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Creating spaces to shift the power dynamics: Counter-storytelling through the Voices of Empowerment Conference

Jordan González
St. John's University

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
Columbia University

Lonice Eversley
Lotus Lorraine

Aliya Holmes
St. John's University

Natalie Byfield
St. John's University

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Jordan González, Ph.D.
Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Ph.D
Lonice Eversley, M.A.
Aliya Holmes, Ph.D.
Natalie Byfield, Ph.D.

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the transformative potential of counter-story as a method for promoting educational equity through the lens of racial literacy and the "Archeology of Self" framework. Rooted in critical race theory, counter-story enables marginalized voices to challenge and reshape dominant narratives within educational research and practice (Delgado & Stefancic, 1996; Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Martinez, 2020). The community-based study using a counter-storytelling approach draws on data from a focus group held during the 2024 Voices of Empowerment Conference, part of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) at St. John's University. The focus group discussed systemic barriers, the undervaluation of educators, and the need for culturally responsive teaching methods. Key themes include the importance of professional development, the impact of administrative decisions, and advocacy for diverse student needs. By engaging in deep self-reflection and embracing shared humanity, educators can create inclusive, healing spaces that foster mutual understanding and support. From this study emerged the Educator Empower Theory. The findings underscore the necessity of reimagining educational environments to address inequities and support the holistic development of all students. Through counter-stories, the article advocates for a paradigm shift towards collective healing and the reconstruction of educational spaces that honor diverse ways of knowing and being.

Creating spaces to shift the power dynamics: Counter-storytelling through the Voices of Empowerment Conference

Educational equity remains a paramount concern in today's diverse society, where the stories and voices of marginalized communities are often overshadowed by dominant narratives entrenched in hegemonic notions of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This qualitative study explores the use of counter-stories as a transformative method to promote educational equity, framed through the lens of racial literacy and the "Archaeology of Self" framework developed by Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz (2018). The research was conducted during the Voices of Empowerment Conference in 2024, drawing on data from focus group discussions that included themes such as systemic barriers, the undervaluation of educators who teach with intentionality in building critical consciousness within students through liberatory practices, and the need for culturally responsive teaching methods. By delving into these issues, the study aims to illustrate how counter-stories can not only serve as a powerful tool for change but also foster an educational environment where diverse narratives are acknowledged and valued as part of professional learning.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform and (re)shape practices, policies, and spaces in building equity and inclusion within educational settings. By engaging educators in deep self-reflection and recognizing the importance of shared humanity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021a), the study advocates for creating inclusive, healing educational spaces. These environments are essential for fostering mutual understanding and supporting the holistic development of all students. Ultimately, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on how to reimagine educational environments to address inequities effectively and enhance the educational experiences of marginalized populations.

Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies

Launched on October 22, 2021, the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) is a relatively new research unit at St. John's University in New York whose main work is to investigate systemic racism and its associated forms of oppression and develop redresses for the problems caused by systemic racism. The Institute aims to "imagine, create, sustain, and promote holistic practices of human flourishing, in keeping with the university's mission to 'respect the rights and dignity of every person (CRES Mission Statement).'" In the Institute, we approach our work with an intentionality that honors and foregrounds knowledges and practices that have long existed outside formal academic structures and settings, particularly those that emerge from minoritized and marginalized communities and traditions. To do this work we use the intellectual foundations provided by the interdisciplinary fields of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. These approaches represent pathways aimed at democratizing learning and educational systems and supporting inclusive scientific/research practices that strengthen our conceptual understandings of the world. Our eventual goal is to usher in an epistemic shift in all areas of learning, whose foundation is derived from incorporation of the lived experiences of racially and ethnically marginalized people. While the CRES Institute's overarching goal in its research focus is to address the problems caused by systemic racism, it also acknowledges and incorporates in its work the intersecting structures of oppression co-constituted with race, particularly in other elements of social identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and ability to name a few (see CRES Website). The CRES Institute's approach to this work occurs via collaborative relationships

between members of the university community and people and groups outside St. John's University locally, nationally, and globally (e.g. researchers, grassroots activists, artists, industry leaders, policymakers, legislators, community-based organizations) who are similarly engaged in finding redresses for systemic racism.

Key initiatives and impact

To build this new epistemic future, the Institute's key initiatives in its formative years, have focused on K-12 education. The Institute sought to immediately impact pedagogical practices and content available to youngsters in their educational life to build on the already existing Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CR-SE) framework created and approved by the New York State Education Department in 2018. This work in the Institute occurred in the two programs, the CR-SE Forums and through the nurturing of a K-16 collaborative in the Institute's Incubator space. These projects overlap in their work by articulating the principles of the CR-SE (2018) framework through the sharing of pedagogical practices and through discussions about course content.

From a structural point of view, the CR-SE Forums represent the first of two types of collaboration in which the Institute seeks engagement, through partnering with a community-based organization and building community with K-12 educators. Our community-based partner in this work is Lotus Lorraine, LLC., an education consulting organization started by a New York City Public Schools Master Teacher Lonice Eversley, who is a co-author on this article. The community-building collaboration occurs with K-12 educators who share the common goal of providing culturally relevant care (CRC) (Watson et al., 2014) to students whose futures are being decimated by products of white supremacy, e.g., the opportunities gap. Members of the K-12 education community seek out these forums to do professional development work to provide for their students contending with the opportunities gap. The CR-SE Forums also provided a space to discover the types of research that would be necessary to reveal the nature of the institution building that would be required to enact the necessary transformation to produce better results for all students, particularly the most marginalized, i.e., Black and Brown students in the K-12 school systems.

To better understand the necessary institutional development for promoting social, political, curriculum, and pedagogical changes in K-12 education, a team comprising of faculty from St. John's University School of Education and Lotus Lorraine, LLC, embarked on a project to conceptualize and initiate essential strategies. This initiative is conducted within the CRES Incubator, a dedicated space at the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies that provides resources and time for faculty collaboration. These collaborations aim to significantly influence educational structures and curricula.

Voices of Empowerment Conference

Within the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) at St. John's University, the Incubator space serves as a dynamic area designed to foster innovative research for the various colleges and institutions at St. John's University and beyond. The Incubator program, integral to the mission of the CRES Institute, facilitates a partnership between the CRES Institute and the School of Education within the University. Under the appointment of Dr. Jordan

González, Assistant Professor of Bilingual Education and TESOL, as the Coordinator of the Incubator space, the work has pioneered initiatives that integrate culturally responsive pedagogies across K-16 educational settings. The work in the Incubator space has pioneered initiatives that integrate culturally responsive pedagogies across K-16 educational settings.

A significant outcome of the efforts in the Institute's Incubator area is the establishment of the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative. This collaborative was designed to bridge theoretical frameworks with practical application, ultimately leading to the conception of the Voices of Empowerment Conference. The Voices of Empowerment Conference: Using Counter-stories in Education for Culturally Responsive and Socially Just Teaching (VoE) stands as a pivotal event in advancing culturally responsive and socially just teaching practices. Utilizing the New York State Education Department's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CR-SE) Framework (2018), the conference showcased a series of discussions and workshops aimed at breathing life into theoretical concepts through the powerful mechanism of counter-stories. The VoE met on February 9, March 1, and May 10, 2024.

Guided by Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz's (2018, 2021, 2024) concept of the Archaeology of Self, the conference encouraged educators to delve into their personal histories, beliefs, and experiences to better understand and articulate their roles within the educational landscape. By fostering an environment where educators could share and reflect on their personal and professional journeys, the conference emphasized the importance of narrative as a tool for empowerment and change.

Key activities during the conference included keynote addresses by Dr. Sealey-Ruiz, breakout sessions for in-depth discussion, and panel discussions that featured experts in the field. These sessions provided a platform for processing introspective exploration, articulating and grappling with the challenges and successes of implementing culturally responsive pedagogies in diverse educational settings. These activities not only fostered a deeper understanding of culturally responsive pedagogies but also demonstrated how counter-stories could be effectively employed to challenge dominant narratives and promote a more inclusive educational environment.

The Voices of Empowerment Conference, as a project of the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative, set a strong precedent for future initiatives aimed at transforming educational practices. It solidified its role as a cornerstone of the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative's efforts to promote social justice and equity in education. The outcomes from this conference are expected to influence ongoing and future initiatives that aim at enhancing equity through educational practices and resources.

Authors' Positionalities

In this study, recognizing the influence of positionality is crucial for shaping our understanding and approach to research. Positionality refers to the complex interplay of race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers that inform individuals' perspectives and interactions, particularly within the context of the United States. Carlton Parsons (2008) emphasizes the importance of considering positionality in research, especially in science education, to address the deficit-oriented frameworks often applied to African American communities. By acknowledging positionality, researchers can better understand the underlying

mindsets and perspectives they bring to the research process, which often implicitly influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Parson, 2008). This awareness helps to counteract biases and ensure a more accurate and inclusive representation of diverse experiences and narratives. Additionally, it informs readers about the lenses utilized in the conceptualization of this work, offering a clearer understanding of the influences guiding this research.

Jordan González, Ph.D.

As the Coordinator of the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative in the Incubator Program at St. John's University, I integrate my experiences in research, K-12 educator experiences in English as a New Language (ENL) and World Languages, and leadership in organizations such as the New York State Association for Bilingual Education. My research focuses on the intersection of race, language, immigration, and education, which informs my approach to second language development—a perspective shaped by my time as an ENL and Spanish teacher in NYC public schools, as the Director of Language Acquisition in Yonkers, and resource specialist for the Long Island Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network. These roles have exposed me to the systemic barriers that culturally and linguistically diverse students face. I was driven by my experiences of having an immigrant parent from the Dominican Republic and grandparents from Puerto Rico. As a Latino scholar born and raised in the Bronx, I am committed to promoting educational equity and inclusivity, ensuring educational frameworks not only respond to but also sustain the diverse identities of students and educators. Through initiatives like the Voices of Empowerment Conference, I advocate for educational practices that affirm and leverage student and educator diversity. My work seeks to foreground marginalized voices, aiming to create a more just and equitable educational environment.

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Ph.D.

My name is Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz. I am a proud daughter of the South Bronx, a community that birthed Hip Hop -- a music genre that represents the spirit of resilience and resistance of Black and Brown youth. My Caribbean and Southern parents named me after Yolanda King, the daughter of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., which I believe has marked my path as a warrior for peace, justice and equality. My life's work is rooted in this legacy and has driven me to choose the field of education as my platform for advocacy. I am a graduate of New York and Columbia Universities, institutions that have not only shaped my academic journey but have also equipped me with the tools to open doors for others. My positionality as an educator, scholar, and advocate is deeply informed by the communities that raised me and the legacies that I am honored to carry forward. I stand committed to advancing equity and social justice in education, guided by the belief that our histories, identities, and voices are essential to creating a more just and inclusive world.

Lonice J. Eversley, M.A.

I am a proud African-American graduate of the New York City Public School system, a daughter of a Paraprofessional, who was an Early Childhood Reading Specialist in the Bronx, and the great-granddaughter of an African-American man who was born during the reconstruction period in North Carolina and opened a Rosenwald School at the turn of the 20th century. There was always a clear understanding among those with whom I share DNA that

education is the fountain for liberation. As an educator in the South Bronx who is in my 26th year, and a Master Teacher who supports teachers, I practice and promote Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education. Additionally, I believe that classroom and school spaces should be liberatory and supportive of the notion that students can safely bring their full selves and use knowledge that they bring into the classroom along with the knowledge that they acquire via academic deep dives and cognitive heavy lifting, to disrupt and dismantle that which does not serve them or their communities. My classroom is a laboratory for my students to use leadership lenses to problem solve and construct alternative ways to ensure that they fully understand what a society that is equality and equity focused looks like. My students are future leaders. I am honored that I can provide the space for them to hone their skills. The Voices of Empowerment Conference was a space similar to what I attempt to create in my classroom every day. It elevated the voices of those who are often not heard, centered their perspectives, and provided the opportunity to identify the obstacles that together we can push out of the way, in service to closing the racialized achievement gap in the United States.

Aliya Holmes, Ph.D.

In the spirit of truth and self-reflexivity, I offer this positionality statement recognizing that I approach this work as an educated Black/African American woman and native of Brentwood, Long Island, New York who is a 4th generation educator and currently a higher education associate professor. My research has many different facets, which include digital teaching and learning, educational research and leadership, and the intersection of critical perspectives in teaching and learning. My work with the CRES institute has been beneficial to my professional and personal growth as I found community, allies, and partners for the work that is important to me. Being part of a family that saw education and faith as equalizers in this world has provided me the impetus to advocate for equitable academic experiences, not only to show gratitude for the legacy, but to highlight the brilliance and contributions of my people in this world. This work is critical and personal. Working with CRES and Dr. Sealey-Ruiz has been nothing short of profound, as I am learning in this process. This work to eradicate the pre-school to prison pipeline, restore the image and respect of the teaching profession, to have a just world, and improve the academic and professional experiences for all students and teachers, is part of my calling. This is for our past and our future.

Natalie Byfield, Ph.D.

I am Black woman who is deeply concerned about racial injustice, who operates in the world with the understanding that racism not only delimits life outcomes, racism destroys and kills people. I participated in this writing project from my position as the director of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies at St. John's University. This work is a continuation of other similar work I have done professionally and in community over the course of my life to address racial inequities that marginalize and minoritize Black and Brown people. I am motivated by the desire to work collaboratively with others to re-construct an anti-racist world. Epistemically, my approach is informed by the various elements of my identity including my position as a Black woman, born under colonial rule in Jamaica, West Indies, whose migration to the United States reflects two main things: 1) The ways in which capitalist-based white supremacy discards people of color; 2) the opportunities that benefit my life in the United States were often times created by people enslaved and colonized in the United States. My desire to build communities across

boundaries is shaped by the knowledge that when the so-called marginalized people come together, we can remake the world.

Our collective positionality and biases. We are educators, social scientists, and researchers with the common goal of building equity and access for all of our students. We each may have individual experiences and concerns, but collectively we are able to engage in sound research to answer questions that cannot be easily answered through traditional conceptualizations of research. We created a space where we can ask questions and engage in storytelling with other K-16 educators for ideas and answers that emerged in response to our research questions. Our shared experiences of navigating predominantly white spaces have undeniably influenced the formation of our biases. However, as authors and educators, we are deeply committed to critically examining and dismantling these biases—both within ourselves and the communities we belong to. This ongoing work is not merely personal but is a conscious effort to challenge the systemic barriers created by the structures of power that negatively and disproportionately impact students of color. By confronting these ingrained prejudices, we aim to foster more equitable educational environments that affirm and uplift the diverse identities of all learners.

Theoretical Frameworks and Essential Pedagogy: The role of Critical Race Theory, Critical Race & Ethnic Studies, and Liberatory Education

The significance of positionality cannot be understated because it resonates not with identity as many posit, rather it resonates with structures of power. Our intersecting identities and how they operate in our world are driven not by our interpretations of them, but by the structures of power that make those elements of our identity significant to the hierarchical organization of the world.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding that racism, as a system of power based on racial identity/classification, is inextricably woven in societal systems and structures that exist in the United States. The basic building blocks involved in the construction of every institution in the US, has normalized whiteness and the dehumanization of People of Color, specifically Indigenous people as well as Black people who were kidnapped and forced to the shores of the Caribbean and the Americas as property. Ladson-Billings (2021) posits that CRT, as a theoretical tool that began in legal studies, in law schools, provides an attempt to explain systemic inequity based on race. CRT can serve the same function in education (Anderson, 2022). Applying this lens to educational systems and institutions, Ladson-Billings (2021) argues that racism is "endemic and deeply ingrained in American life" and is evidenced by the multi-tiered advantages that are experienced by white students in schools across the nation (p. 19).

These advantages shape the hegemonic position of whiteness in educational resource materials and in the minds of teachers and school leaders. These advantages are underscored by educational financing formulas that are structured to ensure that property taxes have direct impacts on educational funding, thus ensuring that students who live in wealthier, whiter communities have greater access to excellent educational experiences, technologically advanced resources, and rigorous curriculum, relative to the academic experiences of students in Black and Brown communities (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Central to the application of Critical Race Theory to the analysis of educational systems in the United States, Ladson-Billings (2021) contends, is

the manner by which the ownership of property impacts the ownership of opportunity to access advanced technology, advanced and emerging knowledges, and myriad languages that benefit white students (both in their present and future lives) to a far greater extent than students of Color, who lack access due to the established structure of property tax driven educational financing in the United States.

Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (2021) fortifies her argument by explaining the manner by which white supremacy has bestowed the privilege upon white people to actually own white culture. The impact of this dynamic on education is that those who are most aligned with the established white culture are treated more favorably in school communities. Proximity to white culture is not only determined by phenotypical racial identification, but also through the assessment of language with specific focus on the possession of an accent that is not aligned with white culture (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Connections to elements of the lower economic class create barriers to ownership of white culture for students who are not white. Consequently, poor white students are provided access to ownership of white culture, to a greater extent than middle class or wealthy students of Color. Having access to ownership of white culture can often ensure that students experience rigorous coursework, opportunities to be mentored, internships and other work opportunities, networking opportunities, letters of recommendation from well respected (and also well connected) staff members and community leaders, scholarships, and more (Ladson-Billings, 2021). These important elements that are critical to the success of students both in the present and future far too often exclude students of Color, thus contributing to the opportunities gap.

Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz' discussion of Critical Race Theory at the VoE conference on March 1, 2024, reveals her position that "CRT asks you to analyze situations with a critical lens in a way that decenters the typical white narrative and to focus instead on the root cause of racism and inequity." Dr. Sealey-Ruiz also posits that understanding why and how inequities exist in our society, allows us to think critically about how to eradicate them. These ideas inform us about how the very nature of CRT analytically and theoretically fuels the interruption of all things that are shaped and framed by notions of white supremacy and the normalized dehumanization of People of Color, for the ultimate purpose of destroying these harmful frameworks.

This understanding of CRT reveals why practitioners who teach with the intentionality of building critical consciousness within students are driven to use Culturally Responsive and Sustaining approaches. The critical component of providing space for students to develop socio-political consciousnesses (Escudero, 2019), is directly related to liberatory pedagogy (Friere, 2005) that focuses classroom practices in ways that create opportunities for students to take deep dives into fully understanding the operationalization of inequality for the very purpose of thinking critically about the disruption and dismantling plans. Practitioners who move with intentionality around building opportunities into their curricula, for their students of Color to delve deeply, engage in cognitive heavy lifting, think critically, and make decisions from the perspective of a leader (i.e. President of the US, corporate leader, or educational leader) about ways to disrupt inequality, effectively inspire the development of their students' socio-political consciousnesses, which Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies as an ultimate goal of teaching. Empowered students see themselves as decision-makers, societal navigators, and solution creators, which benefits their current lives with additional implications for the future.

Teachers who facilitate learning experiences that are Culturally Responsive and Sustaining ensure that the culture of the student body is centered, respected, and recognized as a source of power that replaces master narratives that tend to be based on ignorance and biases against People of Color (Sealey-Ruiz, 2024). It is from this position of strength and power that students develop an understanding that they are expected to engage deeply in learning processes because it will be up to them to use their knowledge to develop alternative outcomes. Critical Race Theory provides a context for students to understand exactly how to interrogate society via their research and learning, to find trends and patterns that reveal institutional and structural inequalities that directly impact them, and their respective families and communities. Their socio-political consciousness is activated when students are involved in developing plans to dismantle the societal ills that create inequality and inequities. Classrooms that operate in this way are essentially laboratories and training grounds for students to develop the cognitive and leadership skills needed to make effective changes in their immediate communities and beyond, both presently and in the future.

At its inception in the early 1990s, the focus of CRT, as a movement (Crenshaw et al., 1995), was the legal system. Some credit (Cobb, 2021) the movement's beginning with the publication of the article “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation” by the legal scholar Derrick Bell (1976). The article questioned the efficacy of anti-discrimination lawsuits prioritizing in their outcomes racial balance over quality of education or educational attainment of the students of Color. Bell’s (1992) work pointed to the “permanence of racism” in the American experiment, for a zero-sum game implies that the freedom of some is based on the oppression of “others.” It suggests that at the end of the day, solutions to racism in the U.S. could only be found based on “interest convergence” (Bell, 1992).

Similar to the field of education, other fields have since adapted CRT. In education, Ladson-Billings (1995) began her own development of CRT in Education within the first decade of the CRT movement. The revolution that Bell’s work set off in the thinking about how to struggle against racism and white supremacy within institutions is ongoing. CRT’s expansion into other disciplines has contributed to the development of critical race and ethnic studies (CRES). While CRT is an important core element of the fields of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, CRT is in some ways distinct from CRES. These interdisciplinary fields that have since created critical race and ethnic studies form something that reaches beyond CRT and is greater than the sum of its parts.

CRES scholars continue to examine the solutions that arise from studies of systemic racism across a variety of institutions, noting that solutions continue to sit atop a rarely changing structure designed to produce racial inequities while simultaneously invoking, in everyday thinking and ideologies, the notion of “color-blindness”—a type of racial neutrality—as a system of socio-economic and political thought. Color-blindness often operates as an ideology used by many in everyday life to ignore racism. The thinking that people fall back on is “I don’t see race/color.” Bell (1992) and other Critical Race theorists (e.g. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, 2017), argue that “color-blind” ideologies hide the ways in which racism is embedded in structures.

CRT and CRES share commonalities, as both interdisciplinary fields contribute to forming an area of study. They both center race in their analyses and they both represent a critique of the epistemic foundations of systemic structures in the United States, given the

nation's role in colonialisms, the slave trade, slavery, and the structurally biased relationality of racial groupings. Both seek redresses to the racial inequities that emerge from these systems and both recognize the ability of these systems to mutate, thereby resisting change.

CRES, which represents interdisciplinary fields of study, adapts its focus to all socio-economic and political systems because its goal is epistemic transformation (i.e., a new value system that produces new sciences, ways of knowing and learning), that is expansive enough to incorporate the lived experiences of all people on the planet, in particular those who have been racially and ethnically marginalized. The development of a new episteme is founded on inclusivity and changes in power relationships (e.g. race and racism), that lead to the formulation of anti-racist goals and structures. This translates into an elimination of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, situations in which:

> …prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experience (Fricker, 2007, p. 1).

Testimonial and hermeneutical injustices are connected to the structures of power that are tied to discourses constructed with master narratives. Testimonial injustice occurs when the knowledge holder is marginalized, regularly experiencing a "credibility deficit" (Fricker, 2007; 2009). Hermeneutical injustice is the marginalization of the knower's experiences due to structural marginalization that renders the knower's situation unintelligible (Fricker, 2007; 2009). Thus, one of the key methodologies for developing CRES-based work that addresses testimonial and hermeneutical injustices is counter-story and counter-storytelling. In CRES, the inclusivity that scholars demand in research will lead to the expected epistemic shift. At the core of the work of the CRES Institute is the goal to practice epistemic justice to disrupt and dismantle the systems of oppression under white supremacy to ensure the building of an inclusive world from the roots of society, its knowledge systems.

Counter-stories

As Ladson-Billings (2013) states "stories reflect a perspective or point of view and underscore what the teller, audience, society, and/or those in power believe to be important, significant, and many times valorizing and ethnocentric" (pp. 41-42). Ladson-Billings (2013) refers to the African proverb, "*Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter*," to demonstrate the hegemonic and ethnocentric way stories can and do operate. Counter-stories are alternative narratives that challenge dominant or mainstream stories. A contrasting story reflects a perspective from a different vantage point to inform people about received truths and invites them to consider alternatives (Ladson-Billings, 2013). For the individuals and communities that engage in counter-storytelling, it provides a way to assert their voices, experiences, and perspectives in the face of dominant discourses that may marginalize or silence them. This approach has been widely used in critical and social justice-oriented research, as it seeks to disrupt power imbalances and amplify the voices of marginalized groups (Pollock, 2008). Pollock (2008) highlights the importance of counter-narratives in challenging the stereotypes, biases, and discrimination that are perpetuated by mainstream narratives. She also emphasizes the role of counter-narratives in promoting social change and transformation.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) argue that counter-narratives are a form of resistance that can challenge the dominant ideologies that underpin social inequalities. They suggest that counter-narratives can take various forms, such as personal narratives, testimonies, and fictional stories. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) emphasize the need for counter-narratives to be grounded in the lived experiences of marginalized groups and to challenge the power structures that perpetuate oppression. Ngunjiri et al. (2010) highlight the importance of counter-stories in qualitative research, arguing that they can provide a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of social phenomena. They (Ngunjiri et al., 2010) suggest that counter-stories can be used to challenge the biases and assumptions of mainstream research, and to give voice to marginalized groups who may be underrepresented in the literature. Overall, counter-stories provide a powerful tool for challenging dominant discourses, promoting social justice, and empowering the voices of marginalized groups. They offer an alternative perspective on social phenomena and provide a way for individuals and communities to assert their agency and push back on the forces that seek to silence them.

Archaeology of Self

The Archaeology of Self is an introspective framework and a critical component of racial literacy development created by Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz that encourages educators to engage in deep personal exploration to understand how their identities—shaped by race, class, religion, gender, and sexual orientation—influence their teaching practices and interactions with students (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021b; Adjapong & Porcher, 2021). This framework plays a crucial role in the broader discourse of Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CR-SE), particularly with respect to how it prepares educators to effectively address educational inequities and foster environments that affirm and utilize the cultural wealth of all students. This is because the framework encourages educators to engage in deep self-reflection and examination of their beliefs, experiences, and biases related to race and other aspects of identity (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021b). Archeology of Self also supports deeper awareness of how structures of power operate in our lives and promote testimonial and hermeneutical injustices for those who are racially and ethnically marginalized.

Dr. Sealey-Ruiz (2024) emphasizes the necessity of self-work before educators can truly implement culturally responsive and sustaining practices. The lack of self-examination can lead to a superficial application of CR-SE principles, where educators might focus merely on integrating diverse content without aligning their deeper beliefs and attitudes with these inclusive pedagogies (Adjapong & Porcher, 2021). Sealey-Ruiz describes the Archeology of Self as a process of "digging deeply and 'peeling back the layers' on one's life experiences" (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021b, p. 288). It involves exploring how issues of race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation and other identities have shaped one's worldview and assumptions. The goal is for educators to understand how their own socialization and lived experiences inform their views of students, particularly students of Color. This deep self-exploration is essential for educators to confront and dismantle the biases and structural inequities that persist within educational systems.

In an interview, Sealey-Ruiz emphasized that the Archeology of Self should be a prerequisite before educators enter the classroom, stating "if the repository for that, which is the body, the heart, the mind, the soul is not in sync with what the theory, and curriculum, and

curricula offer, it's not going to work" (Adjapong & Porcher, 2021, p. 39). She argues that without this deep self-work, educators risk perpetuating harmful stereotypes and racist ideas in their teaching. Importantly, the Archeology of Self is not a one-time activity, but an ongoing reflective practice. Sealey-Ruiz (2021b) encourages educators to continually examine how their beliefs impact their teaching and interactions with students throughout their careers. By engaging in this sustained self-work, educators can develop greater racial consciousness and cultural competence to better serve diverse student populations.

The Archeology of Self framework recognizes that this introspective process can be challenging and uncomfortable. It requires educators to confront their own biases, examine privileges, and reflect on how they may have been conditioned to hold racist beliefs (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021b). However, Sealey-Ruiz contends this work is essential for developing racial literacy and interrupting cycles of educational inequity. Moreover, the Archaeology of Self is positioned as a foundational practice that supports the development of racial literacy, a critical skill for educators working in diverse urban settings. Racial literacy involves understanding how race and racism operate systemically and recognizing one's role either in perpetuating or interrupting these systemic issues (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021b). By engaging with this framework, educators are better equipped to develop a more nuanced understanding of themselves and their students, which is vital for fostering genuine and empathetic connections in the classroom.

The Power Law of Practice

The Power Law of Practice illustrates that improvement in skills and reaction times tends to follow a logarithmic progression, emphasizing the relationship between practice and time (Crossman, 1959; Logan, 1992; Taie, 2014). This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the time educators need to engage meaningfully in counter-storytelling and the Archaeology of Self. As practitioners deepen their engagement with these reflective practices, they navigate a steep initial learning curve. Over time, however, further refinements become more gradual, highlighting the necessity for sustained and repeated opportunities to practice. This dynamic underscores the importance of creating ongoing opportunities for educators to build confidence and competence in these areas, acknowledging the variability in starting points and confidence levels among educators in these reflective practices. Consequently, recurring professional development, aligned with the Archeology of Self and counter-storying, can foster a more empowered teaching workforce equipped to challenge systemic inequities. Collectively, CRSE, counter-storytelling, Archeology of Self, and the Power Law of Practice create an ecosystem to support systemic change.

Methodology

To facilitate this study, researchers embraced methodological principles, tools, and strategies associated with *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and *Counter-story* (Stefancic & Delgado, 1996; Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Martinez, 2020), processes that involve in-depth explorations of raw data to recognize emerging themes, perspectives, and theoretical constructs associated with the phenomenon under study. Grounded theory requires researchers to skillfully utilize the tools of data collection as well as utilize open, axial, and selective coding to identify, examine, and highlight social processes and relationships that are commonly overlooked (Strauss & Corbin,

1990). Grounded theory often enables themes to emerge without a hypothesis, while Counter-storytelling, a method deeply embedded in CRT, explicitly recognizes and challenges unjust ideologies, practices, and social constructs at play" (Bell, 1987; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Delgado et al. (2012), Counter-story documents the persistent fight against efforts to silence and erase the experiences of the marginalized. Some researchers also note that this methodology highlights forms of insubordination to popular ideologies, while allowing voices from the margins to become authoritative bodies in researching and relating their own experiences (Sealey-Ruiz, 2023; Martinez, 2020; Delgado et al., 2012).

This study also accounts for the Power Law of Practice by recognizing that participants entered the focus group sessions with diverse levels of confidence and familiarity with counter-storytelling and the Archaeology of Self. To address this variability, the iterative process of data collection and analysis created conditions for repeated engagement and skill development over time, mirroring the gradual improvement described by the Power Law of Practice (Anderson, 1982; Anderson, Fincham, & Douglass, 1999; Taie, 2014). The VoE conference sessions were designed as iterative spaces where participants could share and refine their narratives, progressively reducing cognitive load and increasing ease of participation. This methodological consideration highlights the need for systemic support to provide ongoing professional spaces, ensuring that educators have the necessary time and resources to internalize and effectively apply these critical practices in their educational environments. Utilizing the qualitative strengths of grounded theory, Counter-story and the Power Law of Practice, this study engages in a process of innovative data planning, data collection, and analysis, to find evidence that supports, expands, or challenges current theories around perspectives and experiences of educators as they work to make their academic spaces more inclusive and racially literate.

Methods

This study utilized the transcript from a 2-hour focus group session where participants voluntarily engaged in Counter-story after attending the morning session of the VoE Conference in February 2024. All conference attendees were presented with the opportunity to participate in the afternoon study session and 10 individuals agreed to participate in the research study. The participants were active K-12 teachers, K-12 administrators, and higher education faculty from institutions in the NYC and Long Island areas who also attended the Archeology of Self Workshop presented by Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz at the VoE Conference. Demographically, the research group consisted of 80% Black Women with two men in attendance who identified as Latinx and White. Among the group, years of service ranged from early career (less than 5 years) to advanced career (more than 15 years) of service as an educator or educational leader.

Participants engaged in a whole group discussion at a large conference table in a private setting. A recording device was discreetly placed in the room for transcription purposes with the knowledge and permission of the participants. Participants were also informed that findings would be shared with them. The prompt, "*we invite you to take a moment to fill the void with your stories. Our counter-stories,"* was informal in design to avoid leading or influencing the direction of the conversation or counter-story. Participants offered personal counter-stories that gave voice to academic experiences rarely shared in public. The transcript was later reviewed to remove any names or institutional identifiers to maintain anonymity. The edited transcript then served as the primary source for the intensive process of open, axial, and selective coding.

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method emphasizes an iterative and cyclical process of data analysis. During the open coding phase, raw data from the focus group was broken down into individual units, allowing the researchers to identify initial concepts and categories within the counter-stories. These concepts were then compared and contrasted with each new piece of data that arose from the transcript, a process that allowed for the continuous refinement and adjustment of categories.

In the axial coding stage, the researchers explored connections and relationships between the emerging codes, helping to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework. This step was critical in synthesizing the 20 themes into five overarching categories: educational equity, culturally responsive teaching methods, pedagogical challenges and innovations, professional development and faculty support, and systemic barriers and advocacy for students.

Finally, in the selective coding phase, core categories were identified, and the emerging theory was refined to ensure consistency and coherence. This process emphasized how these interconnected issues identified by participants underscore the need for systemic changes to enhance equity and inclusion in educational settings.

In the data analysis process, 65 unique counter-stories were identified from the transcripts, each offering distinct perspectives and insights. These counter-stories were categorized into 46 topics, which were further analyzed to extract 20 consistent themes. The themes highlighted recurring patterns and central ideas, which were then synthesized into five overarching categories: educational equity, culturally responsive teaching methods, pedagogical challenges and innovations, professional development and faculty support, and systemic barriers and advocacy for students. This analytical process transformed individual narratives into broader insights, offering a comprehensive view of the complexities and challenges in education. The identification of these categories emphasized critical areas for attention and action, revealing the interconnected nature of the issues and underscoring the need for systemic change to promote equity and inclusion in educational environments. These themes are further discussed in the subsequent section.

Findings

The five key themes, *educational equity, culturally responsive teaching methods, pedagogical challenges and innovations, professional development and faculty support, and systemic barriers and advocacy for students* that emerged from the collection of counter-stories provide insight into the perspectives, experiences, and observations of teachers, educators and administrators as they work to create equitable, inclusive, and thriving learning spaces for children.

Educational Equity

Looking closely at the *educational equity* theme, participants spoke of the inequities that existed in K-12 education, the prevalence of disparities at the high school level, the need to reallocate resources, and institutional challenges in shifting the school climate. Participants discussed the need for more access to teacher and student resources, tools, and skilled personnel

in order to drive change. The analysis process indicated an association of educational equity with the ability to create equal opportunities for all students, especially for those from disenfranchised communities. One participant shared the story of planning an upcoming college tour for students and was told by administration that the trip should be exclusively for students who could get into the university. Participant G stated:

> This should be exclusively for students who could get in. And it just, you know, my awareness around that was piqued and I had to sit at the table and kind of barter for students who traditionally would not get it, but if I'm not at the table, right? What happens to those students?

Participant G speaks to aspects of dismantling unjust structures in the next statement:

> So, we talk about equity and access and then I see that it's not happening…. It's not happening to my students in the classroom, and I have to work to give you this opportunity on such a basic level to get on campus.

Understanding the value of a campus visit and the harm that would occur in a biased process, this seasoned educator was compelled enough to engage in difficult dialogue. While a sense of frustration could be felt from this participant, it should be underscored that this educator successfully planned an inclusive college visit as a result of being vocal and insisting on a fair and just process for all students. This example amplifies the significance of critical decisions educators must make on the spot that have long-term impact on students success and future outcomes. As Participant G modeled, astute educators have an awareness and commitment to equity that allows them to identify and address concerns in the moment or with a minor delay. In this situation, an extended delay or failure to respond could have produced another outcome that would have disenfranchised and harmed students. Collectively, findings stressed a need for educators to actively seek and provide equitable learning opportunities to address gaps in the system and support structure for students. Empowering words from a brave educator made a difference.

Culturally Responsive Teaching Methods

Counter-stories that connected to *culturally responsive teaching methods* category touched on the need for targeted support and individualized instruction, challenges to diversifying syllabi, curriculum, and faculty development, as well as the important role school leadership plays in implementing inclusive and diverse practices forward. Many of the participants worked in academic settings with a diverse student population and they highlighted the importance of taking time to get to know students and earn their respect. Narratives stressed that knowing a student's name is not enough, teachers need to know students' interests and concerns and find ways to connect to what they feel is relevant. For instance, one participant shared:

> Specialized training -- this is the mission of our district. This is what we're looking for and this is the training we're providing you[...] Like you were saying, have to hold them accountable. So when we're doing the observations, we're making them sure we know. How are you implementing the PD that we give them? (Participant M)

Several stories emerged related to racial disparities and biases, and the need for racial literacy protocols for students and teachers to disrupt the pervasive colonizing and deficit mindsets which are inculcated in our academic structures. Several stories spoke of resistance and hostility among teachers in this area; however, Participant M shared that after he attempted several formats, he found success working with the small group of people willing to attend the trainings and do the work. "Now every year, we are sending more and more teachers and we're seeing the changes in the classes and student experience," stated Participant M. This category underscores the need for educators to recognize and leverage the cultural backgrounds and knowledge that students bring with them and aim to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. Our participants felt the outcomes of Culturally Responsive Teaching Methods outweigh the stress in the midst of transition. Simply put, they were convinced that CRT and CRES methods were highly effective with the potential to positively impact the school climate, teacher-student dynamics, and overall student success.

Pedagogical Challenges and Innovations

Participants shared a variety of stories that related to the category of *pedagogical challenges and innovations*. While elements noted in the culturally responsive teaching methods could be applied here, excerpts from stories collected for this theme stressed the need for integration of innovative teaching methods, professional development, access to resources, and cultivating a desire to change the academic climate, rather than maintaining social norms. One vignette spoke of shifting mindsets around immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL). Participant L stated:

> Shifting the mindsets of educators regarding immigrant students, and those for learning, which is in mind. And a lot of it is to remind them that they come with knowledge, they come with language and just because they may not know much English at that moment doesn't mean they have a learning disability. So, learning or not knowing English doesn't mean you're learning disabled. The biggest counter-narrative that I've experienced was during the summer time. This was a student who just came from Ecuador, she was, um, a junior rising senior and she was in the country for less than a year. The program was an intensive summer program for newcomer ELLs. It was connecting the arts with literacy. It was there that she discovered that she had a talent for drawing, as they had to create their own original book. With the research she chose [a topic]. She wrote everything herself in English… and then with her own original illustrations, and it was beautiful. I've never seen work like that from a student in a kind of a project-based learning environment. It was so beautiful. [...] I took it back to the vendor [who sponsored the activity and provided] the materials in the training and they published it. They were so taken back that they published it.

Like others, this vignette captures several elements related to successful pedagogy and challenges. This counter-story provides a great example of a skilled educator who was able to create a safe environment to connect with a new ELL student who was brilliant and gifted. Rather than pre-judging student capabilities, the educator provided her with the tools and support needed to be successful and, in many ways, exceptional. Mindset is perhaps one of the biggest challenges in education. This story reminds us to consider what is possible if we remove limits and barriers from ourselves and our students.

Another vignette highlighted the value of internship and academic experience and how that has helped some students connect to school in a different way. Ultimately, this category expresses the need for innovative approaches to engage learners effectively, which requires educators to adapt and evolve their teaching methods and move from a teach to the middle model to an individualized custom experience. To do this, teachers need to develop healthy relationships with students where ideas and concerns can be exchanged. When educators create environments of continuous improvement and student-centered learning, they will not only succeed in meeting the needs of a growing community, but also address pedagogical challenges and influence innovation in teaching and learning.

Professional Development and Faculty Support

*The Professional Development and Faculty Suppor*t category focused on the needs of teachers, the essential roles they play, and the need for adequate support for teachers at all levels. The counter-stories from the cohort acknowledged questionable hiring practices and the associated consequences in some cases, but the key aspect for this theme highlighted the necessity for systems and structures that support teachers in these endeavors, allowing them to grow and effectively contribute to their students' success. For instance, the term “desperation hires” was mentioned in the room, which was described as hiring any semi-qualified person or sub to have a warm body in the classroom at the start of school. Understanding the national teacher shortage and teacher retention rate, schools and administrators are oftentimes doing the best with the team they have. Participant E shared, “What kind of services or supports do we give this teacher who is an ideal? Or who may be missing the mark or not?” Participant E went on to say, “one was gone in six weeks. [...] My Principal has gotten courageous and[...] brought back a retired teacher.” Participant E explains an ecosystem of support invokes a positive shift in a teacher’s mindset and causes a transformational experience, “it is different when working in an institution where you are valued as opposed to being undervalued and overworked.” This story suggested that teachers who have a positive ecosystem of support will reproduce that kind of space for their students.

Given the national teacher shortage, participant narratives raised concerns about hiring someone underqualified for a faculty position without providing adequate support (i.e. mentor, co-teacher, aide or training). Some of our participants disclosed that teacher retention and attrition are common issues; however, some narratives demonstrated instances where novice teachers shine when they are supported and encouraged in their initial years. Effective and innovative leaders enhance the academic and professional experience for all—particularly students in high-needs and disenfranchised schools—by addressing the needs of students, teachers, and the community. They achieve this through timely and relevant professional development, hiring skilled employees, and retaining talented staff.

Systemic Barriers and Advocacy for Students

The *Systemic Barriers and Advocacy for Students* category called out elements of education that are unjust, unfair, and in many cases, simply wrong. Participants shared vignettes of injustices against students, teachers, families, staff, and academic leaders. For instance, one teacher stated that data was shared in a high school faculty meeting on state exam scores.

Students performed poorly on the science regents exam; however, students were given a science class without an assigned teacher. The teacher states:

> I noticed in one column of the data, it's saying whether or not the student was in a course that was aligned to the test and so I know I copied the assigned teacher, but we haven't had an assigned teacher this year, so I'm like, when I was speaking to the students, 'How are you guys taking this?'... 'Oh, we sat for it last year. We had science, we didn't pass it. So, we are sitting for it again, but we don't have a teacher.' So, I'm just looking through all of them and…so many kids…A year, a year and a half, two years beyond the course[.] (Participant K)

This educator went on to share that this wasn't only in science, but in several other areas as well, and as an early career educator, the fear of punitive action resulted in silence and developing a sense of powerlessness. Other attendees from different schools contributed to the conversation stating, "For high school, we have a number of students that fall in similar circumstances" (Participant M). Participant M went on to explain what happens on his campus that provides after school support but not for credit. Participant E later interjected with a comment on care and the additional burden on teachers of color to try to fill in the gaps:

> I find so often and then, you know, the work comes from the teachers of color, right? You know, because it's almost like does anybody [else] care about this? Right? We know that when students are not successful…that's harm, that harms them, right? And it's almost like they feel set up–they are. They are being set up to fail.

Participants expressed concerns about several issues such as early graduation, advocating for academic and social-emotional needs of students, discrepancies in recognition of teachers' efforts, and systemic issues plaguing the institution like racism and a range of other biases. Some participants noted the element of fear, and the role fear plays in the academic settings in their stories. Some concerns such as fear of change, repercussions (professional, personal, and political), students, diverse communities, and safety, emerged in the narratives, documenting why some teachers feel challenged when addressing racial literacy. Ultimately, key aspects in this category include systemic issues, such as, a culture of compliance (or compliance mindset) to maintain perceived norms and expectations, which prevent the adoption of innovative and tailored educational approaches. Similarly, systemic issues within education, like the focus on graduation rates and numbers versus the actual readiness and future planning for students, suggest a misalignment in educational priorities. The findings suggest the educational system needs a realignment in the five key categories outlined in this study to promote student learning and success.

Educator Empowerment Theory

From this work emerged a new theory which we call Educator Empowerment Theory (EET). This theory encompasses K-16 educators, higher education, teachers, and administrators and calls for the need to have academic spaces that (re)center the human element and remain flexible to positive growth and change. Educator Empowerment Theory calls for the creation of spaces for healing, empowering voices, storytelling, networking, affirming, and sharing resources to support faculty and students. The concept of Archaeology of Self captures our

humanity and clarifies factors that impact students in a variety of ways. By engaging in this process of counter-storytelling, educators will develop different lenses that focus on the humanity of students and teachers. This is especially needed to address the factors that disproportionally impact communities of color (i.e. attendance rates, teacher burnout/ retention).

Figure 1 provides a visual conceptual model of the Educator Empowerment Theory and the themes that emerged from this study. The series of embedded rings presented in Figure 1 indicate the creation of spaces that allow educators time to center themselves in the Archeology of Self and counter-storytelling to unearth and/or release professional antidotes or ailments stored internally. The arrows in the same image reflect time spent in the process and practice of the EET. The Educator Empowerment Theory comprises the five themes that serve as the constructs (1) educational equity, (2) culturally responsive teaching methods, (3) pedagogical challenges and innovations, (4) professional development and faculty support, and (5) systemic barriers and advocacy for students. The visual model and theory leave space for elements that are still unknown or have yet to be acknowledged.

Figure 1

Educator Empowerment Theory at a Glance

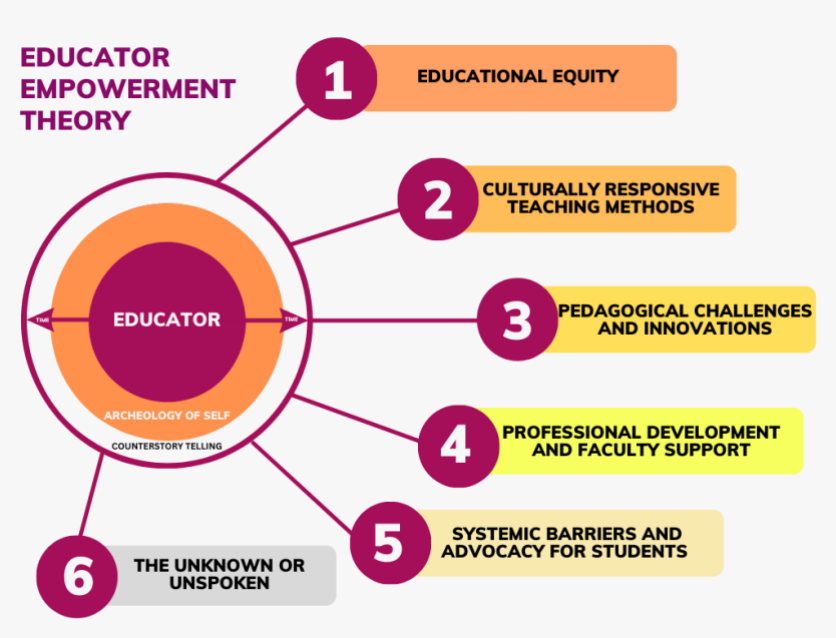


Figure 2 visually demonstrates how the factor of time impacts educators who consistently apply the Educator Empowerment Theory as practice. Drawing from the Power Law of Practice, variations were noticed in response time, depth of reflection, sense of obligation and commitment, and sense of power. Additional analysis of the counter-stories highlighted patterns within groups of participants that indicated three levels of expertise in relation to this work: *reflective awareness, integration, and commitment*. Figure 2 identifies *reflective awareness* as the initial level for educators as they discover new things through the Archeology of Self and the

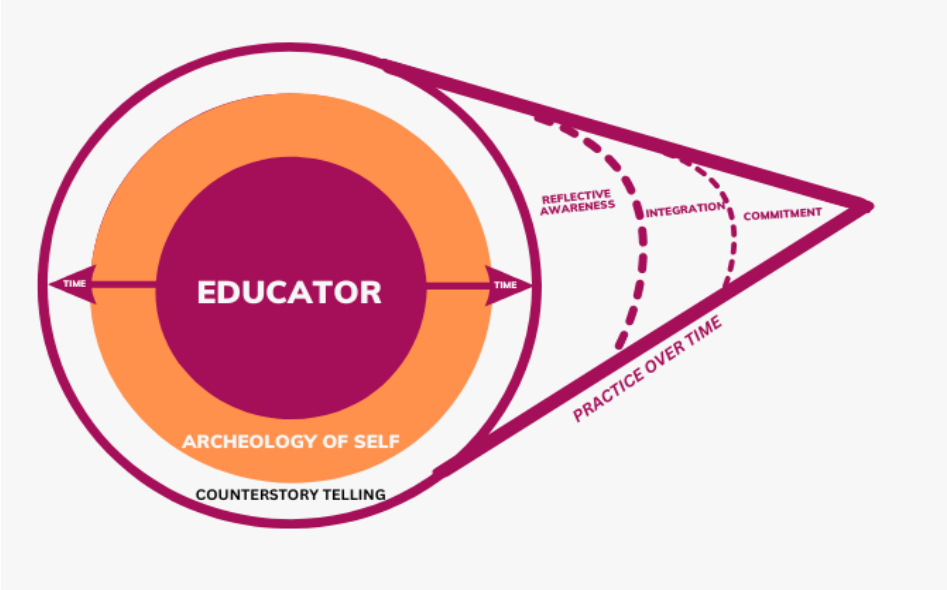
process of counter-story. Reflective awareness requires educators to look back (and within) to recall moments of bias, injustice, or inequity that were tolerated, ignored, or addressed, and to let them fill the room in any form. Typically, at this level, educators may be reluctant, uncertain and/or unfamiliar with the process which requires a safe space to engage in this practice. For some educators, this could be their first time giving voice to an injustice they observed or experienced, and a variety of emotions or thoughts can make a moment of truth telling difficult. Social norms of remaining silent and going with the flow also encourage educators to withhold their truth. There is often fear or a sense of powerlessness for some educators at this level that can be countered with stories of teacher success, support, and advocacy, but educators need safe spaces. Without a safe space and ample time, educators may not have an opportunity to feel empowered. Creating a safe space, void of judgement, retaliation, bias, hate or harm, remains a critical task for teacher and ultimately student success.

As educators develop a reflective awareness with EET, they begin to incorporate elements of the EET in their personal and professional lives. The progression to the next level of *integration* builds on the first level while taking additional steps to apply the tools and resources in practice. At this level, educators have a stronger sense of self, sense of a community, and awareness of resources to support their growth. Although the practice is inconsistent at this phase, there is evidence of personal and professional growth in this area as educators develop confidence in the power of their voice. Vignettes of educators taking a chance to speak up or asking a question in a meeting when they would normally remain silent showcase growth and progress at this stage. Some educators at this stage may not feel comfortable addressing an injustice or bias in the moment and may opt to bring it up at another time as they are aware of the consequences of remaining silent.

Over time, educators who continuously engage in this practice develop habits that reflect a deep commitment to eradicating bias and injustice. Educators at this level display comfort with the practice of addressing injustices as an obligation. Additionally, educators at this level feel empowered and have a lower sense of fear, as they are aware of their resources, tools, and external support, and they are more likely to address a problem, concern, or injustice in the moment. Moreover, they require less time to deliberate on appropriate responses as they often believe that not calling out an unjust practice or bias can be perceived as silent sanctioning. Educators at this stage feel empowered and are willing to share that power with others. These educators teach and lead with an emboldened spirit that inspires students and other teachers.

Figure 2

Educator Empowerment Theory as a Practice



Discussion

The findings of this study have significant implications for various stakeholders within the educational landscape, including schools (IHE and K-12), educators, and students, as well as for the work of the Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) Institute, ongoing research, and the Voices of Empowerment Conference. By examining the transformative potential of counter-stories and the integration of the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework, this research provides a roadmap for addressing systemic inequities and fostering more inclusive and equitable learning environments. The Educator Empowerment Theory (EET) provides a model to support and strengthen teachers as they work to create inclusive and equitable learning experiences for students. The five constructs that emerged from this work -- educational equity, culturally responsive teaching methods, pedagogical challenges and innovations, professional development and faculty support, and systemic barriers and advocacy for students -- identify critical areas to address as we work to eliminate bias and advance K-12 education, higher education, educational policy, professional development, and student success. EET, in conjunction with Archeology of Self and Counter-story, provides a design that can be replicated in learning and professional spaces to empower educators and educational leaders to use the gift of counter-storytelling to counter perspectives and drive change. Given the depth and breadth of this work, the implications focus on schools, educators, students, and research.

Implications of the Themes for Schools

The findings of this study highlight the necessity for schools to create spaces that effectively address educational inequities and provide ample time to allow educators to have meaningful professional development experiences that address a unified commitment to creating equitable educational spaces. The Voices of Empowerment Conference was a wonderful

professional development experience that continues to provide new insights on teacher empowerment. Unfortunately, since there are not enough of these professional development opportunities for teachers nationwide, it has to be sought out. We would encourage schools to consider a multi-tiered approach to truly drive change that provides a variety of approaches over time to meet the needs of their school populations. Similarly, school systems must enhance a culture of respect and value that empowers teachers. Schools must establish safe environments by embedding counselors and social workers within their institutions to provide holistic support for students and educators. Students tend to thrive in learning spaces where teachers are cared for properly.

Additionally, there is a critical need for an interdisciplinary curriculum that integrates the Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education (CRSE) Framework into both K-12 and higher education experiences, ensuring that academic and enrichment activities are inclusive and culturally relevant. Creating spaces for counter-storytelling for educators and students is essential, allowing them to share their experiences and perspectives as a means of challenging dominant narratives and fostering inclusivity. One of the crucial roles of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies is advancing research methods that support these initiatives, providing a foundation for innovative and effective practices. Schools should partner with research institutions, higher education, and community-based organizations to continue developing a shared understanding of building equity and bridging theory to practice. Such partnerships are essential for implementing these changes and fostering a supportive ecosystem for students and educators, ultimately leading to a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape.

Implications for Educators

Educators are at the forefront of driving the necessary changes highlighted in this study. To equip themselves with the skills and knowledge required, they must actively seek out professional learning and training opportunities that focus on CR-SE and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA). Collaboration with Institutes of Higher Education (IHE) to align teacher and educator preparation programs with CRSE protocols is crucial. One participant from the conference voiced a desire to collaborate with the University to develop courses and professional development on restorative practices for pre-service and in-service teachers. Developing collaborations that align common interests, shared expertise, and/or resources between K-12 and IHE are important in this collective effort. Educators and administrators in K-12 and higher education institutions should create spaces where counter-stories and diverse perspectives can be shared and valued. Additionally, educators should explore stories and counternarratives outside of their comfort zone. Whether reading a book, watching a film/play, or having a conversation with someone new that extends beyond one's culture or set of beliefs, it is imperative that educators continue to evolve and develop a heightened sense of awareness of the world. These actions will empower educators and students to foster an inclusive learning environment and challenge hegemonic paradigms.

Implications for Students

The impact of these educational reforms on students is profound, as they directly influence learning, engagement, and potential for success. Schools must implement strategies for effective professional development to ensure that educators are prepared to support student

success. Creating spaces where students can share their voices and experiences is vital for fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. To do this we must inform them and involve them. Provide students with information, skills, and strategies to think critically, collaborate and problem solve. When possible, provide data (i.e. student and staff demographics, teacher attrition rates, student attendance, test scores, graduation rates, and student satisfaction data) and spaces for student (counter) storying and vignettes centered on student experiences to help inform, humanize, and guide data-driven decision making. When making decisions about students, student voices must be at the center. If there are possible changes taking place, allow students to contribute thoughts via an anonymous digital survey or comment box. Everyone wants to be heard, and students are no different.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

As a result of the work within the Incubator Space, the CRES Institute and the School of Education implemented a new model for granting Continuing Teacher and Leader Education (CTLE) credit, with the endorsement of the New York State Education Department. CTLE is part of the professional learning requirements of New York State public educators to maintain professional certification. Partnership with higher education institutions, community-based organizations, and school communities is critical to develop a coherent understanding of the challenges, promising practices, and potential solutions within K-16 contexts. This implies earmarking funding to demonstrate their commitment to these partnerships.

Implications for Research

Future research directions should focus on exploring gaps in current educational practices and identifying innovative solutions to advance educational equity. We also call on researchers to utilize Educator Empowerment Theory as an approach to their studies. The CRES Institute at St. John's University plays a pivotal role in this endeavor by creating spaces that foster discussions and initiatives that promote inclusive curriculum development and formalizing partnerships with the K-16 educational community. The Incubator space within CRES serves as a dynamic environment for producing groundbreaking projects like the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative, which aims to integrate inclusive practices across educational settings. These experiences will inform how partnerships and collaboration may be approached with other colleges and research groups within the Incubator space. This initiative exemplifies how research and practice can converge to drive systemic change.

This study challenged traditional descriptors for researchers by highlighting the active involvement of the community as equal research partners alongside university faculty, which resulted in reshaping the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) understanding of community-based research at St. John's University.This positioned the IRB to rethink their notions of who can perform research and thus created more equitable opportunities for conducting research at St. John's University. These institutional changes demonstrate the epistemic shifts that the research component of CRES promotes, inspiring (re)evolution of long-standing traditions that guide university-based research.

Contributions and Future Prospects

The expanded network of educators, facilitated by CRES, underscore the power of sharing insights and resources that empower educators to heal, act, and disrupt hegemonic paradigms rooted in white supremacy. The Voices of Empowerment Conference exemplifies this mission by providing a platform for educators to engage in critical dialogues and reflect on their roles in fostering equitable educational spaces. This work highlights the importance of being together in these spaces in creating these frameworks in different and powerful ways. Future prospects include expanding online forums for sharing knowledge and resources beyond in-person conferences, ensuring that the momentum for change continues to grow and influence educational practices and policies on a broader scale.

Conclusion

The transformative potential of counter-stories, as explored in this study, provides a critical pathway for promoting educational equity through the lenses of racial literacy and the "Archaeology of Self" framework. By centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, the study reveals the systemic barriers and inequities that persist in educational settings. Through a qualitative analysis of counter-stories, this research identifies key themes that informs the emergence of the Educator Empowerment Theory, underscoring the need for a comprehensive and systemic approach to reimagining educational environments that foster inclusion and equity.

As a call to action, educators, administrators, researchers, community members, and policymakers are urged to embrace the insights from this study to initiate meaningful changes in educational practices, spaces, and policies. By leveraging the power of counter-stories and the CRSE Framework, stakeholders can dismantle the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequities and work towards creating an educational landscape that honors and uplifts diverse narratives. The Voices of Empowerment Conference exemplifies the collaborative spirit necessary to achieve these goals, serving as a model for future initiatives that empower educators and students alike. Through concerted efforts and shared commitment, we can foster an educational system that supports the holistic development and success of all students, paving the way for a more just and equitable society.

Notes on contributors

Dr. Jordan González is an Assistant Professor of TESOL and Bilingual Education and serves as the Coordinator of the K-16 Inclusive Curriculum Collaborative in the Incubator Program at St. John's University. Drawing on extensive experience as an ENL and World Languages educator, as well as leadership roles with the New York State Association for Bilingual Education, Dr. González's work bridges research, policy, and practice. His research explores the intersection of race, language, immigration, and education, informed by years as an English as a New Language and Spanish teacher in NYC public schools, Director of Language Acquisition in Yonkers, and a lead resource specialist for the Long Island Regional Bilingual Education Resource Network. As a Latino scholar with Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage, Dr. González is deeply committed to equity and inclusivity in education.

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Ph.D., is a Professor of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the 2024 recipient of the New York University Steinhardt School's Dorothy Height Distinguished Alumni Award. A proud daughter of the South Bronx, Yolanda's work is deeply informed by her Caribbean and Southern heritage and the legacies of justice and resilience that shaped her upbringing. Her research, published in top-tier academic journals, focuses on equity and social justice in education. She is co-editor of five books and co-author of the multiple award-winning *Advancing Racial Literacies in Teacher Education: Activism for Equity in Digital Spaces* (2021), which explores her groundbreaking concept of Archeology of Self™. Through this framework, she empowers educators to engage in critical self-reflection as a pathway to equity. Yolanda's dedication to advancing racial literacies and advocacy honors her roots while creating new pathways for inclusivity and justice in education.

Lonice Eversley is a dedicated educator with 26 years of experience teaching in the South Bronx and a Master Teacher committed to supporting fellow educators. A proud graduate of the NYC Public School system, Lonice's passion for education is rooted in her heritage as the daughter of a Paraprofessional and Early Childhood Reading Specialist and the great-granddaughter of a reconstruction-era educator who opened a Rosenwald School in North Carolina. She upholds her family's belief that education is the fountain of liberation. Lonice practices and promotes Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education, creating liberatory classroom spaces where students bring their full selves and engage in critical learning to challenge inequities. Her classrooms serve as laboratories for leadership, empowering students to envision and construct a society centered on equity and justice.

Dr. Aliyah Holmes has been an integral part of the St. John's University community for the last twenty years. As Associate Professor of Educational Technology in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, she strives to improve the quality of education for learners of all ages. Her research interests and publications cover technology integration, STEM, Teacher Education, assessment, and issues of equity. As a curriculum specialist, she facilitated school programs that provided student support services to young students in NYC. Throughout her career, she was awarded over $1.5 M in grants and sponsored research. She also held key roles including University Assessment Committee Co-Chair, Co-Chair of the Assessment and Accreditation Committee, and eventually, as Associate Dean and Interim Dean of the School of Education before returning to her faculty role in July of 2022. Now, Dr. Holmes serves as the Program Coordinator for the Curriculum & Instruction PhD Program at St. John's.

Dr. Natalie P. Byfield has a dual appointment at St. John's University. She is founding director of the Institute for Critical Race and Ethnic Studies and Professor of Sociology. Her research is interdisciplinary, broadly concerned with hegemony, specifically the relationship between knowledge and power in the construction and reproduction of racial inequities in the modern western world. She investigates knowledge and power relationships in the language, media systems, technologies, and research methodologies in the institutions of policing, journalism, the social sciences, and higher education. She was a working journalist in New York City for about a decade with her work appearing in New York Daily News, The New York Times, HuffPost, Time, New York Law Journal, among others. She is the author of Savage Portrayals: Race, Media, and the Central Park Jogger Story. Her current book project is titled "Minority Report: Place, Race, and State Surveillance in New York City.

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