil Rights Movement in

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While Stokely Carmichael changed his name to Kwame Ture later on, I refer to him as Stokely Carmichael because that was the name he used at the time on which I am focusing.
1960 and, as the name of the organization already suggests, originally followed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy of nonviolence. However, as time went by, the social context changed and the Civil Rights Movement developed, so that many activists were radicalized as they realized that nonviolence may not be the right approach for their struggle—at least not anymore or not under all circumstances. Like many activists in the movement, Carmichael and other members of SNCC adjusted their philosophies, approaches, methods, and strategies accordingly. Thus, numerous activists moved from one organization to another or belonged to different organizations at the same time. Carmichael, for example, started as an activist in SNCC, then joined the Black Panther Party in 1967, and eventually became a leader of the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party, which focused on Pan-Africanism. Other activists belonged to the Black Panther Party and the Puerto Rican organization the Young Lords simultaneously. Similarly, although Malcolm X had been assassinated even before the Black Power slogan could evolve, many Black Power activists, such as Huey P. Newton or Bobby Seale, referred to themselves as heirs of Malcolm X. In other words, Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965, may not fit into the conventional narrative and timeframe of the Black Power Movement, which is defined as the time between 1966 and 1975. However, with regards to ideas, beliefs, philosophies, concepts, and methods, Malcolm X did lead “a movement for Black Power that paralleled and intersected with the civil rights movement’s high tide.”

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8 The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee changed their name to Student National Coordinating Committee to highlight this change towards broader methods and strategies.


Even the most prominent Black Power organization, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, had explicit ties to and origins in the Civil Rights Movement. When Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in 1966 in Oakland, California, they named their new organization after the emblem of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama, a short-lived, independent party at the county level that attempted to register Black voters. Several civil rights activists and members of SNCC, such as Stokely Carmichael, were involved in the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. This again highlights the fluid and overlapping relationship between the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, both ideologically and geographically. As historian Donna Jean Murch has shown, migration from the South to the North in the United States had a crucial impact on social movements in the twentieth century; “[u]ntil recently, however, southern newcomers’ contributions to the Black Power movement have been obscured by scholarly and popular memory that has artificially divided the larger black freedom struggle into discreet, binary terms set against one another by ideology and region.”

In other words, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements cannot be divided into southern and northern movements. After all, the founders of the Black Panther Party, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, were both migrants from the South. Although they had initially been influenced by Dr. King’s philosophy of nonviolence, Newton and Seale, too, were drawn to new approaches of continuing the struggle.

At the beginning, the Panthers focused on police brutality and supervising the behavior of the police, for which they studied the law carefully. Thus, their newly founded organization started to patrol the police, armed both with guns and with knowledge of the law. While

\[11\] Murch, Living for the City, 4.

photographs depicting the Panthers in military-style clothing with their guns, leather jackets, berets, and afros, and walking lockstep, have become the iconic images of the Black Panther Party, these activities were by no means the organization’s only and primary activities. Instead, the Panthers also offered so-called survival programs, in which they organized free breakfast for school children as well as free food and free health clinics for the community. The idea was to raise awareness and the self-concept of Black people, particularly Black youth, about both their tangible and non-tangible needs and rights because the Panthers thought that real change needed to come from within.13 The Panthers also founded liberation schools, which allowed children to receive meaningful education and learn about African or African American culture and history. While the Panthers and many other Black Power organizations are often portrayed as being anti-white or perceived as being racist, this is a very limited and ultimately false understanding of what the movement was about.14 Not only was the Black Power Movement an important influence on freedom struggles globally and collaborated with movements all over the world, but also in the United States, Black Power organizations collaborated with different organizations fighting for social justice. For example, Fred Hampton from the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party founded the Rainbow Coalition, together with Black, Puerto Rican, and white activists. Thus, coalitions “beyond race, geography, and social origin emerged to fight injustice, discrimination, and economic inequality.”15

These examples challenge the binary narrative of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as distinct and antagonistic entities and instead illustrate the complexity and

13 Murch, Living for the City, 178-181.

14 On May 3, 1967, for example, The New York Times published an article with the headline “Armed Negroes Protest Gun Bill.” The piece began: “With loaded rifles and shotguns in their hands, members of the antiwhite Black Panther party marched into the state Capitol today.”

15 Diouf and Woodard, Black Power 50, ix.
diversity of Black activism while also highlighting that people developed, changed, and responded according to context and their environment.\textsuperscript{16} The Black Power Movement also included a wider range of organizations, individuals, ideologies, and political activities than those limited to the Black Panther Party or its popular perception.\textsuperscript{17} Consequently, the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements cannot be separated as they often are; their concepts are much more fluid and overlap to a greater extent than both the public and the scholarship typically acknowledge. The Black Power Movement does not negate the Civil Rights Movement, but is a more radical movement that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{18} This overlap and relationship of the movements can also be applied to activities and methods that were pursued, particularly in the struggles for quality education for African Americans: the fights for school integration and community control represent a precursor for educational struggles along the lines of Black Power. Thus, establishing educational initiatives outside of the public school system highlights a radicalization of the earlier movements for integration and community control.

While even among Black Power activists themselves, the ideological orientation of Black Power differed, with some having espoused a nationalist approach and others having supported socialist ideas, several attempts at categorizing this ideologically diverse movement have been undertaken.\textsuperscript{19} Writing in the 1960s, the political scientist and civil rights leader Charles V. Hamilton, for example, argued that a complex movement like the Black Power Movement cannot be grasped by one single definition, and instead divided Black Power ideologies into four

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Joseph, “The Black Power Movement.”
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Joseph, \textit{Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour}; Ogbar, \textit{Black Power}; Williams, “Black Women.”
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Murch, \textit{Living for the City}; Rickford, \textit{We Are an African People}.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Carmichael and Hamilton, \textit{Black Power}; Erikson and Newton, \textit{In Search of Common Ground}; Foner, \textit{Black Panthers Speak}; Seale, \textit{Seize the Time}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
categories. The ‘Political Bargainer’ and the ‘Moral Crusader’ are willing to change conditions from within the status quo by following existing rules. The ‘Political Bargainer’ intends to change goods and service conditions for African Americans from within the political system and consequently focuses on material needs. The ‘Moral Crusader,’ on the other hand, focuses on “saving the soul of society,” and thus concentrates on changing minds and thoughts rather than tangible conditions. Hamilton’s other two categories, the ‘Alienated Reformer’ and the ‘Alienated Revolutionary,’ are both suspicious of and critical towards existing power structures. The revolutionary is willing to use violence in order to bring about change, whereas the reformer focuses on nonviolent measures to transform society. Both categories are suspicious of the white middle class and concentrate on self-determination of Black communities. Although these categories may be a useful step to better understand the multilayered ideologies and understandings of Black Power, they are also problematic as they cannot be inclusive of all Black Power organizations or activists. Black Power scholar John T. McCartney explained that some understandings of Black Power would fit into several of these four categories at the same time and that some definitions do not fit into any of them. Thus, McCartney suggested three categories to encapsulate the meaning of Black Power more accurately. The ‘Black Power Pluralists’ seek power for African Americans as a group rather than supporting individuals to excel in society. In contrast to the pluralists who are concerned with changing conditions from within the system and following existing rules, ‘Counter Communalists’ are concerned with replacing the current value system with a totally new system. ‘Counter Communalists,’ however, do not want to create a separate Black community as, for example, the ‘Black Separatists’ intend

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21 Ibid., 111-132.
to do. The separatists, therefore, do not try to transform the broader society, but focus on how to establesh a distinct Black community or even nation, separated from white people.\textsuperscript{22}

While these categories may be more differentiated, they neither encompass everything Black Power stands for nor do they explain Black Power comprehensively or even exhaustively. For example, the idea of separation is very complex and can be defined differently. Black Power does not in general necessarily promote separation or segregation in the form of a separate state or country. Instead, separation can also stand for self-determination and consequently independence from white-controlled institutions. In 1963, Malcolm X already explained that Black people live in segregated environments and institutions, but these segregated environments are created by white people in order to control Black people.

Segregation is that which is forced upon inferiors by superiors…. The Negro schools in the Negro community are controlled by Whites…. The economy of the Negro community is controlled by Whites. And since the Negro…community is controlled or regulated by outsiders, it is a segregated community.\textsuperscript{23}

In other words, the goal of Black Power is to be self-determined, which automatically calls for the necessity to create independent and consequently often separate institutions.\textsuperscript{24} Former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, however, explained that Black Power was not about racial segregation, but about coalition-building among those people who are exploited. For the Black Panthers, Black Power was not necessarily only about race but just as much about class, but they realized that class and race were intertwined.\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, the schools in this study did not teach or work

\textsuperscript{22} McCartney, \textit{Black Power Ideologies}, 111-132.


\textsuperscript{24} Andrews, “Toward a Black Radical Independent Education,” 5-14.

toward a separate Black community or a Black state or even necessarily promoted separation per se. Instead, the schools were working towards independence and self-determination for Black people and thus necessarily needed to be separate from white-controlled public schools. Thus, separation was rather a by-product in the fight for self-determination and self-sufficiency.

While it is challenging to categorize Black Power ideas, it is similarly difficult to define what exactly the characteristics of Black Power are and to what extent different Black Power organizations share a ‘family resemblance’ that constitutes them as a variation of Black Power.\(^{26}\) Scholars have argued that there are indeed characteristics that define Black Power, although these characteristics may be interpreted differently among organizations that pursue different strategies and tactics to achieve their various goals. Nevertheless, all Black Power groups share some common understanding of power and agree that power, meaning control over one’s life, and the circumstances in one’s life are necessities in order to change conditions for African Americans in the United States. Thus, self-determination is one of the basic goals upon which Black Power is built. Black Power groups insist on self-determination for African Americans as a group either within or outside of the existing system. A further characteristic of Black Power is a realistic pursuit of change by being aware of existing factors and by applying realistic methods. Similarly important for Black Power groups is the conviction that the change has to come from the Black community itself rather than from white allies or by appealing to the consciences of other ethnic groups. Finally, Black Power groups are convinced that strategies that emphasize Blackness can succeed.\(^{27}\) Similarly, Black Power schools in Harlem were convinced that the control over educational change had to lie with the Black community, which is why they founded

\(^{26}\) McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies*, 111.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 111-132.
their own schools in addition to or entirely outside of the public school system. Pursuing goals with a focus on Black self-determination, as well as negotiating with and reacting to outside factors, however, often forced educational activists to find compromises. As a result, depending on the context, similar ideas were often interpreted or executed differently and sometimes in a contentious and contradictory way in different Black Power organizations, which is what makes the Black Power Movement so unique, multilayered, diverse, and complex.

While the traditional historiography has defined the Black Power Movement as the timespan between 1966 and 1975 and often focuses on the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, current historians have broadened the definition of Black Power in terms of time, space, membership, and activities. Current Black Power scholars have included earlier activists and organizations such as Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as part of the Black Power Movement as well as various Black Power groups in different places beyond Oakland, California, such as Seattle, Washington; Houston, Texas; and Des Moines, Iowa.28 Similarly, recent scholarship has also developed a more complex understanding of activism and has contributed to a more diverse representation of activists of Black Power. Several Black Power scholars, such as Peniel E. Joseph, describe Black Power as demanding “cultural autonomy, racial pride, and equal citizenship.”29 He challenges the idea that the Black Panthers were the main or even the only actors in the Black Power Movement, but instead argues that the movement was more diverse, including students, prison inmates, as well as parents. Similarly, Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar focuses on the aspect of nationalism within Black Power and offers a comparison between the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Nation of Islam—“[t]he

28 Jeffries, On the Ground; Theoharis and Woodard, Groundwork.

two most significant organizations in the Black Power movement.”

He nevertheless also explains that Black Power did not require African Americans to be in an organization or to be ‘radical,’ but that individuals who supported certain ideas were part of the Black Power Movement, albeit not being on the streets or on the news demonstrating. For Ogbar, Black Power endorses Black self-love, self-respect, and self-determination. Additionally, while scholars still focus on the Black Panthers as representatives of the Black Power Movement, recent historians present a more complex view of the organization itself by emphasizing community programs rather than focusing on the militant and violent character of some of the Black Panthers and other Black Power organizations.

Furthermore, a rather new approach includes the many different roles of women in the Black Power Movement and emphasizes to what extent women, and mothers in particular, were involved in issues such as welfare, tenant rights, or Black feminism both within and outside the Black Panther Party.

Several current scholars have additionally challenged the idea that Black Power was a movement within the United States alone. Instead, it was an international and a global movement that not only carried ideas of self-determination and self-sufficiency abroad, but similarly brought back lessons they had learned and thus further developed and influenced Black Power ideas in the United States.

30 Ogbar, Black Power, vii.

31 Ibid., vii-x.

32 Jeffries, On the Ground; Murch, Living for the City; Williams, “Black Women.”


Drawing on the current Black Power scholarship, I define Black Power as a strategic response to persistent social inequity that called on activities that pursued an active approach; as a movement that is anti-integrationist, self-determined, community-supporting, empowering, and action-oriented rather than protest-focused. Black Power, thus, stands for self-determination, control over one’s life, communal responsibility, as well as Black self-love and Black pride. It does not, however, necessarily pursue a separatist ideology.\textsuperscript{35}

Education has played a role in many Black Power organizations and thus it is not surprising that educational initiatives emerged from these organizations that particularly work with Black Power ideas. This chapter, therefore, explores schools and educational initiatives organized by the Black Panther Party and by Pan-African nationalist organizations. This chapter introduces the purposes and goals of Black Power schools in order to highlight the complexity and breadth of Black Power within nationally and internationally recognized Black Power organizations and to exemplify what the theoretical definition of Black Power looks like when translated into practice.

In addition, moving beyond educational initiatives by recognized Black Power organizations adds to the understanding, the complexity, and the breadth of Black Power. Therefore, in the next chapter, I investigate schools and educational initiatives that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem, but which were organized by activists who were not necessarily part of nationally or internationally recognized Black Power organizations. For the purposes of this research, Black Power does not only refer to activists within Black Power organizations, but also to activist teachers, parents, students, and community


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members in their everyday efforts and fights against social inequity along the lines of Black Power ideas such as self-determination and self-sufficiency.

**Black Power and Education**

Developing independent Black institutions as a means of fighting for social justice has a long tradition within African American history. In this regard, African Americans have not only organized independent schools throughout history but also independent religious institutions, newspapers, clubs, unions, and banks, for example. Sometimes, these endeavors were a response to legal exclusion and sometimes they were a means to support and empower the Black community, giving Black people the power to determine their own lives and giving them a voice. 36 There were numerous endeavors to organize so-called movement schools long before the Black Power Movement. 37 In the early twentieth century, for example, there were two strands of movement schools that counted as precursors for the Black Power schools in the late twentieth century as they pursued several Black Power ideas. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as well as Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam (NOI) organized private schools outside of the public school system and consequently shielded Black youth from the white school system. These schools identified as Black nationalist schools and aimed at creating “a separate, orderly black world,” which could exist next to an oppressive


37 Rickford defined ‘movement schools’ as “educational institutions that arose in the context of mass struggle.” Rickford, *We Are an African People*, 74.
white society.\textsuperscript{38} UNIA’s educational institutions reflected the idea that Black people could only be free if they had knowledge about their own history and the achievements of Black people. Since Black people would not receive such an education in white-controlled schools, Black schools outside the public school system were necessary in order to liberate Black people. UNIA’s schools ranged from elementary level to higher education in different places such as Harlem, Toronto, or Claremont, Virginia. Some of these schools were vocational whereas others pursued a more academic approach. While not having the Black Power vocabulary at hand yet, these schools promoted Black Power ideas such as self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. Schools of the NOI encompassed elementary and secondary education, and pursued similar purposes and goals as UNIA’s schools. While they were not too different from other parochial schools, they were under governmental observation from the beginning. In addition to the usual subjects, students learned about Islam and were taught Arabic. Discipline and order were important values in NOI schools; the single-sex classes, the strictly prescribed uniforms, and the educational approaches of drills and rote learning emphasized the military-style pursuit. Nation of Islam schools emerged in various places with large student bodies. “A Harlem campus opened in 1969 with an enrollment of 500 and soon developed a waiting list of 200 children, most of them non-Muslims.”\textsuperscript{39}

While the schools of UNIA and NOI were ideologically close to Black Power ideas, schools that emerged later, during the 1950s and early 1960s, often called freedom schools, pursued different purposes and goals. Within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, the later established freedom schools fought for access, integration, voter rights, and full citizenship. The

\textsuperscript{38} Rickford, \textit{We Are an African People}, 74.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 74-99.
Mississippi Freedom Schools of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), for example, pursued an egalitarian, anti-racist, and anti-authoritarian pedagogy. Education at these schools was very political too and, beyond improving academic skills, schools aimed at recruiting new activists and critical thinkers who would challenge white supremacy. While support of white northern middle-class students was crucial for the Mississippi Freedom Schools, the involvement of white people also sparked the wish for Black autonomy and independent institutions among Black activists.\footnote{Rickford, \textit{We Are an African People}, 74-99.} Thus, as historian Russell Rickford explained, these schools represented “the first break in [Black people’s] desire to integrate. […] The creation of Freedom Schools raised the possibility of forming more permanent structures—separate if not entirely \textit{separatist}—to engage in ideological competition with the dominant society.”\footnote{Ibid., 81-82.} Therefore, these schools also exemplified a precursor—if a different one than the schools of the NOI and UNIA—of later Black Power schools.\footnote{Ibid., 74-99.}

There were also attempts to combine the approaches of freedom schools and schools of the NOI or UNIA, leading to so-called liberation schools. The weekend schools in Harlem organized by Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), for example, were transformed into liberation schools in order to emphasize both the pursuit of citizenship and the teaching of survival skills and self-determination.\footnote{Ibid., 88.} Thus, even within the framework of education, there is neither a chronological continuum toward radical Black Power thought nor a binary cut between the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.\footnote{Ibid., 88.} Instead, these schools reflect
particular contexts and various responses to these contexts. Similarly, the schools that are explored in the next chapter of this dissertation also represent specific reactions to social inequality and injustice in Harlem.

Despite the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that ruled segregated public schools unconstitutional in 1954 and despite the fact that segregation in New York City’s public schools in particular had been outlawed since the early twentieth century, African Americans continued to receive inferior education in segregated public schools in New York City. After attempts at transforming the public school system from within by demanding integration and community control, activists moved from criticizing and protesting towards more control over public schools to eventually designing and organizing their own schools. Several Black Power activists argued that the institution of schooling in the United States was traditionally a ‘colonial’ school system and therefore cannot empower Black students.\(^\text{45}\) Activists also thought that “[t]he most damaging thing a people in a colonial situation can do is to allow their children to attend any educational facility organized by the dominant enemy culture.”\(^\text{46}\) While liberals assumed that the school system would progress and improve automatically from within, more radical activists were convinced that this liberal portrayal of education was wrong. Instead, radical activists were aware that the public school system was created to reinforce a particular power structure and hierarchy and that an anti-racist and anti-colonial ideology was necessary for meaningful education and ultimately true liberation for Black people.\(^\text{47}\)

\(^{44}\) Rickford, We Are an African People, 74-77.

\(^{45}\) Lewis, New York City Public Schools, 28.

\(^{46}\) George Jackson, Soledad Brother, 1970, in Rickford, We Are an African People, 23.

\(^{47}\) Andrews, “Toward a Black Radical Independent Education,” 5-14; Konadu, View from the East, xiv.
As a response to this continued inequality in public schools, there have been several schools and educational initiatives outside of the public school system within the framework of Black Power at different times and in various places in the United States. Black Power activists moved towards education outside the ‘colonial’ system because it would allow them to have power over their own education. Activists like Preston Wilcox envisioned education to contribute to liberation and full citizenship for Black people. The power in this approach to education would lie with the entire community and education would provide a space in which the community, both adults and children, could engage in issues relevant to them. Consequently, such an approach could not be pursued within a ‘colonial’ public school system but needed to happen outside of it. Thus, education was a crucial arena in which Black Power ideas could be translated into practice.

Independent schools that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in the late twentieth century and that operated outside of the public school system varied in terms of methodology and ideology as well as purposes and goals. Recent Black Power scholarship has included some of these schools, arguing that they represented a sub-movement of the broader Black Power Movement and allowed reassessing and reinterpreting Black Power. The focus has so far been on the schools organized by the Black Panther Party as well as schools that pursued Pan-African nationalist ideas.

This chapter follows this tradition and discusses schools within these two strands. While this chapter introduces Black Power initiatives and the history, purposes, and goals of Black

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49 Rickford, *We Are an African People*.

50 Konadu, *View from the East*; Murch, *Living for the City*; Rickford, *We Are an African People*.
Power schools more broadly, it also discusses education within and by the Black Panther Party extensively, because the Panthers have been dominant in the scholarship and provided much evidence. They have also influenced Black Power activists outside of the Black Panther Party. An investigation of schools organized by the Black Panthers, therefore, helps to explore the role of education within Black Power more thoroughly. In addition, this chapter examines the role of education within the Black Panther Party both in Oakland and beyond, and investigates how a certain location changes Black Power ideas when applied in a specific context.

**Black Power Schools I: The Black Panther Party**

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in 1966 in Oakland, California by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton. The basis of the Panthers’ philosophy was the Ten-Point Platform and Program. Inspired by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the Panthers developed a program that expressed their rights and their demands. The Ten-Point Program called among other things for economic equality, decent housing, and an end to police brutality. In addition, the Ten-Point Program also reflected the purpose and goals of education within the framework of Black Power. Point five stated that “We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.” Thus, the Panthers did not only demand the right to learn, but also to have the power to decide what and how people would learn, to control the methods, content, and curricula. Elaborating on this point, former Panther Eldridge Cleaver explained that “we want to be able to teach ourselves and our children the necessity for

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52 Black Panther Party Ten-Point Platform and Program.
struggling against this ruling class. […] [O]ur enemy and that which we in fact are struggling against is […] the entire social structure. We are struggling against the capitalist system.”

Related to that, the party focused on ‘intercommunalism’: the Black Panther Party fought with and for the community in order for the people to have power over their own education as opposed to the power system deciding what and how to learn. In a next step, the community would then be able to educate students to become critical thinkers, challenging the social order themselves as well. This did not just include the Black community, but every community that was oppressed by the power system. Thus, the Black Panther Party pursued a counter-hegemonic education both in form and in content and the ultimate goal for the Black Panther Party was revolution, which Eldridge Cleaver defined as the following:

What [revolution] means to us is that we are trying to change a system that has historically enslaved our people, has continually exploited us, has discriminated against us and made our lives miserable and kept us underdeveloped and kept us blind and kept us in a form of slavery, one form of slavery or another. […] The process of breaking out of slavery, the process of breaking out of a set of social arrangements, out of a social organization that is killing us, this process is named revolution. […] If we are not going to be revolutionary people, we have to accept the designation of satisfied slaves.

As mentioned earlier, the approach of the Black Panther Party was based on Marxist ideas and included not only an analysis of race in the United States, but also a class analysis. The Panthers thus argued that “those who control the economy of the United States are able to control the rest of society.” Consequently, the ultimate goal of the Black Panther Party was to

53 Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 47.
54 B. Kwaku Duren in Shih and Williams, Black Panthers, 69.
55 Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 47.
56 Shih and Williams, Black Panthers, 3-4.
overthrow capitalism because “as long as the capitalist system exists, by its very nature some people will have to be exploited in order for others to be rich and powerful.”58 In other words, the Panthers argued that there is a relationship between education, economy, and power and that those who have the power can control the education of everyone else and consequently steer society in a specific direction. Those in power can decide whether education should empower people and allow them to become critical thinkers or whether education should keep people down and the capitalist social order in place, not allowing people to think for themselves but to merely follow instructions. As a response, people who are exploited by the power structure need to collaborate and work together in order to fight and ultimately destroy the capitalist system.59 In contrast to those in power who have an interest in reinforcing the power structure, people who are oppressed in this system try to expose the truth through education. This education, then however, has to be determined by those oppressed themselves. As Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, explained in his 1969 essay “Education and Revolution”:

[what we realize is that the education that is given is designed to perpetuate a system of exploitation. On the one hand it is designed to keep black people and so-called minorities ignorant, and on the other hand it is designed to keep the masses of white students in harmony with this system, to keep them supporting the system, to indoctrinate them to fight the wars that protect the system, and that extend the influence and the power of the system.60

This is what the Panthers and other Black Power activists have described as a ‘colonial’ public school system.

58 Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 47.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 48.
Cleaver further explained that the struggle for Black liberation was historically divided into specific aspects rather than pursuing a total social change and that this division or compartmentalization of the struggle also divided the community. The struggles on college campuses, for example, are often seen and understood as distinct and separate from the community. Thus, he argued, a fight for quality education in public schools or on college campuses alone will not bring about revolutionary change. Instead, activists need a broader strategy to actually overthrow and change the social system.61 Regarding education, this approach then called for a comprehensive understanding of education beyond schooling. It called for the idea that education does not only take place within an institution, but happens on an everyday level in every aspect of life. Thus, education needs to be embedded within the community and, similarly, the community needs to become more involved in educational issues that may not seem to impact them personally at first sight. However, educational issues will eventually impact everyone in the community, because education is a communal effort and goes beyond getting entry into college or the university, or even individual success, but can represent an arena for social change. This means that every individual does not only have a stake in social change, but also has a responsibility to contribute to social change by having an interest in education and by educating themselves.62 In order to achieve their theoretical demand, the Black Panther Party had many programs that related to education. They also organized liberation schools all over the country and beyond, allowing students to challenge the social system and encouraging revolutionary thought and enabling the community to participate in this revolutionary endeavor through education.

61 Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 49.

62 Ibid., 46.
As a result, there were several Black Panther schools nationwide and, depending on the local community’s individual needs and conditions, these schools varied slightly in terms of methods, content, and approaches, but they all pursued similar ideas and goals along Black Power. The Oakland Community School (OCS), for example, was a Black Panther-run liberation school that operated in Oakland, California from 1973 to 1982 and offered education to children between the ages of two and thirteen. Reflecting the Black Panthers’ educational ideal, the Oakland Community School started each day with a free breakfast and then focused on meaningful education for the students such as Black history. The school included discussions on current events, highlighting the goal of enabling students to become responsible and knowledgeable citizens. Just as importantly, students were required to learn, understand, and memorize the Ten-Point Program in order to understand and pursue the philosophy of the Black Panther Party. This approach would provide transparency and help the students to understand why they were doing what they did. While poor students in urban public schools usually received inferior education compared to white middle-class students in public or private schools, the Oakland Community School provided quality education to poor children for free, reinforcing their ideology of “[l]earning how to think, not what to think,” and thus being in agreement with point five of the Ten-Point Program.

63 The precursor of the OCS was the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI), which was founded in 1971. The OCS was also called Oakland Community Learning Center. Murch, Living for the City, 181; “Oakland Community Learning Center [founded by the Black Panther Party], 1977.” “This video introduced the Oakland Community Learning Center, a project organized by the Black Panther Party in Oakland, CA. […] This video was originally from It’s About Time, the official website of the Black Panther Party Alumni” (www.itsabouttimebpp.com/https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=9dYsjDqUdr0).

64 Murch, Living for the City, 178-182; video of “Oakland Community Learning Center, 1977.”

65 “Learning how to think, not what to think” was the motto of the Oakland Community School. Murch, Living for the City, 182.
In contrast to the experiences described in Chapter II, relationships between educators and students were based on trust and respect in the Oakland Community School as the school pursued anti-authoritarian and hands-on methods. As Donna J. Murch has explained, the director, Ericka Huggins

worked actively with the staff and discussed how to engage with students without harsh verbal or physical discipline. As a regular practice, the OCS director “patrolled the halls of the school” to carefully observe teachers’ treatment of students and to make sure there was no “yelling, screaming, and terrorizing.”

In addition, students themselves had a lot of responsibility and power in the school. The Justice Board, for example, was run by students. Whenever a student broke a rule or, for example, did not do their homework, that student had to explain himself or herself in front of the Justice Board. The students of the Justice Board then decided what the punishment for this student should be. In other words, children themselves had to make responsible decisions which had an impact on other students. Beyond holding each other accountable through the Justice Board, students also learned about the importance of teamwork in a very practical approach. In so-called “survival games,” older students practically experienced that they could accomplish much more as a group than alone by themselves. They then translated that knowledge into their everyday life in the community. As a result and as part of the school, older students took care of community members. For example, students helped elderly or sick community members to get to their doctor’s appointments or helped them with grocery shopping. In addition, some of the older students at the school were also teachers at the same time. One student, for example, received one-on-one lessons in reading and writing in order to improve his literacy skills, but at the same time taught Taekwondo to other students. Thus, students were involved in the organization, the

66 Murch, Living for the City, 182.
establishment of rules, decision-making processes, and the overall running of the school which communicated to students not only a sense of responsibility, but also self-respect and trust and showed students a realistic approach to self-sufficiency.67

These descriptions of the school and the methods and approaches that were pursued stand in stark contrast to more popular accounts of the Black Panthers and their schools. There are several pictures of the Oakland Community School in which education is represented as indoctrination. In one of Stephen Shames’ photographs, for example, students stand at attention and wear uniforms, modeled after the Black Panther uniform for adults (black pants or skirts, blue shirts, berets, and afros). On the walls are pictures of Huey P. Newton in his ‘thrown’ with a gun and a spear, as well as drawings by Emory Douglas, who had designed the visuals for the Black Panther newspaper.68 While popular accounts of the Oakland Community School focus on the representation of the school as military and as indoctrinating students with revolutionary propaganda, the reality was more complex and the school provided students with meaningful, comprehensive, transparent, and challenging education, as well as the freedom and the space to develop into critical and reflective human beings and citizens.69

The Oakland Community School as well as other liberation schools that were initiated and organized by the Panthers did not only intend to improve the students’ academic skills and support them to go to college. Instead, liberation schools also provided political education that allowed students to become critical thinkers, engage in race-conscious class struggles, and question as well as challenge mainstream society. Political education therefore enabled students

67 Video of “Oakland Community Learning Center, 1977.”
68 Stephen Shames, Children of Party members attending class in the Intercommunal Youth Institute, Oakland, 1971, Photograph in Murch, Living for the City, 181.
69 Murch, Living for the City; video of “Oakland Community Learning Center, 1977.”
to understand their position and purpose. By doing this, liberation schools not only focused on issues and struggles in the United States, but they embraced a global outlook and tried to learn from third-world revolutionary struggles and intended to apply at home what they had learned abroad. In other words, schools that were organized by the Black Panther Party allowed children to reflect on the role of class and race, and emphasized the importance of interracial alliances and multiculturalism. Thus, since the schools’ goal was revolution and social change, children in Black Panther schools were not only exposed to Black culture and history, but also to revolutionary thought and the philosophy of the Black Panther Party.

While the Panthers were often accused of indoctrinating their students, the Panthers instead countered that the public school system indoctrinated children into following western ideas and supporting as well as maintaining the status quo. Social scientist Kehinde Andrews confirmed this conviction and additionally challenged the idea of objective and neutral education, explaining that education can never be free of perspective:

The ‘political’ education that [the Panthers] prescribe is no less political than the liberal mainstream version, which hides behind objectivity and universality while privileging and promoting the subjective and particular. A radical critique of schooling does not see any knowledge created as free from the political values of those who produced it.

In other words, while education in the Oakland Community School was political, education in public schools was just as political but from a colonial perspective with the purpose of assimilating students into mainstream white society. In contrast to white liberal public education, the Panthers never hid the fact of using education to politicize, whereas public schools, according

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70 Shih and Williams, *Black Panthers*, 57.

71 Murch, *Living for the City*, 180.

to Andrews, pretended to be objective, neutral, and universal. For the Panthers, education was not only a human right, but it was the first step for people to become critical and responsible citizens. To that purpose, the Black Panther schools encouraged their students to critically question and challenge rather than blindly believe what they were taught. The overall approach of challenging white liberal public education rather than assimilating or integrating into it represents a crucial turn towards Black Power ideas and could be observed in the Black community beyond the Black Panther Party.73

Black Power had had an enormous impact on social movements in Harlem long before it became a slogan. During the 1950s and 1960s, Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as representatives of the Black Power Movement had a tremendous influence on social movements and community activism in Harlem and were simultaneously influenced by Harlem as a place of diverse expressions and practices of Black thought. Malcolm X questioned and criticized the shortcomings of American democracy and thus offered a new language and rhetoric for the Black Power Movement.74 Similarly, in 1966, Sam E. Anderson, Muhammad Ahmed (formerly known as Max Stamford), David White, Al Patella, and Ted Wilson founded a Black Panther group in Harlem even before the well-known Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. Additionally, many members of Malcolm X’s Organization of Afro American Unity (OAAU) became members of the early Black Panther Party in New York City since, influenced by Malcolm X, the Panthers tried to finish what Malcolm X had started.75 Only after the Black Panther Party in Oakland was founded did the

73 Murch, Living for the City, 8, 178-181.

74 Joseph, Dark Days, 38.
party in Harlem merge into the umbrella of the growing and now well-known Black Panther organization.\textsuperscript{76}

The earlier Black Panther organization in New York City, inspired and endorsed by Stokely Carmichael as well as Adam Clayton Powell Jr., established headquarters in Harlem, founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School and Malcom X Liberation School, and organized direct-action events in Harlem such as public school boycotts.\textsuperscript{77} In September 1966, for example, the original Harlem Black Panther Party boycotted Junior High School 139 (JHS 139) and demanded that a Black curriculum be implemented, thus ensuring that community members were politicized and children were properly educated in public schools. In the same year, the Black Panther Party together with community activists also organized a school shutdown in Harlem in order to emphasize the importance of quality education in Harlem. During this protest, activists demanded the establishment of two high schools in Central Harlem and a community college. They also asked that African languages and Black history be taught in elementary and junior high schools. Additionally, activists requested Black superintendents, Black principals, and Black teachers for Harlem schools. Finally, the names of public schools in Harlem were supposed to be changed so that they reflected Black history and Black achievements. Demands were made to the Board of Education and the Panthers explained that in case the board did not comply, the schools would be closed and children would be taught in


liberation schools. This protest for quality education was supposed to be a community effort and the Panthers expected the community to support this endeavor. Thus activists demanded that “Harlem churches must unite to support the school boycott by opening them for Freedom Schools.”78 The Black Panther Party also asked store owners, beauticians, barbers, restaurants, and even street gangs to unite in order to fight for and provide quality education for children in their community.79 While the original Harlem Black Panther Party was very productive, it was also very short-lived. A year later, in 1967, the party experienced a fraction and several members of the early Harlem Black Panther Party joined the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded by Newton and Seale, which originated in Oakland. While the original Harlem Black Panther Party was different from the Oakland faction, their ideas and methods overlapped and both organizations used education in order to promote and achieve their broader goals of self-determination and self-sufficiency. Consequently, even though short-lived, the early Black Panther Party exemplified that there were initiatives and organizations all over the country that pursued similar purposes and goals. Thus, while both Black Panther Parties emerged at the same time and pursued similar goals, their emergence also highlights that the Black Panther Party in Oakland was not the main actor or even initiator of Black Power activism and merely influenced communities in other cities. Instead, activists in New York City had organized their own Black Power initiatives already and then merged with the larger organization. Consequently, Black Power activism in Harlem was sparked by the specific context, such as continued injustice in


Harlem’s schools. While Harlem is often associated with the Harlem Renaissance or the Civil Rights Movement, this history highlights that Black Power has been a part of Harlem from its inception.

Once the Harlem-specific Black Panther Party merged with the larger Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, activities in Harlem, while still influenced by the Harlem-specific context, started to resemble Black Panther activities in other places. Eventually, there was a chapter of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in New York, with a local branch in Harlem, one in Brooklyn, one in the Bronx, and two in Queens. Various educational initiatives were designed, organized, or run by the Harlem Black Panther Party that provided education outside of institutional schooling. These initiatives included, for example, workshops or clubs within the community. Further, these initiatives were not only concerned with academic skills and political awareness, but also included knowledge about, for example, food, health, housing, or employment policies. As a result, there were programs in almost every chapter that related to education in a broader sense, such as the survival programs. For example, the Panthers organized free breakfast for school children in order to guarantee that every child was being fed before going to school, since not every family in the Black community could provide breakfast for their children. In the New York area, the Black Panther Party provided free breakfast every school morning between 7 a.m. and 8:30 a.m. There was one breakfast program in the Bronx and Queens, two in Brooklyn, and three in Harlem alone. These programs not only supported the

80 Autodidact 17, “Schomburg.”
community, but were also supported by the community as the “party would send out ten to twelve Black Panthers to convenience stores, supermarkets, dairy suppliers, and restaurants to ask for donations.” Additionally, these programs were also educational and political as “[c]ollege students in the Party […] read up on price supports, discovering that dairy farmers dumped milk, butter, cheese and eggs, in order to guarantee a certain market price […]” Thus, those involved in these programs learned more about the capitalist system they lived in and understood their place in society and why they were living the way they did. Consequently, they were able to make sense of their living conditions by understanding the system they were part of. Participating in survival programs such as the breakfast program not only supported and involved the community in the broader struggles of the Panthers, but it also taught those involved about organizing, capitalism, and power. The Black Panther Party also had programs that supported the Black community in issues of employment and housing. Finally, as part of the survival program, the Panthers additionally organized free health clinics:

Established by the Black Panther Party in 1971 to test and create a cure for sickle-cell anemia (a deadly blood disease that affects primarily Black Americans), the Sickle-Cell Anemia Research Foundation informs people about sickle-cell anemia and maintains a national advisory committee of doctors to research this crippling disease.

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84 Hugh Pearson in Herb Boyd, Black Panthers for Beginners (Danbury, CT: For Beginners, 1995), 61.

85 Ibid.


Thus, the Panthers not only provided health care to people in the Black community, but also educated the community about health issues such as sickle-cell anemia. By doing that, they not only supported the community in health issues, but they also raised awareness about a disease that was affecting particularly African Americans, encouraging self-worth and self-respect within the Black community. Whereas mainstream clinics may not have thought the research and education on sickle-cell anemia important, particularly because it mainly affected Black people, the Panthers challenged this assumption by focusing on curing a disease that could end deadly for African Americans.

The education director of Harlem’s Black Panther Party was responsible for all issues concerning the education of Black youth in the community both outside and inside the public school system. The internal education of party members was also the education director’s responsibility. The party provided a research library and created a reading list required for all members of the core leadership to read. This list included, for example, Malcolm X’s autobiography, Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, as well as Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The Harlem branch initiated a Black Panther Athletic and Social Club, which was the youth section of the party. While the education director or education chairman was responsible for educational issues, all members of the Black Panther Party were supposed to be involved and take deep interest in the ideological and organizational work of the Youth Club. At the same time, the Panther Youth learned to take a deep interest in the community and apply what they had learned from older party members. Beyond that, there were also rules that every member of the

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Black Panther Party had to know “verbatim by heart.” These rules highlighted the importance of education and stated that “[p]olitical Education Classes are mandatory for general membership.” Another rule required that “[e]veryone in a leadership position must read no less than two hours per day to keep abreast of the changing political situation.” In their rule book, the Panthers also emphasized the importance of grassroots political work and highlighted the importance of being active on the ground: “[o]nly office personnel assigned to respective offices each day should be there. All others are to sell papers and do Political work out in the community, including Captains, Section Leaders, etc.” While still attending public school, Atno Smith, who joined the party as a youth, explained what his involvement in the Black Panther Party as a young member looked like on an everyday level:

At fifteen, I was one of the younger members. […] We were basically in high school […]. When calling upon someone for a task, the officers knew exactly who had the ability to do what—whether it was taking a family down to the welfare office or trying to get public or private housing for a homeless family.

This involvement of the youth in the community contributed to the goal of supporting the entire community and the common good rather than focusing on the success of a few single individuals within the Black community. This example also highlights the practical translation of the rules of the Black Panthers and particularly the idea of supporting young people to become responsible citizens.

Members of the Black Panther Party were not only responsible for promoting the Black Power spirit and theory among youth in the Black Panther Athletic and Social Club, but also for mobilizing and educating the Black community around issues concerning the education of Black

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90 Shih and Williams, *Black Panthers*, 63.
91 Ibid.
92 Atno Smith in Ibid., 59.
youth in Harlem in general. Thus, it was important for the Panthers that the club maintained a close relationship with the broader masses of young people in the community. As a result, party members arranged and publicized lectures and classes on various subjects relevant to the struggle for the liberation of Black America. They went to public schools, distributed flyers and pamphlets, and talked to students about conditions in the neighborhood. Cheryl Foster, the school coordinator of the Harlem Branch in 1970, for example, explained in her journal that she was not only intensively involved in breakfast programs all over New York City, but she also documented how she spent her days organizing students for mass rallies, regularly organizing statewide workshops and conferences in New York City and beyond, going to schools, colleges, and universities to educate and recruit more students to organize and become active and responsible citizens.\footnote{Cheryl Foster’s Notebooks, 1970, Box 1, Folder 12, Black Panther Party Harlem Branch files 1969-1970, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.}

Claudia Chesson-Williams, a former Black Panther in the Corona, Queens branch of the Black Panther Party, recalled how these initiatives raised awareness and motivated her to become involved in the Black Panther Party herself. She explained that hearing the Panthers speak at Public School 92 for the first time “started the wheels of [her] mind for [her] to become political” in the first place.\footnote{Claudia Chesson-Williams in Shih and Williams, \textit{Black Panthers}, 11.} This example emphasizes the importance of educational initiatives outside of the public school system, but also outside of institutional schooling more broadly, as they may reach different people in different ways. This example also highlights the role of education and community within Black Power. It shows how education is embedded in social activism and community organizing; how education and community are intertwined. Thus,
again adjusting education to the needs of the community and not the other way around is crucial in order for education to be truly meaningful.

In addition to recruiting students and raising awareness in public schools, the Panthers organized a weekly PE—Political Education—class on Seventh Avenue in front of their office in Harlem, where people—young and old—from the community could just walk in and participate. In those classes, they usually started with the Ten-Point Program and then listened to the people from the community, how they lived, and what they wanted to change. In this way, the Panthers not only were able to focus their efforts on the community’s needs, but they also tried not to lose touch with ordinary people in the community. These classes and the constant contact also helped the Panthers to educate and remind themselves about the needs and struggles of the broader community outside of the Black Panther Party. The regular exchange with ordinary people in the neighborhood outside of the party allowed the Panthers to understand what the community was thinking and to challenge and reflect on themselves and their methods: “The Panthers knew what you were doing because they were Panthers and they were doing the same thing. Outside, there were constant questions and answers with the people.”

Last but not least, as detailed in Chapter II, the Black Panther Party kept a close eye on the public school system and the situation of Black students in it. Based on these observations and the communication with the community, the Black Panther Party was also involved in community control issues regarding education and initiated boycotts against public schools, demanding more Black representatives in the public schools, and a curriculum that adapted to the needs of the community. These goals fit into the broader idea of Black Power for self-determination, but they also exemplified the different stages Black Power activists went through.

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and the various compromises activists had to make due to outside forces and the amount of power they had.  

In collaboration with other chapters on the East Coast, the Harlem branch organized student conferences which educated Black youth about the situation of the Black community in the United States. For example, from May 16 to May 19 in 1970, Black Panther Party chapters on the East Coast organized a student conference in New Haven, Connecticut in which numerous high school and college students from Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, and Jersey City were involved. More than one hundred students attended that conference. Speakers at these conferences included, among others, Emory Douglas, Bobby Seale, Elaine Brown, and David Hilliard. The conference also included a mass rally on May 19, 1970 protesting the imprisonment of political prisoners in New Haven. Additionally, there was a local rally at the United Nations in New York City at the same time for all those who could not make it to New Haven. Workshops that were offered revolved around education and revolution, revolutionary action on campus and in the community, national salvation and self-defense, as well as freeing political prisoners. “In order to organize a revolutionary struggle, we must be able to manipulate ideas,” explained Eldridge Cleaver, which is why control over one’s own education was crucial in order to contribute to social change and justice. Black people and other minorities need the intellectual


98 Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 47.

99 Ibid., 49.
space to imagine another reality, another future, and to challenge the status quo. The public school system, which represents ideas of the white middle class which intends to maintain society the way it is, does not represent a space in which people can imagine an alternative reality.

In addition to constantly struggling to fund and organize educational initiatives, the Black Panther Party also had to contend with outside government forces such as the FBI which deemed educational initiatives of the Panthers and the subsequently increasing popularity of the Black Panther Party dangerous. While the Black Panther Party seemed militant, violent, and masculine to some in the Black community, as a result of the Panthers’ survival programs, the Panthers received much respect and gratefulness from the community. Such support was deemed dangerous to the FBI and the existing power structure. In one of the first memos of the Counterintelligence Program or COINTELPRO against hate groups, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover wrote that “[e]fforts of the various groups to consolidate their forces or to recruit new or youthful adherents must be frustrated.” Thus, the goals of the FBI program were, among others, to “[p]revent militant black nationalist groups and leaders from gaining respectability. […] A final goal should be to prevent the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations, especially among youth. Specific tactics to prevent these groups from converting young people must be developed.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the Panthers’ commitment to revolutionary change through educational initiatives sparked the suspicion of the FBI and other authorities, declaring education a dangerous tool and endangering the status quo.

The FBI’s Counterintelligence Program consequently infiltrated the party with FBI informants who sowed distrust and evoked conflicts among members of the Black Panther Party.

¹⁰⁰ Shih and Williams, *Black Panthers*, 252-255.
FBI files on the Black Panther Party have shown how the survival programs were considered dangerous and the programs were consequently under constant surveillance. Further, FBI files have revealed how the FBI constructed fractions within the party so that it would look like the Black Panther Party would destroy itself from within. In 1968, for example, the FBI stated that “New York, in its overall counterintelligence letter 4/4/68, suggested ridicule of militant black nationalist leaders as a prime weapon to discredit these leaders, noting we should try to make militant black nationalism ludicrous to ghetto youth,” also highlighting the influence the Black Panther Party had on the youth and consequently the “danger” they posed to the power structure. In 1970, the FBI wrote that “[t]he Bureau is considering a counterintelligence measure calculated to create a split between top level leaders of the BPP.” Particularly in New York, the FBI struggled to find ways to infiltrate Black organizations and the FBI was particularly anxious to disrupt the organizing in New York City due to its numerous different Black organizations. Thus, the FBI explained that “[i]t is important to use every possible technique to disrupt and neutralize the extremist black nationalists.”

Beyond but probably related to the FBI’s COINTELPRO in general, the Harlem branch also had to deal with another main instance that led to their decline. In 1969, twenty-one members of the Harlem Panthers were arrested and charged with plotting a series of bombings in New York City. The charges were eventually dropped, but the energy and the money needed to defend the New York 21 had a lasting impact not only on the Harlem branch, but also on other branches throughout the city that helped to keep the Harlem branch running during the trial of the New York 21. Claudia Chesson-Williams, for example, explained

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102 Shih and Williams, *Black Panthers*, 12.
that she “was originally from Queens and came out of the Corona Branch of the Black Panther Party. When the Panther Twenty-One were arrested and went to jail, in order to keep those offices open and functioning, Panthers were sent from all over the city to Harlem.”

This again highlights the importance of community for Black Power activism and reflects the goal of uplifting the entire community with the support of the community, thus encouraging self-determination and self-sufficiency. These struggles also highlight the different obstacles Black Power activists had to deal with and compromises activists had to make in order to achieve their goals and fulfill their purposes. Last but not least, the surveillance of the Black Panther Party and particularly the surveillance of survival programs by the FBI highlight the power of education, self-determination, and self-sufficiency, since the Black Panther Party—according to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover—represented the “greatest threat to internal security of the country.”

Black Power Schools II: Pan-African Nationalism

While the Black Panther Party was based in the Black community, it did not pursue a nationalist or separatist approach. Instead, the Panthers cooperated with other organizations outside of the Black community. Apart from independent schools and educational initiatives organized by the Black Panther Party, scholars have also focused on Pan-African nationalist schools that emerged during the Black Power Movement. Historian Russell Rickford, for example, has provided a comprehensive history of the more than sixty Pan-African nationalist schools that had emerged by 1970, highlighting the shift within the Black Freedom Struggle from the fight for integration and community control towards independent institutions for an independent Black nation. Black nationalism, however, does not necessarily mean that these

103 Shih and Williams, Black Panthers, 12.
schools or sub-movements intended to create their own state, but rather to create a cultural national identity, a peoplehood. “In the African diaspora, peoples of African descent do not have a state structure, so they root notions of nationalism in people and culture.” For this purpose, they looked to third-world countries for inspiration and support. For these activists, the divide was not between the North and the South in the United States, but rather between the oppressed and the oppressor. Black nationalism was not a homogeneous concept, but also varied from community to community and depended on a community’s particular needs and conditions. While there may not be a single definition for Black nationalism, a common concern and goal of this movement was liberation and cultural identity. The overall goal of these schools was consequently not only to support academic skills of students but also to decolonize the students’ minds. These schools not only tried to fight western hegemony in students’ minds and deconstruct their racialized and oppressed consciousness, but they also promoted Black pride, African identity, and self-determination. For them, education was an essential tool for true Black empowerment. As Rickford explained, “[t]hey concluded that a revolution by education required a revolution in education. Schools would have to be dramatically reimagined if they were to be engines of the new society rather than bulwarks of the status quo.” The approach towards social justice was no longer to criticize, protest, change, or even control the existing public schools. Instead, entirely new institutions were necessary in order to provide Black students with a space to imagine a self-determined and independent future for Black people. Most of these

104 Konadu, View From the East, xxii.
105 Ibid., xxxi.
106 Rickford, We Are an African People, 12.
107 Ibid., 2-12.
schools were part of a nationwide system of independent schools, called the Council for Independent Black Institutions, or CIBI. This council incorporated schools that would fight for the rights of all people of African descent.¹⁰⁸

One of the Pan-African nationalist schools Rickford wrote about was created in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area in Brooklyn, New York, and operated between 1969 and 1986, called the East. As a response to failed attempts of more control in public schools, the East was created by students and adults in the community during the height of the Black Power Movement. In his history of the East, Kwasi Konadu described the annual Black Power conferences that were organized between 1966 and 1969 as instrumental to the founding of the East and several other Black independent institutions. At those conferences, Black people from all around the world came together and shared visions of a future for people of African descent. This exchange empowered Black people to leave the fight for integration and community control in public schools behind and to start forming their own institutions and their own infrastructure that would contribute to true self-determination, independence, and liberation. The institutions that emerged from these Black Power conferences thus envisioned a Black cultural nationhood within the United States, highlighting Cleaver’s point of the importance to provide intellectual space for the Black community in order to manipulate ideas and imagine a different future for Black people.¹⁰⁹

Schools that emerged pursued a Black nationalist approach and thus thought that providing Black students with a space, in which they could freely express their culture and their identity, would automatically lead to positive learning experiences and consequently improve the academic performance of Black students. In other words, these schools were convinced that having the

¹⁰⁸ Konadu, View From the East, xiv; Rickford, We Are an African People, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 48-49.
power and liberation to self-determine one’s own life and academic achievement went hand in hand and influenced each other.\textsuperscript{110}

While the school began as an evening school, it became a full-time school in 1970. Located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area in Brooklyn, the East was a whole educational complex, including a daycare center, known as the Imani Child Development Center, an evening school for adults, and the Uhuru Sasa Shule, which was the centerpiece of the East education complex. “Uhuru Sasa” was Kiswahili and translated to “Freedom Now.”\textsuperscript{111} The school not only promoted academic excellence, structure, and discipline, but it also emphasized the importance of cultural identity and embraced Blackness, following a curriculum and pedagogy that would support self-reliance, self-respect, and self-love, and was based on self-determination. Love for Black people and respect for Black intellectual thought were understood as acts of cultural resistance. Under the leadership of Jitu K. Weusi, the East considered itself not only a community of people of African descent, but more so a family.\textsuperscript{112} In order to build this nationhood within the United States, the East had to serve not only the student body, but also the families of students as well as the community more broadly. From the beginning, the value of elders and their wisdom were emphasized and students learned to respect each other and think of their community as a supportive union.\textsuperscript{113}

Regarding school policies, it was essential for the East to make decisions as a community. As a result, the school had a governing council in which students, teachers, and parents were involved. This council then decided on, for example, the curriculum or the finances of the school.

\textsuperscript{110} Konadu, \textit{View From the East}, 86-112.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., xiv-xxxiv.

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 89.
While the principal was responsible for the school’s daily supervision, he himself was supervised by both parents and teachers. However, parents and teachers not only had rights but also many responsibilities and were deeply involved in the school’s issues. Consequently, parents had to attend regular workshops and lectures in which they were challenged to question their own worldviews and re-educate themselves. Beyond that, parents were also expected to either pay tuition or contribute their time supporting the school in various ways; for example, parents often taught at the school themselves. In addition, necessary qualifications for teachers to be able to work at the East differed tremendously from public schools. For the East, it was particularly important that teachers were passionate about and open to teaching in an African-centered environment. Teachers therefore were also required to regularly participate in meetings, workshops, and lectures to (re-)educate themselves. Maintenance of the facilities was taken care of by teachers and students so that the school could save resources in this way. While the work and commitment that parents, teachers, and students put into the school may seem excessive, it actually reflected Black Power ideas of self-determination and particularly self-sufficiency very well. In exchange for the community’s commitment to the school, the school also provided an evening school that allowed community members regardless of age to receive quality education while they worked their job during the day. This evening school was called “communiversity” because it was structured like a university and aimed at the development of the community. Due to their strong belief and commitment for self-sufficiency and self-determination, the entire institution was able to operate for more than a decade.\footnote{Konadu, \textit{View From the East}, 86-112.}

The curriculum of the East’s Uhuru Sasa Shule, the centerpiece of the East educational complex, was crucial in order to fulfill the school’s ideals and goals of allowing students and the
community to develop a worldview from a Black perspective. Consequently, the curriculum focused on African history, geography, and cultural life. An African-centered curriculum not only influenced the perspective of students on how to view the world, but it also supported the development of Black pride and self-respect. The skill to see one’s world from a different perspective also allowed Black students to imagine an alternative future; it helped students to work towards positive social change and justice.\(^{115}\)

This chapter has not only highlighted the complexity and breadth of Black Power ideas and theory, but also exemplified the many different ways of translating these theories into practice. Educational initiatives created and organized by recognized Black Power organizations show how diverse the content, approach, method, and ultimately the execution of Black Power ideas can be, depending on the specific context. The next chapter introduces and discusses three further educational initiatives that emerged during the height of the Black Power Movement in Harlem in the late 1960s. These schools expanded the idea of Black Power schools and Black Power even more. Set within a unique Black community like Harlem, the exploration of these schools highlights Black Power ideas on the ground, within a specific community, and helps to broaden our understanding of Black Power and the needs and responses of the community.

\(^{115}\) Konadu, *View From the East*, 86-112.
Chapter IV

BLACK POWER SCHOOLS IN HARLEM

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.¹

Introduction

After failed attempts of integrating public schools in Harlem, activists moved towards community control. While there have been cases in which the community had some control over their children’s education—as in the case of Intermediate School 201—the amount of control did not allow for meaningful educational change. As a result, other measures were necessary in order to guarantee quality education for children in Harlem. This chapter examines three educational initiatives that emerged outside the public school system in Harlem and compares and contrasts them. Thus, it introduces further approaches to the fight for quality education, beyond integration and community control towards independent schooling.

None of the schools discussed in this chapter, however, identified as members of the Black Panther Party or as Pan-African nationalists nor did they explicitly identify as Black Power initiatives. Nevertheless, the three examples discussed in this chapter reflected Black Power ideas such as self-determination and self-sufficiency.² Consequently, these educational

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² This idea is supported by Ogbar’s understanding of Black Power. He explained that Black Power did not require African Americans to be in an organization or to be ‘radical,’ but that individuals who supported certain ideas were part of the Black Power Movement. Ogbar, Black Power, vii-x.
initiatives allow for a rethinking of Black Power and the role of education for Black Power ideas and activism.

In addition, while this research focuses on Black people, Black Power principles and ideas did not only refer to Black people alone. As discussed in the introduction, the tenets of Black Power were influential for other oppressed groups as well. Puerto Ricans in particular were regularly mentioned in the primary documents and played a crucial role in the history of the schools discussed in this chapter. Again, while this research focuses on Black people, there is also information on Puerto Rican students in this chapter. While I do not examine Puerto Rican experiences separate from those of Black people, the inclusion of Puerto Ricans in Black Power ideas and principles widens and differentiates the understanding of Black Power. As former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver explained, Black Power is not about separation, but about collaboration and solidarity among oppressed people. While experiences of Black and Puerto Rican people differ, the tenets of Black Power ideas are relevant for both groups.

**West Harlem Liberation School**

In the fall of 1967, the newly constructed Public School 36 (PS 36) was supposed to open and merge with the already operating Public School 125 (PS 125), located across from PS 36. In 1966, Superintendent Bernard E. Donovan announced that he had assigned a white principal, Mrs. Kate Tuchman, to the new PS 36. In response to that decision, parents started protesting and demanding more involvement in their children’s education.³

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PS 125 was a predominantly Black elementary school located at Amsterdam Avenue and West 123rd Street in Harlem. After the superintendent had announced the nomination of the new principal in September 1966, the Parent Association had demanded a meeting with the board to discuss parents’ involvement and control of the new school’s staffing, curriculum, and operation. In particular, parents demanded to have a say in the selection of the principal and the curriculum for PS 125’s twin school PS 36. They requested a written statement from the Board of Education to guarantee them more participation in the school. The board ignored the parents’ demands and, as a response, in March of 1967, parents, supported by PS 125’s teachers, boycotted the school. After the parents had protested the assignment of Mrs. Tuchman as principal of PS 36, Mrs. Tuchman withdrew from that nomination and the superintendent met with parents, suggesting that parents should provide him with a list of potential principals, but clarifying that the final decision would be his. The parents, however, declined this offer and insisted on their initial demand of involvement in the selection of a principal, teachers, and the curriculum.

In line with Black Power ideas of self-determination and self-respect, the parents wanted to control and determine themselves who was going to teach their children and what exactly they were going to learn. Suggesting potential principals was not sufficient

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4 PS 125 belonged to District 5. Boundaries were Tiemann Place, Broadway, West 125th Street, Fifth Avenue, West 124th Street, Mount Morris Park West, West 120th Street, West 110th Street Eighth Avenue (Central Park West), West 59th Street, North River. Other schools included: 9, 75, 76, 84, 87, 113, 144, 145, 162, 165, 166, 170, 179, 180, 184, 191, and 199; J44, J54, J88, and J118, West Side HS.

5 Slack, “School Boycott.”

and did not represent real power. Instead, parents called for true and sustained democratic input of those directly affected, namely parents, rather than just being consulted in an advisory capacity in the early stages of the selection process of a principal for the new school. Moreover, suggesting potential candidates for the position of principal did not guarantee a say in the development of the curriculum, and parents were not willing to compromise. In addition, although the board proposed discussing the issue with a limited number of parent representatives, the parents requested to have a mass meeting with the board and all 3,000 parents who were involved. A spokesperson for the parents, Sidney Jones, compared the board’s treatment of the parents to slavery and stated: “We decided that we’re through with that same old plantation bit where the master can tell the slaves who can come to [the] big house and talk with him.” While a mass meeting may seem impractical, it nevertheless reflected Black Power ideas and the importance of the opinion of the entire community rather than delegating responsibilities to a few representatives. This approach of including everyone who was involved not only promoted self-respect among parents, but also exemplified a true bottom-up approach.

However, the board did not respond to these demands, which led the parents to boycott PS 125 and create their own school, in order to put pressure on the board and prove to them that parents knew exactly what they wanted and what their demands could look like. As a result, in early March of 1967, the classrooms of PS 125 remained almost empty. Out of the student body of about 1,800—about 55 percent Black, 28 percent Puerto Rican,


8 Slack “We won.”
and 17 percent white—parents withdrew as many as 1,700 students. Instead of sitting down behind their usual desks at PS 125, these students attended the so-called ‘West Harlem Liberation School,’ which was initiated by the parents boycotting PS 125. West Harlem Liberation School consisted of three ‘permanent’ school buildings:

Kindergarten pupils [were] being taught at the Grant Community Center, 1301 Amsterdam Avenue. First and second grades students [were] studying at St. Mary’s Ackley Center, 514 West 125th Street and third through sixth graders [were] attending classes at the Riverside Church, Claremont Avenue between 121 and 122nd Street.

Teaching their children in churches and community centers highlighted the importance of relying on the community and its resources in achieving self-sufficiency and ultimately Black Power, as did the staffing of the school that was drawn from community members and volunteers sympathetic to the cause. The number of staff and teachers varied from day to day; on some days, there was an integrated staff of thirty-two retired teachers, college professors, and college students, and on other days, up to sixty teachers taught and worked with the students. Dan Limerick, chairman of the Liberation School Committee, stated that the liberation school’s purpose was “to show the Board of Education that we, as parents, can have the kind of school

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9 The exact number of students boycotting and attending the liberation school is inconclusive. Lois Prager of Columbia Daily Spectator argued that PS 125 had a student body of 1,800 and that 1,700 of those attended the liberation school. Robert Hardman of Columbia Daily Spectator stated that PS 125’s student body consisted of 1,900 students. Sara Slack from Amsterdam News explained that the numbers varied depending on who was asked. Her interviewees agreed that PS125 had a student body of 1,800. Parents argued that 1,600 students were boycotting, while the principal of PS 125 claimed that 1,400 students were boycotting.

10 Prager, “Social Work Professor.”

11 Slack, “School Days.”

that doesn’t presently exist for us. While we recognise that our children are different from other children, we want to give them an appreciation of their differences.”

Thus, Black Power ideas were prevalent in this endeavor: The idea of the liberation school was to provide a space for children to learn about and embrace their heritage and culture, to develop pride for who they are. In order for the students to develop such pride, it was necessary to learn not only about themselves and their background, but also about the context in which the students and their families lived. Consequently, in addition to the usual academic subjects, students studied the history of the fight for community control in Harlem and, supplementing more standard textbooks, students learned from a ‘Liberation Notebook’ written by the parents. Chevannes and Reeves emphasized the uniqueness of independent liberation schools within the Black community and explained that

[w]hat [made] these projects distinctive from other ethnic minority extra schooling is that they [did] not focus on language or religion but rather on teaching the basics of schooling to overcome inequalities in education and providing education about Black history and culture that [was] absent from mainstream curricula.

The curriculum at the liberation school, which differed tremendously from the one in public schools, would encourage students to learn about their own history and support the development of self-respect, self-love, and pride in one’s heritage, which again aligned with Black Power ideas.

The boycotting parents elected Preston Wilcox for principal of West Harlem Liberation School. Preston Wilcox, an Associate Professor of Social Work at Columbia University, whose

13 Prager, “Social Work Professor.”


children attended PS 125 as well, had already advocated for community participation in school affairs during the controversy over Intermediate School 201 in East Harlem. Initially, Wilcox had been convinced that meaningful educational change could be achieved from within the public school system. However, after several experiences in the fight for community control, he then argued that the solution to educational issues in Black communities could not be solved by white people and that instead white-controlled education merely reinforced white economic progress as well as Black economic exploitation. Thus, white decision-makers would only act in their own interests and reinforce the racist educational system.16 Although Wilcox was a professor at prestigious Columbia University, in his writings he used a rather radical tone and expressed Black Power ideas. He also distanced himself and his educational philosophy from the fight for integration. In 1968, for example, addressing a Black audience, he wrote:

I am here to help convince you that Black people of all persuasions are capable of turning themselves around, i.e., every Negro has the potential for becoming Black. A Negro is half Black; not half white. […] I am here to help convince you that being, thinking, feeling and behaving Black is not enough. […] He must meet the test of being effectively Black—being Black in the presence of whites […]. I am here to suggest that Black men must and can think for themselves. […] The current struggles relate to the hearts of white Americans. Black men who are worrying about heart transplants on white Americans are participating in gradual self-genocide. […] The choice of achieving Black humanity, however, belongs to Black men alone. It is up to white America to choose to humanize itself.17

Against the backdrop of Black Power, Black activists did not intend to change white people’s opinions anymore, as was often the case in the fight for integration. Trying to convince white people of the value of Black people would, in Wilcox’ words, resemble Black genocide. Instead,


Wilcox encouraged Black people to embrace their Blackness and to become unapologetically Black. He additionally promoted unity and support among the Black community because only they could achieve justice and equality for themselves. Within this ideology, Black people and their interests were at the center of the struggle rather than the reformation of white people, who, on the other hand, needed to teach their own communities and contribute to social justice in that way. In his writings, he also argued that if the community controlled its own institutions, the community would acquire the skills to run their own lives. According to Wilcox, Black education has always been in white control and thus “the public schools have succeeded in assigning Black students to prisons, the welfare rolls, poor housing, police surveillance—and to Vietnam.” Wilcox further argued that white decision-makers were responsible for the deterioration and pathology in Black communities. Thus, he explained that white people were not capable of improving Black education, but in order to provide education that was actually meaningful, Black education should be controlled by the Black community. Therefore, believing in integration as it had been approached was shortsighted and ultimately counterproductive since integration merely meant that “[t]here are no Black people.” In his view, integration did not change the public school system towards meaningful education and justice for all children, but merely resulted in Black and non-white students having to assimilate into the white public school system. Thus, community control of schools—having democratic input into and control over a school’s finances, curricula, and teachers—was a prerequisite for

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meaningful education. Therefore, Wilcox demanded that schools that were predominantly Black should also be controlled and managed by the Black community. Similarly, resources that would provide economic, physical, and mental security to students should be controlled by the local communities rather than by a central institution. In addition, educational content needed to be transparent to both students and parents. Wilcox argued that if Black communities were in control of the institutions that served them, Black communities would be able to live self-sufficient lives. As a community endeavor, West Harlem Liberation School was designed to live up to these Black Power ideas: the school supported itself with the help of the community in order to achieve self-sufficiency and self-reliance. This approach then highlights the idea that meaningful change can only come from the Black community itself and not from white people or a central institution that is not familiar with the community’s needs, nor with everyday issues and conditions the community had to endure.

Although nearby Columbia University was not directly involved in the affairs of PS 125, the protest as well as the liberation school were endorsed and supported by several campus organizations and individuals. Showing their support, many offered assistance in the form of moral support, financial aid, and volunteer help at the liberation school. The Faculty Civil Rights Committee, a Columbia University organization concerned with civil rights issues, for example, called for faculty participation not only in protesting PS 125 but also, and more importantly, in teaching those students who did not attend PS 125 during the boycott. The Columbia College Citizenship Council passed a resolution supporting both the boycott and West Harlem Liberation School and argued that the liberation school “was formed by the community as one means to correct educational deficiencies in the present [public school] system”; it asked the Board of

Education to “invite the participation of the parents in establishing the criteria for the selection of the first principal.”\(^{23}\) Columbia’s Students for a Democratic Society as well as the Students’ Afro-American Society explained that the issues parents were fighting for at PS 125 were not that different from the issues students at Columbia University were fighting for: students at Columbia University and parents at PS 125 fought for more involvement for students or parents, respectively, as well as the implementation of Black Studies. Since these struggles were connected in a broader sense, it was essential to support each other in their fights for a say in education.

This idea of the community being involved in the broader Black Freedom Struggle across single-interest struggles highlights former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver’s argument, discussed in Chapter III. Cleaver explained that the struggle for Black liberation was historically divided into specific aspects and that this compartmentalization of the struggle divided and consequently weakened both the community and the struggle. The struggles on college campuses, for example, were often seen and understood as distinct and separate from the community. Thus, he argued, a fight for quality education in public schools or on college campuses alone would not bring about revolutionary change. Instead, activists needed a broader strategy to overthrow and change the social system. Thus, college students, students at public schools, and community members should collaborate and fight together for social change overall, not just on campus or in schools.\(^{24}\) One activist confirmed that West Harlem Liberation School pursued such an approach and explained that what was unique about this school was that “it’s a cooperative community venture. It gives a chance for people from the institutions to work together with people from the

\(^{23}\) Prager, “Parents’ Boycott of PS 125 Citizenship Council Supports.”

\(^{24}\) Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 49.
neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{25} Similarly, the president of Union Theological Seminary, John C. Bennett, not only supported the boycott ideologically and argued that “the boycott is the only way for the parents to get adequate attention to their claims.”\textsuperscript{26} Instead, Union Theological Seminary, an affiliated institution of Columbia University, also provided classroom space for about ninety students attending West Harlem Liberation School.\textsuperscript{27}

While the school was not intended to operate for a long time, activists and parents were committed to make it work and to achieve what they were demanding: real power over their children’s education by having a say in the selection of a principal, teachers, and the curriculum.\textsuperscript{28} West Harlem Liberation School represents a practical translation of Black Power ideas and theory. Black education was governed and organized by the Black community, providing relevant and meaningful education that would allow students to develop pride and confidence rather than trying to fit into the white public school system. The liberation school also highlighted what self-determination and self-reliance can look like. Parents, teachers, students, and community members all worked together for social change and to improve both education and their community more broadly.

Only about four weeks later, in April 1967, the parents eventually gave up the demand for a mass meeting, closed down the liberation school, and sent their children back to PS 125.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{25} Hardman, “Chaos.”


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Hardman, “Chaos.”

\textsuperscript{29} It is not quite clear when exactly West Harlem Liberation School was operating. \textit{Amsterdam News} reported about the liberation school between March 11 and April 8, 1967, whereas \textit{Columbia Daily Spectator} mentioned the liberation school from March 6 to March 15, 1967.
However, seventy parents accompanied their children to school, sat quietly in the back of the classroom, and filled out report cards about the teachers’ methods and their behavior towards the children. In addition to that, parents decided to move their struggle beyond local authorities and intended to take their struggle to Albany and Washington, D.C. instead.\textsuperscript{30} Parents insisted that they had not given up their beliefs and explained: “We won our point. We haven’t surrendered and we haven’t been defeated. On the contrary, we have only changed our tactics. The boycott brought our community together.”\textsuperscript{31} While some may see the closing of the liberation school as failure, parents and community members called West Harlem Liberation School a success. For them, success did not equal test scores or academic skills for individual students. Instead, the fact that this educational initiative had brought together the community—across institutions and racial groups—fighting united for power and against oppression resembled true success and highlighted the importance of education as a tool for social change.

Very practical reasons forced the parents to end their boycott and discontinue the liberation school. While the organizers of the liberation school and particularly the parents arguably had some economic power over the Board of Education, boycotting PS 125 and operating an alternative educational space ultimately drained the activists’ resources. On the one hand, they argued that their boycott put significant economic pressure on the board, since only two weeks of boycotting, “[a]t the rate of some $6 per day given the Board of Education to educate each child who attends school, the parents estimate that the Board so far has lost approximately $79,500 since they began boycotting PS 36-125.”\textsuperscript{32} Yet on the other hand, parents

\textsuperscript{30} Slack, “We Won.”

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Slack, “PS 36.”
pointed out that the taxes they paid for the education of their children were lost to them as well, now that their children attended the liberation school. Also, while the board lost a sizable amount of money due to the parents’ boycott, parents and community activists also needed to raise funds for the liberation school. In addition to smaller fundraising activities, parents then looked for outside funding through, for example, the Ford Foundation.\textsuperscript{33} Crucially, apart from raising funds for the liberation school, parents also had to organize the daily operations of the school, which was divided into three different buildings, thus making coordinating the different grades more difficult than having the entire student body in one single building. Finally, beyond organizing West Harlem Liberation School, parents and community activists continued picketing PS 125.\textsuperscript{34} Thus, organizing and running a school for any extended period of time was a very different endeavor than a ‘mere’ protest. As a result, trying to fulfill all of these different tasks on volunteer labor alone often led to chaotic scenes at the liberation school with children running around in the halls, and Sidney Jones, a spokesperson for the parents confessed that they “were not prepared to run this school for any length of time.”\textsuperscript{35}

In addition, for the parents, students, and activists, West Harlem Liberation School was only the beginning of a longer struggle. Even though they may not have achieved what they had initially demanded, they nevertheless raised awareness and showed the Board of Education what they were calling for: a self-determined, empowering education for Black students in Harlem. While the existence of West Harlem Liberation School was ultimately short-lived, beyond raising awareness among the board, parents, and the community, as well as increasing solidarity among

\textsuperscript{33} Slack, “We Won.”

\textsuperscript{34} Prager, “Parents.”

\textsuperscript{35} Hardman, “Chaos.”
community members, it can also be understood as a precursor for initiatives that followed. Preston Wilcox, the principal of the liberation school, for example, continued to be an active proponent for Black Power education after the school closed down. In 1968, he became the chairman of the National Association of Afro-American Educators (NAAAE), “a culturally radical national organization, [which] represent[ed] […] the first whole Black-initiated, wholly Black-implemented, wholly Black-controlled body in this country that ignores social class and ideological [sic] differences.” In his acceptance speech, he emphasized the importance of education for Black liberation: “we will not be deterred from our goal: the task of ensuring the fullest possible educational opportunities and attainments for Black people.” Thus the goal of the NAAAE was Black control of schools in Black communities. In 1969, the NAAAE created a program called “Blackening the Curriculum” and argued that the Black community needed independent Black educational institutions outside the public school system. Similarly, in the 1960s, the African-American Teachers’ Association (ATA), formerly known as Negro Teachers’ Association, was organized to raise awareness that education in New York City public schools was not concerned with the interest of the Black community.

36 Newspapers covered the liberation school from March 6-April 8, 1967.


38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

In the early days, ATA’s goals were to be in position to influence educational policy vis-à-vis the Black community. After a period of involvement, it became amazingly clear that nothing short of complete community control of schools would begin the foundation to educate, hence liberate, black people. [Their] philosophy emerged: Self-Control, Self-Determination, Self-Defense.42

Thus, similar to other activists and organizations in the late 1960s, the ATA was radicalized after realizing that only Black Power can contribute to meaningful change.

These projects reflect a more structured and long-term endeavor but are reminiscent of the approach West Harlem Liberation School pursued. Preston Wilcox argued himself that struggles over the control of IS 201, for example, were merely a precursor for Black nationalist movements:

The major oversight was the fact that little attention was focused on the incipient Black nationalist movement at IS 201 […] that challenged to [sic] well-known white racist assumptions: that white people are equipped to effectively educate Black youth, even though they have not been able to confront it (racism) in their own homes and that Black people are incapable [sic] of educating their own!43

Thus, even though integration and community control efforts as well as endeavors such as West Harlem Liberation School may not have achieved what they had demanded, they nevertheless sparked a radical sentiment in Black activists leading towards Black Power. Consequently, these efforts radicalized people and opened up new approaches to social change. Again, radical in this context refers to activists becoming unapologetically Black, demanding their rights as citizens, and embracing their heritage instead of seeking acceptance and respect from white people. Thus, the ideas and beliefs of activists involved in West Harlem Liberation School have become more radical, whereas their activities or their practical translation may not have been particularly


different from activists demanding desegregation. This distinction becomes apparent in a comparison between the *Harlem Nine* case and West Harlem Liberation School. While the *Harlem Nine* pursued similar activities like the activists involved in West Harlem Liberation School, their demands were less radical. The *Harlem Nine* demanded desegregation and better resources for their children attending public schools, whereas activists of West Harlem Liberation School requested more control, involvement in, and power over their children’s education. Last but not least, the example of West Harlem Liberation School highlights in which way Black Power ideas could be translated into reality. Yet, the school also highlights the compromises activists had to make in order to be true to their beliefs as much as possible.

Having only a limited amount of resources, time, and power, parents and community activists had to give up some of their convictions. Not being able to put pressure on the Board of Education for long enough, parents had to give up their demand for true involvement in the selection of a principal and curriculum, and had to accept the board’s vision of parent involvement after all. Thus, within the existing power structure, it was difficult to challenge the status quo exhaustively and implement Black Power ideas entirely. To what degree these ideas can be realized then depends on the context, individual people, and amount of power activists possess. Nevertheless, establishing a liberation school as an alternative to the public school system with the support of the community alone promoted self-sufficiency and self-determination, which are crucial Black Power ideas. Thus, these parents not only supported and pursued Black Power ideas in theory, but they also put those into practice.
Urban League Street Academies

While short-lived, West Harlem Liberation School represents a rather straightforward example of Black Power ideas and theory translated into practice. A more complex and contradictory case can be found in the form of the storefront or street academies. In this part of the chapter, I focus on the street academies that were founded and organized by the New York Urban League, a non-profit, non-partisan, multi-racial civil rights organization. Afterwards, I discuss West Side Street Academy, later renamed to the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE), which was founded in 1968 and specifically decided not to collaborate with the Urban League’s street academies.44 After introducing the ideas on which the street academies were based, I highlight the contradictions that they had to navigate from a Black Power perspective and contrast the Urban League Street Academies with the Academy for Black and Latin Education to emphasize these contradictions. I argue, however, that, despite these contradictions, the street academies and particularly the Academy for Black and Latin Education exemplify how aspects of Black Power ideas permeated these educational institutions and were actualized, shaped, and reshaped under the practical, institutional, political, and financial realities they operated.

A number of different street academies emerged in New York City during the height of the Black Power Movement. Some were involved in job training and setting up youths in local businesses, some offered formal academic training, some were engaged in streetwork and recreation, and some street academies were working on all of these issues. According to educator, scholar, and activist Joseph Featherstone, street academies were successful because they worked from the streets up: “First they established contact with students through

44 In some archival documents, ABLE is called Association for Black and Latin Education.
streetworkers and teachers and then adapted institutions to fit what grew out of this relationship. They were truly decentralized units, small, and with a fair amount of autonomy for teachers and workers.”45 While this may have been true for some of the academies and surely represented the ideal organizers had envisioned, looking at the academies more closely, the history becomes more complex.

In the late 1960s, the number of Black and Puerto Rican youths who became school dropouts was constantly increasing. In a fact sheet, the Urban League Street Academy program claimed that “[o]ver ½ of the youth of Harlem drop out of school and most of those who remain take non-academic courses.”46 In a proposal to the Board of Education, the Urban League also explained that “[i]n the New York City public high schools, sixty-five percent of all the black and Puerto Rican students who enter in the nineth [sic] grade drop out or are discharged by the end of the twelfth grade.”47 As a result, many young Black and Puerto Rican students turned to the streets since students, who had attended urban public schools before, realized “that the classes taught for the general diploma are essentially custodial in nature, that employers take a dim view of the diploma anyway, and that what is taught is not worth learning.”48 Against that background, in 1965, the New York Urban League Street Academies were founded by Dr. Susie Bryant, who later became the educational coordinator of the New York Urban League.49 The academies were


co-educational, non-sectarian, and not part of the public school system, thus representing an alternative to public schools. The academies were, however, not in competition with public schools, but cooperated with them and aimed at changing the public schools from outside the system. In addition to teachers, the Street Academy employed so-called streetworkers. Streetworkers were community members who had left public school without graduating themselves and would try to connect with other young people who had just dropped out of school in order to motivate these youths to complete their secondary education in one of the street academies.50 The basic idea of the street academy was to provide quality education and meaningful experiences to high school-aged youths who had been unable to complete high school within the public school system, the majority of students being Black and Puerto Rican. The academy intended to enable these youths to become responsible and independent citizens of society by supporting them to get off the streets through education. Translated into practice, this idea included courses on Black history and culture in order to spark interest and motivate students to learn.51

The Urban League Street Academy program grew rapidly and in the academic year of 1972 and 1973, for example, the academies had a staff of sixty full-time faculty and 650 full-time students. While the number of academies varied in different years, there were between six

49 According to the website of the New York Urban League (NYUL), the academies were founded in 1959. While a pamphlet of the NYUL Street Academy from 1972-73 stated that the academies were founded in 1965 by Dr. Susie Bryant, the pamphlet later stated that the academies were “functional” in 1965; “A ‘Reform School’ for Dropouts offers New Hope in Harlem,” Street Academy Clippings, Box 7, Folder 32, New York Urban League. Secretary of the Board of Directors records, 1957-1990, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.


51 Ibid.
and sixteen different street academies in New York City in operation at any one time.\textsuperscript{52} Students between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two were admitted to the academies and there was no entrance examination. Instead, students were met at their individual academic level. While all academies were organized and supported by the New York Urban League, each individual school had its own administrative leader so that local autonomy was rather high. Local autonomy also implied that, despite certain basic objectives, academies differed from each other as each community had different needs. As a result, while the curriculum included certain basics prevalent at all academies, each academy was flexible and able to offer courses and address topics relevant to their specific student body. Education in predominantly Black communities, therefore, focused on Black Studies. The education of the students was not restricted to the classroom, but went beyond, teaching the students that their social environment was their classroom as well. The school year lasted twelve months and the daily average in the academic year of 1972 and 1973 indicated an 84 percent attendance rate at an average day of six hours for each student. Students were required to earn sixteen credits in order to graduate, which usually took two years.\textsuperscript{53}

While not part of the public school system, the academy collaborated with public schools and other public institutions. Independent schools such as the Street Academy were well aware that the equivalent of a high school education alone would not enable students to be successful afterwards. Thus, the street academies offered several options on different levels. The basic level was the Street Academy—a storefront with ten to thirty students. Then, students could move on to the Academy of Transition. Finally, students would be recommended for one of the college

\textsuperscript{52} “1972-1973 Report Card of the Street Academy,” Street Academy Clippings, Box 7, Folder 32.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
preparatory schools—Newark Prep or Harlem Prep, after reaching eighth or ninth grade. Harlem Preparatory School, set up in Central Harlem, and Newark Preparatory School, a private school in New Jersey, were transitional institutions that provided an intensified and more formally organized and administered curriculum specifically designed to help graduates from the academy to apply and get into college. Later on, the academies created their own college preparatory wings and were consequently able to offer college preparation at their own academies. In addition, after taking classes at the Street Academy, students were also able to attend various public schools, such as Benjamin Franklin High School, which had special programs for ‘disadvantaged’ kids and offered assistance in applying to colleges. In 1967 and 1968, the collaboration between Benjamin Franklin High School and the street academies intensified and the institutions literally exchanged their students in the Benjamin Franklin-Urban League Project, funded by the Board of Education. If a student at Benjamin Franklin High School showed signs of dropping out of school, the student would be sent to a street academy. Once ‘restored,’ the student would transfer back to Benjamin Franklin High School. Further, the Street Academy collaborated with a number of universities and colleges in New York. This collaboration was not only supposed to provide scholarships, but it was also supposed to create innovative educational methods and material. As a goal, the Street Academy intended to improve the public school system from outside. Thus, the Street Academy saw itself as a sort of experiment or model for public schools geared towards specific student populations, and by

54 Featherstone, “Storefront Schools in Harlem,” 21-27.

working closely with educational experts at professional educational institutions in New York City, hoped to create educational innovations that could also be implemented into the public school system. Thus, similar to West Harlem Liberation School, the Street Academy wanted to show the Board of Education the kind of education that would work and that the community wanted, but presently did not have. West Harlem Liberation School, however, intended to put pressure on the Board of Education for immediate changes within the system and did not intend to run for a long time. The Street Academy, on the other hand, represented a supplemental approach, running parallel to the public school system in order to develop a model and ideas for the public school system to be incorporated eventually.

In 1972 and 1973, the Street Academy program of the Urban League was under review for accreditation by the New York State Department of Education. However, even though not formally certified at that time, various colleges and universities all over the country had already accepted graduates from the Street Academy. Additionally, the academies also organized internships both in New York City and beyond since practical experience outside of the classroom was seen as just as essential as the accumulation of academic content knowledge. Internships included academic orientations and were supposed to complement learning activities that took place in the classroom. Afterwards, students were required to attend seminars, lectures, and courses in order to reflect on the internship and experiences they had gained. Finally, while the street academies were also able to provide students with opportunities for vocational education through their collaboration with various businesses in the community, their initial focus was on academic education since, historically, Black and Puerto Rican students had been directed towards vocational instead of academic education.\textsuperscript{56} The Urban League director said that
[t]he tragedy of most programs existing today is that they want to job-retrain everybody. Job-retraining programs have their places, obviously, but a lot of teenagers are being thrown into these programs when they have the ability for higher education. Our premise is that 70 per cent of the teenagers that live in deprived areas have the capacity to go to junior college or college. When our society can devise a method to see this happen, the cycle of poverty will be snapped.57

Streetworker Oostdyke added that they “are trying […] to bring together the self-respect of the black nationalists, the diligence of the bourgeoisie and the soul of the streets.”58 The Street Academy thus consciously worked against the trajectory of Black students towards vocational education and empowered Black and Puerto Rican students to embrace their background, develop pride and confidence in themselves, and ultimately pursue academic careers.

Thus, success for the Urban League Street Academy meant getting students off the streets and helping them acquire academic skills that would allow them to navigate the public school system and eventually attend college. In addition, the aim of the Street Academy was also to fight poverty and they were convinced that a different educational system alone could contribute to a more just society. In 1966, a year after the Street Academies were founded, they could already claim success in their endeavors. The director of the Urban League, Dr. Eugene Callender, talking about Street Academy students, stated that “[t]oday, […] 17 of them are in college and the rest are in junior college. Please remember that these guys are products of the Harlem streets. And they are now mature and serious and are wielding a tremendous influence on


58 Ibid.
In addition, while the pilot group started with about twenty-three students in 1965, only a year later, in the summer of 1966, more than 400 students were served by the street academies. Ultimately, by the academic year 1972 and 1973 “[t]he Street Academy [could] proudly point to some 421 graduates of its program that [were] involved in programs of higher education. Also, there [were] […] 500 graduates participating in career-oriented jobs or training.”

The way students were portrayed and ultimately treated matters tremendously. In an article, street academy director Dave Walker and teacher Dallas Garvin argued that every child wants to learn, but

unless a student can find validation of his desire (desire born out of a just dawning respect for himself, his intelligence, his authority figures); unless he can find, both in school and the rest of the world, the meaning and value of his education, the end in sight, then the natural struggle and rebellion necessary to growth becomes and remains infantile. Unless alternatives are provided him when and where he needs them, what is taught him, his mind rejects as meaningless. His intelligence suffocates in the stagment [sic] air of disease and finally dies in a morass of pride-hurting, death dealing vices.

In other words, in order for students to succeed in life, they need to see a purpose in their education and they need mentors who not only challenge, but also support, appreciate, and validate their work. Thus, students need an environment in which they can grow. One street academy student, who had dropped out of Benjamin Franklin High School before, explained that

what he liked most about the teachers [at the academies] was that they asked things of you, even homework. He was scornful of school, where the teachers


were always trying to make deals with the kids, where you could study or not, just so long as you didn’t make trouble. […] He was proud of the fact that his studies here were academic, college preparatory.  

This statement emphasizes again that students generally want to learn and be challenged, but the public school system had failed many of them. It also shows how important it is to appreciate each student and believe that he or she is capable and worthy of mastering a comprehensive, academic training. Expressing such respect and trust in the students alone contributed to the self-respect and pride of the students. Harv Oostdyke, one of the streetworkers, explained that “[t]hese kids studied 10 hours a day. […] They really wanted to make it.”

Vernon Douglas, another streetworker, also emphasized that the focus on vocational education or making deals instead of providing rigorous education for Black and Puerto Rican students in public schools, is what had failed these students. Consequently, Black and Puerto Rican students needed a space and the support to develop a pride of their heritage; they also needed the opportunity to believe in themselves in order to see meaning in their education and consequently excel. Similarly, in order to develop pride and self-respect, the curriculum and the educational content were just as essential. For education to be meaningful, students needed to be able to identify with the content. The street academies overall were able to provide a space for students in which they could embrace their cultural background and succeed in their educational endeavors.

While the Urban League Street Academy program presented itself as empowering and successful, its rhetoric, assumptions, and programming were also rife with contradictions, as

already exemplified in the previously included quote by the director of the Urban League, Dr. Eugene Callender, who, talking about Street Academy students, stated that “[t]oday, […] 17 of them are in college and the rest are in junior college. Please remember that these guys are products of the Harlem streets. And they are now mature and serious and are wielding a tremendous influence on the dropouts they’ve left behind.”

Calling the students at the academy “products of the Harlem streets” not only objectifies students as “products”—thereby erasing their agency—but, more importantly, it also implies that students needed to be rehabilitated from their cultural “Harlem” background. Describing the students as “mature” and “serious” once they have graduated necessarily frames them as having been immature before they attended the academy and implicitly blames the students for not finishing their education at a public school. This attitude reflects unawareness or even ignorance of the challenges Black and Puerto Rican students had to face and the different reasons why students may have dropped out of public schools. Instead of criticizing barriers in the public school systems, this quote ultimately portrays the students as deficient.

While the academies pursued Black Power ideas like cultural pride through their curriculum, they interpreted this concept in very specific and narrow ways. First, Black cultural pride was employed as a means of connecting students to education rather than an end in itself or a tool for challenging injustice and inequality more broadly. Second, Black Power ideas were interpreted in an individualistic way as the academies focused on the success of the individual student rather than the uplift of the entire Black community. Thus, an analysis of systemic inequality and oppression was not part of the curriculum. Consequently, instead of questioning and changing this system to embrace Blackness, students learned to navigate the existing system.

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in order to live successful lives. Ultimately, the goal of the Urban League Street Academies was not to contribute to social change and justice for the entire community, but to educational change. In other words, although drawing on Black Power ideas and rhetoric, the academies did not intend to liberate students but to rehabilitate them. While the academies implicitly criticized the public school system for not serving their children, by trying to rehabilitate Black students, the academies ultimately reinforced the narrative of Black students as “problem” students and contributed to the continued stigmatization of Black students. Thus, the academies provided a model for public schools for how to change schools in order to deal with “problem” students.

While the Urban League Street Academies incorporated several basic Black Power ideas, the degree to which these ideas were translated into practice and expanded depended on the specific academy and its teachers, streetworkers, and students. In addition, several other street academies beyond the ones organized and run by the New York Urban League emerged in the late 1960s in New York City. Oftentimes, these academies were influenced by the New York Urban League’s Street Academies and sometimes even collaborated or overlapped with the Street Academies of the Urban League. One of those street academies was West Side Street Academy, which later became the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE). Before West Side Street Academy was established, the Urban League also ran a Street Academy on the Upper West Side. While short-lived, the Urban League’s Street Academy on the Upper West Side was very successful in achieving their purpose and brought more than 250 former dropouts back into educational programs and prepared them for college. Despite this success, the Urban League Street Academy on the Upper West Side only lasted for one summer in 1967 due to lack of

\[66\] For a discussion of the distinction between ‘rehabilitating’ and ‘liberating’ students, see Rickford, We Are an African People, 249.
funding. Since the community saw the success and the value of the street academy, community members initiated a full-time academy; thus, West Side Street Academy was founded in 1968.

While West Side Street Academy was inspired by the Urban League’s academies and the founders of West Side Street Academy discussed and developed the idea of the academy with the Urban League, West Side Street Academy deliberately decided not to let the Urban League organize the school because local community control was seen as essential for the community in this neighborhood. Another reason for organizers of the new academy to create a street academy independently in and with the community in Harlem themselves might have been the fact that the Street Academies of the New York Urban League received funding from various corporations such as Burlington Industries, IBM, and Union Carbide. This collaboration not only allowed the Urban League Street Academies to expand to different places in New York City and spread their educational philosophy more broadly, but it also enabled them to provide education to students without requiring tuition fees. However, the financial dependency on corporations restricted the academies in their educational freedom and required them to incorporate corporations in their educational decision-making processes. Thus, both the idea of local autonomy and financial independence led to the founding of West Side Street Academy independent from the New York Urban League.


West Side Street Academy and Academy for Black and Latin Education

In response to the same issues—such as the increasing dropout rate of students—that led to the founding of the Urban League Street Academies, in 1968, several young white professionals from the Upper West Side founded West Side Street Academy. Initially, they pursued similar goals as well: to interrupt the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency and offer meaningful alternatives in order to support individuals to become independent and self-sufficient community members.

Starting in April 1968, about thirty volunteers from the community met on a regular basis to develop and work on the Street Academy project. Most members of the founding committee were young, white, and middle-class—the idea of white people to organize an educational initiative for Black and Puerto Rican students in order to provide an alternative to the public school system that had failed these students seemed contradictory. Being aware of this contradiction, however, this academy, while initiated by white people, was organized, controlled, and executed by Black people in the neighborhood. Organizers themselves argued that

[though the original impetus came from whites, it was realized that the effectiveness of the program was dependent upon black and Spanish members of the community running the program to meet the needs of their community. It was felt that if the program was to be truly for the community it must in a very real sense be of the community.]

Thus, both the director and the first streetworker at the Street Academy were Black members of the community. Discussions and frictions between Black and white members in the weekly meetings of the planning committee highlight how important it was for the Street Academy to have Black members to organize and control the school as they could relate to the students’ needs

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better. Some disagreements between Black and white members revolved around curriculum and the content that should be taught. For example, a white member suggested including William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in the Street Academy’s curriculum. Published in 1967, the novel tells a version of the slave revolt in Virginia in 1831 and was criticized by many Black people for distorting this history. In reaction to Styron’s novel Black intellectuals, like Ekwueme Michael Thelwell or Vincent Harding, for example, responded in an edited volume by John Henrik Clarke criticizing Styron’s representation of Nat Turner. They argued that Styron portrayed Turner as a coward and prone to sexual assault of white women and thus reinforced a stereotypical picture of Black men. The Black streetworker at West Side Street Academy, Vernon Douglas, opposed the suggestion to include this book in the curriculum for similar reasons, arguing that the book misrepresented Nat Turner and the history surrounding him. He argued that the purpose of the academy should be to challenge these stereotypes and to teach Black and Puerto Rican children a different history. Douglas argued that this book and the white member’s opinion

[...] characterized the whole reason we need a street academy. That book makes Turner a slut, a pimp, a homosexual, everything you can name. And that’s what black kids will think of black heros [sic] like Turner, unless we teach them differently.

Similarly, another white member of the planning committee suggested that the curriculum at the Street Academy should include more vocational subjects in order to get more financial support from companies in the community. Again, a Black member of the committee had to educate

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white members that this is what historically has happened to Black and Puerto Rican students—they end up in vocational programs instead of receiving rigorous academic education, automatically restricting their opportunities and reinforcing their second-class citizen status. The Black member of the committee thus insisted on the academy’s fundamental goals and had to push back and remind the planning committee that this was not what the Street Academy was all about and this was not what the community wanted. Otherwise, the curriculum would not be any different from what was taught in public schools.72

These frictions highlight the importance of the Street Academy as an alternative to the public school system. As Vernon Douglas argued, the curriculum of the public school system reinforced negative stereotypes about Black and Puerto Rican people and steered Black and Puerto Rican youths towards vocational training and away from academic education. Instead, the Street Academy was supposed to pursue a different approach and offer students both academic and professional training. The conflicts and opposing assumptions about the curriculum of the Street Academy also highlight the importance of white and non-white members of the community working together and learning from each other. Black activists, however, did not try to change the “hearts and minds” of white people to accept and integrate or rather assimilate Black people into their community, but in the era of Black Power, these educational activists insisted on the acknowledgment of their expertise on the topic and to be heard.73 This example then highlighted the importance of Black community members running the academy and actually


having (Black) power rather than merely including Black people as tokenism in yet another white-controlled institution.

From October 11, 1968 on, West Side Street Academy opened its doors on a daily basis from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. in a storefront on 109 West 104th Street to twenty-five students in the pilot group of the academy. From 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., classes were offered to youth who had dropped out of public school. In the evenings, tutoring was offered to adults or younger children. The academy was situated in a storefront since a storefront was perceived as being a visible and accessible part of the community. A weekly meeting of volunteers, open to the community, was supposed to encourage a wider involvement of community members in the Street Academy program. As a result, on Monday nights, the academy organized meetings with all members and interested people from the community to discuss the academy’s activities, philosophies, and approaches: what went well, what needed change or improvement, what was the role of the community, and what did the involvement of the community look like. Since community members who were not directly involved in the Street Academy on a daily basis were able to express their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions, the program was automatically evaluated, adjusted, and improved regularly. Including the broader community in the academy’s affairs also guaranteed that it was a truly community-based endeavor and not merely another isolated educational institution influenced by either public school officials or corporations. In contrast to the case of PS 180 described in Chapter II, in which school officials expected the community to be involved in a new project on the school’s terms, the Street Academy allowed community members to actually take ownership of this community endeavor on a voluntary basis and on the community’s own terms.
Similar to the Urban League Street Academies, West Side Street Academy also collaborated with transitional and preparatory institutions in order to support students to attend college. The academy therefore worked with Newark Prep and Harlem Prep, but also with public schools like Benjamin Franklin High School and Charles Evans Hughes High School. In addition to academic cooperations, the academy also collaborated with local businesses which offered students part-time jobs and training programs. This allowed students to work and get an education at the same time, rather than have a full-time job and quit education altogether. In case students decided not to go to college but to pursue a business career, the street academy would accommodate the students’ interests as well. Part of the salary for the students would be paid by the Street Academy and the rest would be provided by the business. In some cases, students who attended the program on a regular basis would then be offered a job in the Street Academy, tutoring adults or younger children. Thus, the students would be both student and teacher and, as a result, would develop a sense of responsibility not just for themselves, but also for others and the community in general.

While West Side Street Academy started off very similar to the Urban League Street Academies, this particular academy transformed quickly into a true communal effort, pursuing more radical ideas that drew on Black Power more clearly. In 1969, West Side Street Academy was renamed Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE) and moved from its storefront on 104th Street to 73 West 105th Street. The new name emphasized the focus of the academy more than the initial name had and explicitly embraced the students’ Black and Puerto Rican identities. The name change would also more clearly distance this particular academy from the New York

Urban League Street Academy program, which was funded by corporations and worked closely with the Board of Education. This development reflects the constant radicalization of the academy and its move towards Black Power. While the academy was initially founded by white middle-class people on the Upper West Side, the academy was run and controlled by Black people. Instead of success of individual students, ABLE focused on community support and collaboration for social change rather than educational change alone.

Consequently, local autonomy was crucial to the academy. Independence from large corporations as well as the Board of Education, however, also meant dependence on the community. In one of their first pamphlets, introducing the program, the street academy explained that it would have to rely on community businesses and philanthropic organizations to support the academy financially. Since the street academy understood itself as a communal experiment, it appreciated constant feedback and advice from those involved in the program—both academic and professional advice. Additionally, the street academy also welcomed innovative educational material, methods, and technology provided by colleges, universities, or businesses to be tested and evaluated by the students in order to find a way to provide meaningful and relevant education, particularly for those students who had been distanced by traditional education.\(^75\)

Overall, the street academy was a communal project in which the entire community was involved and which could thrive only if the entire community participated in and supported the academy. For example, during the summers, the academy organized concerts in Frederick Douglass Park between 102nd Street and Amsterdam Avenue, encouraging the community not only to donate money but also to attend the coordinating meeting and get involved either as

\(^{75}\) West Side Street Academy, 1968, 1970, Box 55, Folder 5, Subseries 11.2.
artists or coordinating members for these events. Activists and organizers emphasized the academy’s benefits for the community and explained that donations would ultimately contribute to the community’s—not just the academy’s—progress. By funding their own education, the community would eventually become self-determined and self-sufficient. This approach again echoed Cleaver’s argument that the struggle for true freedom for Black people can only be successful if the struggle is fought together by the entire community and if the struggle is not compartmentalized.

While the academy asked the community to become involved in educational matters, the academy also realized that it, too, had to become involved in broader community issues. As a result, communal responsibility and collaboration went far beyond education, and the academy worked together with other community organizations in Harlem to improve conditions in the community. In 1970, for example, in response to the death of Walter Vandermeer, a twelve-year-old Harlem resident who had died due to drugs, the Academy for Black and Latin Education cooperated with St. Luke’s Hospital Center and the community organization “Mothers Against Drugs” (MAD) in order to work against the lack of facilities for the treatment of adolescent drug users in New York City. Thus, these community organizations together with the hospital developed an experimental plan which called for decisive input of medical and community resources for the treatment of young drug users. This endeavor illustrates the aim of the academy and other community organizations to fight for their community’s interests and needs.

While Public School 180 (PS 180), discussed in Chapter II, also worked with hospitals and particularly their psychological units, the collaboration between the academy and St. Luke’s Hospital differed tremendously from the one between PS 180 and Harlem hospitals. For

76 West Side Street Academy, 1968, 1970, Box 55, Folder 5, Subseries 11.2.
example, PS 180’s cooperation with the hospitals’ psychological units reinforced the idea that Black children and their cultural background were problems that need to be cured through psychological treatment in order for them to assimilate into school specifically and society more broadly. In the case of PS 180, the decision to work with hospitals did not come from the parents, students, or the community more broadly, but was decided by school officials. Finally, by working together with hospitals, PS 180 created a problem in the first place and reinforced the pathologizing of Black children. The collaboration between ABLE and St. Luke’s Hospital, on the other hand, was a true communal endeavor and a response to an actual problem in Harlem. Last but not least, instead of reinforcing stereotypes about Black students, this cooperation rather highlighted that the lives of Black students mattered and that they needed support in order to fight drugs. In contrast to the War on Drugs, for example, the community endeavor did not criminalize those who were addicted, but sought to address drug addiction as a medical issue rather than one of criminal activity.

In order for the academy to meet its goals and ideals, it was crucial that teachers and streetworkers were open to innovative approaches and committed to meaningful education as well as social change. Related to that, it was important that teachers and streetworkers came from the same neighborhood as their students and were part of the community themselves. As a result, the interactions between teachers and students were not only limited to the classroom but went beyond that. Dave Walker, for example, who was the director at West Side Street Academy in 1968, was former assistant director of Frederick Douglass Community Center and had lived in this community for the past seven years prior to working at the academy. Similarly, Vernon

77 Dave Walker was the director at West Side Street Academy. When the academy was renamed to Academy for Black and Latin Education, it seems like his position was renamed to coordinator. This change of title might
Douglas, one of the streetworkers, had lived in this community and had attended Public School 163 and Junior High School 54. He himself had had some experiences with drugs in the past. By working at the street academy, he wanted to give back to this community and help others who might become or who were already involved with drugs. As a result, Douglas automatically represented a role model to the students who felt they could get support from the academy beyond school issues and beyond (academic) subject-matter. Since the academy pursued a holistic approach of education, they viewed their students as human beings who made mistakes, but who can learn and change. Consequently, teachers and streetworkers at the academy understood that their students did not live in a vacuum either, but were part of a society with a particular power structure. Thus, the academy did not blame students for dropping out of school, but supported them in navigating their lives and thus gave students another chance. In response, students who benefitted from the street academy were also expected to pass on their knowledge and support their community with their acquired skills, instead of leaving the community in order to achieve individual success. In an initial proposal, academy organizers elaborated on their expectations of the students and explained that students’ responsibilities may involve helping to define and move towards solutions of neighborhood problems in health, housing and employment. While at the Academy it may involve tutoring younger children and parents in the community. While in college it may involve tutoring others in the Academy, wether during the school year or in summer programs. It is hoped that eventually the student will return to the community to teach or to become involved in a local business.

78 West Side Street Academy, 1968, 1970, Box 55, Folder 5, Subseries 11.2.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.

speak to the structural change of the academy. Coordinator sounds less hierarchical than director and fits into the development of West Side Street Academy towards the Academy for Black and Latin Education.
This approach reflects the academy’s purpose of contributing to social justice for the entire community rather than the academic success of a single student through education.

Classes at the academy consisted of small group discussions rather than lectures by the teacher, and the curriculum included relevant and meaningful content for the students attending the academy. Basic knowledge in English, math, science, history, and social studies formed the core of the curriculum, but all centrally incorporated Black and Latinx culture. This approach highlighted that teaching a basic core curriculum from a Black or Latinx perspective does not contradict itself, but that crucial knowledge can be taught from different perspectives. In addition, ABLE emphasized that meaningful and relevant classes in, for example, Black history and literature would be significant in order to create a sense of pride in the students and to recognize the value of education. ABLE ultimately criticized the lack of this history and a focus on a white mainstream perspective in public school curricula. Art and culture were just as important to the academy as a way to develop pride in the students and to unlearn thinking of themselves as inferior, something they had learned in public schools and society, as one of the teachers argued in ABLE’s official newsletter:

Not only do our students learn artistic appreciation but also ‘Revolutionary’ ideas such as black pride, and appreciation of Black Art and Culture. We have been successful in the fact many students have been registered, but we find that it is a difficult task changing some of the detrimental ideas which Black and Latin students seem to acquire living under this exploitive system.\(^8^1\)

An example of such detrimental, stigmatized, and racist ideas that students learned in public schools was reflected in PS 180’s Language Development Program, discussed in Chapter II, which taught Black and Puerto Rican students that their language and their culture needed

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improvement or correction. Thus, embracing Black art and culture at ABLE aimed at unlearning these stigmatized attitudes students were confronted with at public schools. The idea behind providing meaningful education and adjusting the curriculum according to their students was that students would not only want to learn and develop self-pride, but they would also acquire the skills they needed to become independent and self-sufficient individuals within a self-defined and self-reliant community.

Students also pursued research projects on their own neighborhood and background in order to understand broader structural conditions that influenced their lives. One of the students explained in “Sting,” the official newsletter of ABLE that

[thanks to A.B.L.E. we are now learning to make Math, English, Black History and Puerto Rican History classes, they have introduced us to a meaningful education that will someday help our Black and Puerto Rican people. Here at A.B.L.E. they have made us aware of our environment, its social make-up and its need for progress. Through our Community Research Program held at A.B.L.E., we have gathered an insight on the neighborhood’s social and economic problems and how they influence the lives of the people. We, the student body of A.B.L.E., hope that by our work with the community, we will make the people within the vicinity change their outlook of it, just as A.B.L.E. has made us change our outlook by not putting the blame on one another but on the society that oppresses us.

This quote emphasizes the political approach to education at the academy and highlights that education went beyond content-knowledge. While self-respect and pride in one’s heritage were important aspects that the Urban League Street Academies fostered as well, the emphasis there was not on collective action and social change. In other words, while the Urban League Street Academies focused on individual student success and educational change, ABLE concentrated on the importance of community, solidarity, and ultimately social change.

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In this quote, the student used the pronoun “we” rather than “I” and displayed an activist outlook in arguing that the education at the academy did not only have value for the individual student, but that quality education would eventually support the entire community by developing knowledge of and pride in the community’s history and its struggle for justice. Thus, students at ABLE realized that their own education was part of a collective struggle for social justice. They did not attend the academy only to succeed individually, but to uplift the entire community and to fight for a better future for all. This approach to education then also empowered students and helped them to realize that they had the power to change conditions in their community themselves. This particular student argued that they would pass on their knowledge to their community and highlight that they were fighting a collective struggle in order for the community to develop a sense of solidarity; thus, this student reflects a sense of responsibility towards the community.

In addition, this student discussed the relevance of Black and Puerto Rican community members and their histories, highlighting the influence and importance of Black Power ideas and principles on other oppressed groups. The student’s quote reflects the Black Power principle of collaboration and solidarity among people rather than separation. The awareness that the students’ community was more diverse and included different groups of oppressed people who fought similar struggles and were influenced by Black Power ideas was expressed in the fact that Sting, ABLE’s newsletter, was published in both English and Spanish. By providing bilingual information about the schools’ activities and the students’ convictions and thoughts, the school was able to reach a broader range of people and showed a commitment of inclusion and solidarity.
Another student at ABLE explained that it was not true that Black and Puerto Rican students did not want to learn and were “problem” students, but that the content and purpose of, approach to, and relevance of education to their individual and collective situation were crucial for students to be motivated to learn:

\[\text{[a]t ABLE I learned that education isn’t bad, only the method in which it is sometimes taught. The staff at ABLE have devised a way of making you want the teaching it has available. They do not follow the system’s way of “want it or not—you’re going to get it,” a way which has failed so many times. ABLE taught me that for the Black man to get out of his oppression he must learn why, how, and when his oppression started. He must learn the ways of his oppressor and study them to perfection. He must then learn of other oppressed people and study why and by whom they are being oppressed. ABLE teaches you these things and tries to give you the desire to investigate them further. I learned and believe that when Black people are strongly united the bond of oppression will be no more. The Black teachings of ABLE are deep and very serious. What ABLE teaches, you may learn in books, but the feeling comes only when felt. I learned of the patience it takes to get some things done. While working with young Black brothers and sisters, I saw that with patience we can give them enough wisdom and knowledge to be a ‘really united people.’}^{83}\]

Thus, this quote highlights that the academy enabled students to develop an analysis of systemic oppression and to understand the history and the relationship of oppression and power. In addition, students not only learned to define and name their oppressors, but they also realized that in order to recognize, dismantle, and ultimately fight oppression, they needed to understand strategies of oppression. Both students argued for the importance of solidarity among different groups of oppressed people. Thus, ABLE taught students that the struggle for true liberation was not an individual endeavor and not achieved by individual success, but only by meaningful change for all. Thus, students not only adopted a sense of responsibility for themselves, their peers, and their community, but also for other oppressed communities, and they realized the importance of coalition-building for positive social change. Because this knowledge was so

relevant for students, they were motivated to continue studying. In other words, ABLE gave these students a purpose and a goal for their education—a purpose bigger than mere academic and economic success for themselves, but the goal to contribute to liberation and independence of those oppressed in society. Thus, true success for ABLE did not equal academic achievement, but rather community empowerment and bringing the community together.

*Intersections, Similarities, and Differences*

The history of the various street academies highlights the complexity of Black Power ideas and the translation of those ideas into practice. At first sight, the Urban League Street Academies seem to be contradictory to Black Power: These academies pursued the idea of remedial education for Black and Puerto Rican students, intending for them to get back into the public school system and continue their education within a system that had failed them before. This approach, at least in part, reinforces the assumption that Black and Puerto Rican students are unable to navigate the public school system due to their cultural background. Programs like the street academies, therefore, seem to ‘cure’ the students and help them fit into the system instead of challenging and changing the system according to the needs of the students. However, the content, the curriculum, and the methods of street academies were not only supposed to be remedial but also empowering. The focus on education that would be relevant and meaningful for the students would not remedy the students’ Black and Puerto Rican cultural background and help them to assimilate into a white system. Instead, it would empower Black and Puerto Rican students to embrace their heritage and their history, thus developing a Black or Puerto Rican identity that would help them navigate the oppressive system in which they were living. Beyond that, students were also empowered to embrace self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and Black pride.
The degree to which the academies either empowered or remedied the students, however, depended on the specific academy.

While the academies tried to get students into colleges and consequently become successful within the existing system, the idea was nevertheless that former students would return to the community and support the neighborhood and the academies contributing to a community that would eventually be self-sufficient. Despite these Black Power ideas that were present at the street academies, there are also several indications that this practical translation of Black Power theory was contradictory in many aspects. While educators at the street academies were supposed to uplift and empower Black and Puerto Rican students, the same educators oftentimes also seemed to have brought ideas of pathological Black culture into the schools. The language that was used in several of the archival documents highlights that many educators at the street academies were socialized in a ‘colonial’ education system or society more broadly themselves. In their proposal to the Board of Education, for example, the street academies argued that many Black students dropped out of school because they were “unable to respond to the normal Board of Education curriculum.”84 This statement not only reinforced the idea that the mainstream public school curriculum was the norm, but it also implied that the problem lay with the students, not with the curriculum. This statement then either pointed to the strategy of de-radicalizing the academies’ rhetoric in order to appease the Board of Education or it reflected that some of these educators and organizers would have had to unlearn their racist ideas themselves in order to help students unlearn theirs as well.

While West Side Street Academy (later renamed ABLE) and the street academies of the Urban League were influenced by each other, shared a similar name, and initially pursued similar goals, they were nevertheless different in several aspects. The New York Urban League Street Academy program was organized by the Urban League, operated in several different neighborhoods all over New York City, and was funded by various corporations. West Side Street Academy, on the other hand, was a single school, located in Harlem, thereby focused more on a communal approach. While the academy was initiated by white people, it was mainly organized and run by Black people from the community. Within a year of its founding, West Side Street Academy was renamed to the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE), giving the academy an entirely different identity—the focus shifted away from the West Side to Black and Latinx education and thus to the people the academy was actually serving. ABLE was mainly funded and supported by the community through volunteers, philanthropists, fundraising activities within the community, and some local businesses. In contrast to the street academies of the New York Urban League, ABLE did not collaborate with corporations such as American Airlines or IBM. This allowed ABLE to be a community project and truly independent. While the collaboration with corporations allowed the street academies of the Urban League to be more financially stable, it also brought a lot of responsibilities and dependencies. The influence of the corporations was obvious and visible in the name of the respective academies. The street academy on 8th Avenue in Manhattan, for example, was the “IBM Academy,” the name of the one on Fulton Street in Brooklyn was “American Express Academy,” whereas the one on East 149th Street in the Bronx was called “American Airlines Academy.”

were several incidents in which corporations requested more involvement in the academies or did not entirely support the academies’ approaches. In his report on the “Pan American Street Academy,” for example, the director of the Urban League Street Academies argued that he feel[s] that the Pan American Corporation has not given its full cooperation to the Street Academy Administration. It has been a very difficult job pulling the pieces together because of undue interference from Pan American Corporation in regards to the functioning of the Street Academy Administration in its relationship to the staff of the Pan American Street Academy.\(^86\)

Thus, conflicts between teachers and corporations and consequently between corporations and the administration of the academies arose. Further, despite their collaboration with corporations, the academies still had to worry about financial issues and the continuation of the street academies. The Urban League had to apply for grants from the corporations on a regular basis, and depending on the corporations’ continued ability and willingness to fund these initiatives, the street academies had to face the danger of closing anytime. In another report, the director of the academies described the precarious state of the “American Express Street Academy” when he explained that

\[\text{the American Express Company decided to withdraw from the Street Academy Program and channel their monies into another worthy program, The Veterans Program. Their change in priorities left a void in the Street Academy Program that has yet to be filled. American Express did, however, plan a systematic phase-out process. The American Express Street Academy is presently being carried by the New York Urban League. This support will end at any time due to the lack of funds in the New York Urban League budget. We are presently in search of a sponsor that will assume the operational costs of this Academy. The Street Academy Program has only two Academies in Brooklyn and the loss of this Academy would be extremely detrimental to the Program as a whole, in that the student population now served by this Academy would no longer be served.}\]\(^87\)

\(^{86}\) “Director’s Report on Chase Manhattan Street Academy,” Street Academy, Box 7, Folder 38,

\(^{87}\) Ibid.
The street academies incorporated some Black Power ideas, but they also highlight the contradictions and internal struggles of translating Black Power ideas into practice. It is true that the various street academies of the Urban League differed tremendously in their ideas and approaches, depending on the specific neighborhood, teachers, streetworkers, and students. However, they generally seemed to be less obviously pursuing radical Black Power ideas. While ABLE was more radical and able to pursue its ideas in a practical matter, the Urban League Street Academies had to make various compromises due to their dependency on other organizations as well as corporations. Their collaboration with and dependency on corporations may explain their rhetoric being less radical than the one apparent in documents on ABLE. It is also possible that the Urban League Street Academies may have had less radical convictions—either way, the case of the Urban League Street Academies highlights the difficulty and the balancing act of translating Black Power ideas into practice. In his analysis of the Urban League Street Academies, educator and activist Joseph Featherstone also pointed out that the situation of the street academies can be very contradictory at times. He explained that one of the teachers he had interviewed in the 1960s said that

“I try to teach self-help and not a lot of crap about a revolution that isn’t going to happen.” Others regarded themselves as black revolutionaries in some sense. Joking, [Featherstone] asked one how it felt to be a revolutionary working for the Urban League. He answered, seriously, that he does worry that the program might just be the system putting its best foot forward. It was basically individualistic, and although everybody hoped some of the kids would return later to work in the ghetto, it was hard to be confident they would, hard not to suspect it was taking leadership out of Harlem.88

This quote highlights the difference between the Urban League Street Academies and ABLE very well. The teacher of the Urban League Street Academy explained that education at the academy

ultimately supported the success of individual students instead of uplifting the entire community. Worse even, the teacher explained that the street academies may even contribute to the loss of leadership in Harlem. Looking back at the testimonies of the students who attended ABLE, the small and local academy was more explicit in highlighting the importance of the community and the students’ responsibility towards the community. Thus, the example of the street academies raises the question of to what degree can a Black Power project or initiative be entirely true to its ideals while being part of an oppressive society. Historian Derrick White confirmed this assumption and argued that “[t]he hard work of institution building revealed key inconsistencies between ideology and praxis. […] The implementation of independent schools revealed varying interpretations of self-determination, none of which were totally cohesive.”

Thus, the constant struggle for funding and the different interpretations and practical realizations of Black Power ideas highlight the complexity of Black Power and explain the sometimes contradictory and contentious practical implications. These contradictions, however, help us to better understand Black Power. They highlight the constraints activists had to deal with and reflect the context in which Black Power ideas were supposed to be implemented. Thus academies had to balance their ideas and goals with the resources they had. It was crucial for ABLE to distance itself from the New York Urban League Street Academies and particularly the corporations that funded those academies. While ABLE focused on the specific needs and individuals in their local community, the New York Urban League Street Academies developed into a complex corporate endeavor with numerous different academies all over New York City. This not only led to many different local administrations and subsequent miscommunication, but also to conflicts between teachers.

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and corporations and the struggle for power over educational decision-making. Featherstone explained that these conflicts were inevitable because the street academy program stands in direct contrast to the kind of grandiose institutional engineering the foundations like to sponsor in the name of “fundamental change.” It runs counter to the ethos of both schools and large corporations in this country. The price of involvement with the schools and corporations may in the end prove too high. As the emphasis of the program shifts, there will be difficulty maintaining the present assortment of people. Already one academy was closed because its director was thought too extreme [...]. The program needs to be as various as the streets, and yet it is hard to envision a number of the militant streetworkers I talked to toeing a line chalked by the city schools, just as it is hard to believe that many corporate officials would be pleased by the tone of many of the discussions I heard.

Thus, this quote highlights once again how complex Black Power thoughts are and how contradictory their practical implementation can be. Featherstone argued that the Urban League Street Academies could not stay true to their ideas because their ideas were per se contrary to the purposes and goals of the corporations that funded them. In other words, activists tried to include Black Power ideas in a society that was particularly opposed to Black Power. As a result, activists either had to give up the collaboration with corporations or give up their ideas.

Although the different educational initiatives discussed in this chapter emerged in the same time period and were, broadly speaking, designed to address similar shortcomings identified about the public school system, their differences in specific goals, approaches, and trajectories are striking. Insofar as these schools were influenced by and drew on Black Power ideas, the translation into practice of these concepts highlights the diversity, complexity, and sometimes contradictions of both Black Power theory and practice. Especially given the

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91 Featherstone, “Storefront Schools in Harlem,” 27.
constraints activists faced while trying to put into practice their thoughts, ideas, and convictions, certain ideas were emphasized—and others let go of—or adapted, interpreted, and reinterpreted in distinct ways.

While not directly tied to Black Power organizations, the educational initiatives discussed herein share central characteristics, ideas, and goals with the schools discussed in Chapter III and consequently reflect Black Power aspects. Although not identifying as or using the language of Pan-African nationalist schools, for instance, they still drew on themes of cultural Black nationhood and sought to establish a united and supportive Black peoplehood within their community. The names ‘Liberation School’ and ‘Academy for Black and Latin Education’ directly reflect basic Black Power ideas in stressing Black cultural pride and ultimately envisioning themselves as a contribution to Black liberation. The development of cultural pride was crucial for West Harlem Liberation School and the Academy for Black and Latin Education, which they emphasized in the inclusion of Black Studies and their own communal struggle and achievements in the curriculum. While individual teachers or streetworkers at the Urban League Street Academies emphasized the importance of cultural pride as well and even identified the academies’ ideology with Black nationalism, this aspect was often pursued more implicitly than explicitly.

These educational initiatives tried to change the public school system from the outside and attempted to create models for what they were looking for in the education system overall. While numerous education activists embraced independent educational institutions and initiatives outside the system, they understood that their approach was just one strategy in the fight for changes in education and continued to support endeavors designed to fight for quality
education within the public school system. The National Association of Afro-American Educators, for example, stated that

we see even more clearly the overwhelming necessity to create complete independent Black educational institutions in the Black community. However, we do not discourage Black organizations from attempting to make reforms within white institutions. We support them. Independent Black institutions can help push demands for reform within white institutions.92

The three educational examples in this chapter perfectly reflect the different possibilities of contributing to educational change and highlight the complex relationships between independent Black educational institutions and attempts for reform in public schools. The Urban League Street Academies mainly aimed at educational change in public schools and focused on providing a model for public schools from the outside. West Harlem Liberation School represented a means to put pressure on public schools for immediate educational change. While the Urban League Street Academies focused on the educational success and achievement of individual students, West Harlem Liberation School emphasized the communal aspect of education as well as Black control and self-sufficiency. The Academy for Black and Latin Education, on the other hand, not only pursued educational reform and functioned as a model for the public school. Instead, the Academy for Black and Latin Education highlighted the communal as well as political aspects of education and pursued education as a means for broader social change.

Chapter V
CONCLUSION

The late 1960s saw an increased movement towards Black Power in the Black community. In response to continued inequality in various areas of life, many Black people pursued more radical approaches, and instead of fighting for integration and acceptance from white people, they moved on to fight for social justice, independence, and Black liberation. At the same time, Harlem saw a number of independent schools emerge that were not part of the public school system and which intended to provide meaningful quality education for their students. While these schools did not necessarily self-identify as Black Power schools, their names made allusions to Black Power ideas such as Black liberation or Black cultural pride. This dissertation investigated three of these schools more closely, examining why they emerged, what they looked like, and what their purposes and goals were. I argue that these schools were another response to the fight over establishing quality education within the Black community that went beyond integration and community control of public schools. These schools aimed at enabling students and ultimately the community to develop self-pride and become self-sufficient. But in this case, activists tried to achieve these goals outside of the public school system rather than from within. I additionally argue that these schools did, in fact, engage with Black Power ideas in their educational approach, and thus closely examining these institutions contributes to a broader and more diverse understanding of Black Power.

Several issues spurred educational activism along the lines of Black Power outside the public school system. Black students received unequal education in segregated public schools in Harlem, despite the fact that segregation had been outlawed in New York City since the early
twentieth century. As a response, parents, teachers, and community members fought for integration—not necessarily in order for their children to spend time with white children, but rather to guarantee that their children would receive a quality education in schools that were equipped with decent resources and competent teachers. Due to the failure of most of these attempts, activists moved on to fight for community control and to have more power over their children’s education and a school’s finances, curriculum, and personnel in particular. As these pushes for true control over their children’s education fell short, too, and inequality in Harlem’s public schools persisted, activists decided to pursue different measures to achieve quality education for their children by organizing their own schools and educational initiatives outside the public school system. These schools pursued different methodologies, approaches, and curricula, but they mostly emerged for the same reasons. Numerous schools were initiated and run by the Black Panther Party all over the country, and aimed at promoting revolutionary thought and the implementation of this ideology. Other schools pursued African-centered education and provided students with a space to develop a proud Black identity in order to create a cultural nationhood among people of African descent. These schools, such as the more prominent exemplars described in Chapter III, were organized by recognized Black Power organizations and explicitly identified as Black Power initiatives. While Black Power organizations operated numerous independent schools all over the country, there were also various educational initiatives that did not explicitly identify as Black Power but drew on and were in conversation with Black Power ideas in their educational approach. Some of those educational initiatives emerged in Harlem.

In response to the New York City Board of Education’s refusal to give parents meaningful control over their children’s education, parents of elementary school PS 125 started
boycotting this public school and organized their own liberation school with the support of the community. Out of this protest emerged West Harlem Liberation School, which provided a model for the Board of Education and reflected the kind of school on which parents, students, and teachers insisted. The school was a communal endeavor and heavily relied on the support of volunteers, educators, and institutions from the community, which simultaneously provided students with a model of a self-supported community. In addition, students were encouraged to embrace their cultural heritage and received education that was relevant to them. As a result, students not only learned about Black history and culture more broadly, but were also taught about the struggle for justice in which their own local community was involved. While West Harlem Liberation School was able to exert some pressure on the Board of Education, the parents and activists were not able to maintain the school for long and had to give in eventually, sending their children back to public school.

Due to increasing numbers of students not completing school, the New York Urban League developed and organized storefront street academies. In contrast to public schools, the street academies adapted their curriculum and methods to the students’ needs and interests. Since the majority of their students were Black, the academies focused on Black Studies and subjects that were deemed meaningful and relevant to the students. The idea was that this focus of the curriculum would not only motivate students to learn, but it would also promote a sense of self-pride and consequently encourage students to stay in school. While the street academies supported the development of Black pride and thus incorporated aspects of Black Power thought, the academies nevertheless aimed at steering students back into the public school system. Although the academies did not entirely focus on the deficits of the students, they nevertheless intended to rehabilitate students in order for them to finish their education at a public school.
while simultaneously criticizing public schools and trying to provide a model for the public
school system to adopt. In addition, collaborating with corporations, on whom they relied for
funding, also restricted academies in their ideas, methods, and purposes as these donors
demanded more involvement and control over the academies, leading to frictions between
corporations and street academy administrators as well as between administrators and teachers.

West Side Street Academy—later renamed the Academy for Black and Latin Education (ABLE)—emerged due to similar reasons as the Urban League Street Academies and initially worked closely with the street academies of the Urban League. However, after a short exchange of ideas, ABLE pursued its own purposes which differed tremendously from the ones of the Urban League Street Academies. Both strands of street academies pursued student-centered education and provided curricula that were heavy on Black Studies. However, while the Urban League Street Academies intended to steer students back into the public school system and pursue a successful career, ABLE focused on a more radical and activist approach utilizing education as a tool for social change. Education that students received at ABLE was not only supposed to set up students for their individual success but also to learn how to navigate the public system. Instead, students at ABLE learned to think critically about society and oppression, organize in order to fight inequality, and show solidarity with other oppressed people.

These schools and their approaches provide a unique lens through which to view Black Power. While the schools did not identify as Black Power schools, they utilized Black Power ideas which were reflected in their goals and the language they used as well as the names of the schools. Although the existence of many Black Power schools was only short-lived, this history helps to understand the ideas with which local Black activists engaged. West Harlem Liberation School and ABLE, for example, highlighted the importance of knowing one’s history and
background. Both schools emphasized the importance of students learning the history of their community, their struggles, and, most importantly, their achievements. This knowledge enabled students to truly fight for Black liberation and gave students motivation and added purpose to their education. Apart from some similarities like these, the schools were very different in their approaches and ideas, and as such reflect the diversity and contradictions of the movement and the different goals and avenues for change that activists within that movement envisioned. This is why Harlem is of particular relevance. As a unique and diverse Black community with a long Black history, Harlem provided the intellectual space for activists to envision a number of different educational possibilities for Black people and by Black people. Highlighting the diversity of Black intellectual thought, activists during the Black Power era, while supporting related ideas and reacting to similar issues, pursued different approaches and methods in order to achieve their goals. As a result, Black Power activism was at times contentious and contradictory because individual Black Power activists and organizations had their own interpretations of Black Power within a contentious social context. For example, the Urban League Street Academies tried to rehabilitate rather than liberate Black youth in Harlem and helped them to get back into mainstream schooling. The Academy for Black and Latin Education, on the other hand, tried to liberate Black youth and intended to prepare students for collective action for social justice rather than individual progress. Thus, some Black Power initiatives pursued incremental change on a very narrow level, whereas others intended to change the social system more broadly; some organizations and activists pursued particular issues like educational change, and others fought for broader social change overall. The various educational initiatives discussed in

1 Examining the Black Panther Party, Donna Murch highlights the complexity of this one Black Power organization alone. She explains that “[a]s the Black Panther Party grew rapidly with little coordination from the top, each chapter reflected the particular conditions of regional black communities.” Thus, even within the Black
this dissertation reflect this diversity of Black Power ideas and practice as well and highlight the possibilities and challenges a diverse and complex Black community like Harlem provided.

In addition to ideological disagreement or different expectations in the practical implementation of Black Power, various outside factors need to be considered in order to understand Black Power ideas translated into practice. While the schools discussed herein emerged within Harlem, a ‘Black city,’ which provided an intellectual space to imagine an alternative Black future, they did not exist in a vacuum. Activists had to deal with very basic struggles and challenges of grassroots organizing. They had to figure out how to pursue their ideas and which compromises they were willing to make. This applied particularly to the question of funding. The parents and community members who organized West Harlem Liberation School could only afford to run the liberation school for about four weeks because of financial constraints and the amount of time-intensive unpaid labor required. This case exemplifies that activists were often ordinary citizens who needed to make a living and take care of their families in addition to organizing and fighting for their rights and their beliefs. Similarly, while the Urban League could be criticized for collaborating with corporations, this history also raises the question of what choices activists and organizations have. While there are many cases in which Black Power activists did not rely on corporations, activists did not necessarily have the luxury to reject certain compromises due to the existing social and power structure. Activists had to draw a line somewhere, but where exactly that line was drawn depended on the activists, their context, and ultimately their goals. These additional factors explain why the same ideas were often interpreted differently and sometimes in contradictory ways, which makes the Black Power Movement so multilayered, diverse, and complex.

Panther Party alone, there were many different interpretations and pursuits of similar ideas. Murch, *Living for the City*, 234.
The most important contribution of this research for educators, for example, is that this history highlights once again that Black people were the architects of Black achievement. This study shows that Black achievement does not necessarily require separatism or an all-Black approach, but Black Power—self-determination, independence, and cultural pride—is relevant for Black achievement. Thus, this research adds to the scholarship of James Anderson and Hilary Green.\(^2\) Both scholars have discussed the long history of Black achievement and debunked the myth that Black achievement was enabled by white people. Instead, they have highlighted the crucial role of Black people in their own achievements. Similarly, this history challenges stereotypical thinking about Black people and corrects the idea of cultural deprivation of Black people; instead, it highlights how determined Black people were in their fight for power and ultimately justice through education.

In addition, it contributes to our understanding of how theoretical ideas of Black Power were translated into practice on the local level in very particular issues, how the concepts and ideas that people developed played out in the real world. It shows that translating Black Power ideas into practice can be diverse and contradictory. On the one hand, activists fought for educational reform, others for social change more broadly. Some activists pursued individual success for their students, others struggled for community empowerment. For some, community support and independent decision-making processes were more important than financial stability, even though this meant closing down institutions due to financial shortcomings. Finally, several activists focused on the rehabilitation of the students, whereas others tried to promote Black liberation, encouraging a pride pursuit of Black culture.

\(^2\) Anderson in *The Education of Blacks in the South* or Green in *Educational Reconstruction* represent examples of histories that highlight how long Black people have been their own architects regarding education and the fight for freedom, independence, and liberation through education.
Furthermore, this research demystifies the Black Power Movement. It moves beyond the militant and violent perception of Black Power and highlights Black Power activism within the arena of education that was not directly tied to recognized Black Power organizations. As a result, these schools broaden Black Power by highlighting that ordinary members of the community pursued Black Power activism on the ground. If we look at different actors of the Black Power Movement than those who are most prominent, we get another history. This history then allows viewing different foci of Black Power ideas, such as the fight for community control, Pan-Africanism, Black nationalism, or socialist approaches, as more diverse and overlapping. Finally, this history highlights the importance of education as a crucial field for activism.

This research contributes to numerous scholarly fields. On the one hand, this research contributes to the scholarship on the fight for equal education both in secondary education and higher education. While Heather Lewis, for example, already frames community control as a move towards Black Power activism, this study goes beyond community control within public schools and thus widens the idea and the purpose of community control. 3 Scholarship by Jerald E. Podair, Daniel Perlstein, and Wendell Pritchett focuses on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville case and therefore concentrates on one single incident in which parents, teachers, and school administrators fought over the control of public education in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community in Brooklyn. The perspective of this research is broader in that it looks beyond this one struggle. Instead, my research looks at initiatives that have not been studied in depth by the scholarship. Focusing on other struggles than the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict allows telling a more diverse history, focusing on various activists and initiatives on the ground. 4

3 Lewis, New York City Public Schools.

4 Podair, The Strike; Pritchett, Brownsville; Perlstein, Justice, Justice.
Martha Biondi, Stefan Bradley, and Ibram X. Kendi (formerly known as Ibram H. Rogers) on the Black campus movement discusses the various struggles that students in higher education were fighting all over the country, but also in New York City in particular. This study contributes to their scholarship, highlighting in which way similar struggles such as the fight for the integration of Black Studies in the curriculum and more power for students were fought in primary and secondary education, not just on college campuses.\(^5\)

This research moves beyond struggles for equal education within public schools and looks at schools and educational initiatives outside the public school system from a Black Power perspective outside of Black Power organizations. As such, this study contributes to the field of Black Power Studies as it bridges scholarship on Black Power and education. Only a few studies have connected Black Power and education in particular. Focusing on the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, California, Donna J. Murch introduces the role of education within the party more broadly and specifically discusses the Oakland Community School, an independent Black institution founded and organized by the Black Panthers between 1973 and 1982 in Oakland, California. The comprehensive history by Russell Rickford examines the sixty Pan-African schools that were founded all over the country during the height of the Black Power Movement. In contrast, Kwasi Konadu’s history focuses on one single institution, namely the East in Brooklyn. Elizabeth Todd-Breland, on the other hand, investigates numerous independent Black schools in Chicago, starting in the 1960s, and relates these schools to current educational issues such as the discussion about charter schools, vouchers, and school choice.\(^6\) In contrast to

these studies, my research looks at three different educational initiatives in Harlem that were neither part of the public school system nor of recognized Black Power organizations and thus provides yet another layer to this field. In addition, my research bridges intellectual and social history. While scholars like Russell Rickford or Ashley Farmer pursue strictly intellectual histories, my study focuses on the actions and activism on the ground and how local activists negotiated Black Power ideas in practice.7

This research highlights that the history of Black Power activism is messier and more complex than it may seem at first glance. First, it may seem that categorizing Black Power initiatives was easy. Looking more closely and focusing on activists on the ground, however, the history becomes more complex and Black Power ideas broaden and change accordingly. People develop, adopt, or embrace certain ideas and translate these into practice. But not only are these ideas changing; the translation into practice is also influenced by inside and outside factors. Activists need to make compromises and work with what they have, even though this may not represent their ideas entirely. Neither ideas nor actions are static, but need to be adjusted. As a result, this research allows rethinking and adding to our understanding of Black Power both in theory and in practice.

The impact and the legacy of prominent Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party are very apparent and have been studied more extensively. The legacy of lesser-known activism along Black Power ideas, however, requires further research. For example, in addition to the outside forces discussed earlier, further research is necessary to obtain a clearer understanding of what factors led to the sometimes short-lived nature of the educational

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activities or the decline and eventual closing of the different educational initiatives more generally. Finally, more research is needed on the personal and institutional embeddedness of these local educational struggles on the Black Power Movement more broadly. Have these local initiatives influenced Black Power organizations with regard to ideas, expectations, goals, or strategies? Similarly, were these local initiatives in direct contact with experienced Black Power activists and more prominent organizations? Was there some overlap between recognized Black Power organizations and local activists or were local activists involved in Black Power organizations and thus able to contribute their knowledge and experience to these local educational initiatives?

Questions are also left to be answered about what lasting impact these specific schools had on public schools and the local government and whether and how individual activists continued to fight for change even after schools had to shut down, such as the parents and activists of West Harlem Liberation School who claimed they would take their fight to Albany and Washington, DC. Additionally, it would be crucial to know what impact these educational initiatives had on parents, teachers, students, and community members regarding their activism. Did these schools set up their teachers, parents, and particularly students for lives as activists for social justice? And what impact did experiences at these schools have on the ideas, values, and political commitments of those who were involved?

Regarding this particular study, further research is needed regarding the relationship between Black and Puerto Rican activists, families, and students. While primary documents often make mention of these two groups as distinct, they do not discuss their relationship to each other. Similarly, the relationship between Black and white activists requires more investigation. For example, the primary documents available for this research did not provide information about the
initial founders of the Academy for Black Latin Education other than they were white middle-
class professionals. In addition, the documents did not provide extensive information on how
Black Power was interpreted in situations where white people were co-activists or even allies of
Black people. While women and particularly mothers are mentioned, this history would benefit
from a more elaborate focus on the role of women as it would further contribute to our
understanding of Black Power activism. Finally, while there were some student voices in the
documents, they are largely missing from the archives and from histories about Black Power
activism. More research would allow learning about students’ experiences and particularly the
impact this activism had on the students.

Moving beyond this research, the relationship and collaboration between Black Power
schools and further alternative institutions outside the Black community would help understand
Black Power even more. Contextualizing Black Power schools in the broader history of
alternative education in the 1960s will add to Eldridge Cleaver’s definition of Black Power:
Black Power does not promote separation but collaboration of different oppressed groups.⁸
Looking at different attempts to provide alternative and meaningful education will provide a
more detailed and differentiated understanding of social oppression and how that oppression has
impacted different groups and, last but not least, how different groups have responded to that
oppression.

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⁸ Cleaver, “Education and Revolution,” 47.
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**Maps**

Locations of relevant public schools and selected independent Black schools in Harlem, New York City.

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