

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: EDUCATION WITHOUT SCHOOLS: WITNESSING
BLACK LIBERATION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION SPACES AND PRACTICES

Courtney A. Douglass, Doctor of Philosophy, 2025

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This dissertation explores how Black families in the United States are reclaiming educational sovereignty by opting out of traditional school systems that often function as sites of antiblackness and dehumanization. Through three qualitative studies, I examine homeschooling, unschooling, and self-directed education as acts of resistance and care, rooted in Black radical traditions and guided by the pursuit of Black freedom. Across the studies, I engage theoretical frameworks including motherwork, marronage, and BlackCrit, while grounding the work in an understanding of antiblackness as both structural and ontological.

The first study draws on interviews with Black homeschooling mothers, highlighting the multidimensional labor of motherwork in resisting state violence and nurturing Black children's liberation. The second study analyzes a podcast by a Black unschooling mother, positioning unschooling as a contemporary form of marronage—an intentional disengagement from the state in pursuit of autonomy, self-determination, and joy. The final case study examines a Black self-directed education community in Maryland, uncovering the tensions, joys, and healing practices involved in sustaining educational spaces centered on Black sovereignty.

Together, these papers argue that traditional schools are incapable of fully honoring the

possibilities inherent in Black children. Instead, Black families are creating alternative education spaces where their children can thrive. This work contributes to the growing body of research on Black educational resistance and raises critical questions about what it means to raise free people in a world not currently built for Black freedom.

EDUCATION WITHOUT SCHOOLS: WITNESSING BLACK LIBERATION THROUGH
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION SPACES & PRACTICES

by

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Dedication

To the liberation of Black people
individually and collectively
mind, body, soul, and spirit
past, present, and future

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Introduction

Bearing witness to the birth of Black children as they come into this world has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life. As a birth worker, I have held space for Black mothers and fathers as they travail the journey of becoming guides to these precious souls. Each opportunity to behold this incredible moment feels sacred, spiritual, miraculous, magical, and wondrous. Being present for the moment that Black life emerges on this planet has deeply shaped how I regard Black children and their existence. Before they even take their first breaths, these Black beings are loved, seen, and celebrated with an enormous hope for life possibilities. These babies' innocence and curiosity are encouraged by having ample room to explore and discover. Black parents prioritize helping them learn who they are and what gifts they have. Black children are protected and have ample freedom, fun, and joy.

Unfortunately, the priority for supporting these experiences shifts dramatically as Black children grow up. Through their eventual interactions with the school system, so many Black children and youth are met with the exact opposite of the excitement and delight that surrounded their birth and early years. Oftentimes, schools introduce shadows that dim or obstruct the light of what is possible for Black children. By the time I encountered Black youth as a secondary teacher, schools had already extinguished Black students' pleasure of learning. Engagement with schools discouraged Black learners' self-expression, creativity, and sense of inquiry. The previous advocacy for helping them pursue their learning interests had been replaced with standardized learning objectives and constant testing. Proving mastery of a subject and moving on was prioritized over deepening their knowledge on a topic just for the sake of learning. Having fun and playing with peers had become an intense focus on grades and competition. The wild, unstructured freedom of childhood was reduced to limited recess and classrooms that

primarily valued discipline and behavior management. Over time, Black children's agency, voice, and autonomy diminished, and instead, they learned to obey school authority, be compliant, and silence their dissent.

Furthermore, Dumas (2014) refers to schools as sites of Black suffering and oppression where antiblackness and the impossibility of Black humanity have become ordinary pains. As institutions of spatialized antiblack violence and terror, schools habitually assault Black students through curriculum, disciplinary policies, language practices, and cultural erasure (Jenkins, 2021). Other researchers and Black folks alike recognize that schools are sites of dehumanization, surveillance, policing, state-sanctioned violence, and death for Black children (Wun, 2016). In response, Black families in the United States are increasingly choosing alternative pathways to education (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009). By declining state-sponsored education, Black parents try to avoid the aspects of school that extinguish their children's life possibilities. Deciding to step outside the school system means that Black parents can offer their children more opportunities to access their full humanity. Despite numbers indicating that home education nearly rivals the number of students in charter schools (NCES, 2019), little research has focused on this type of education. Furthermore, Black home educators are the fastest-growing population of homeschoolers (Eggleston & Fields, 2021; Ray, 2019) but they are virtually unexamined in the academic literature. Even less is known about Black unschoolers, who reject or resist school-based approaches to learning and education.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the ways Black people are choosing education without schools and to learn about their experiences. A central argument of my overarching research is that schools cannot be fixed, therefore, we must invest in exploring and studying alternative pathways to educating our children. My work seeks to understand how

Black parents articulate their decision-making processes, collaborate with their children for learning, and what educational practices they employ outside schools. I contend that choosing to remove children from schools is an act of resistance by Black parents in response to antiblackness. Therefore, I view Black parents' educational work as liberatory, and my research is grounded in theories that consider aspects of Black freedom.

Theoretical Framing

I approach my work with an onto-epistemological understanding of the totality of antiblackness (Day, 2015). As such, I take up critical scholarship that does not limit my concept of antiblackness to only violence or racism within or beyond schools. Instead, I understand that antiblackness encompasses various forms of haunting, terror, suffering, fungibility, and malaise (Dumas, 2016; Jenkins, 2021; Love, 2014; ross, 2019). The Afro-pessimist framework of antiblackness (Hartman, 2008; Moten, 2013; Patterson, 1982; Sexton, 2014; Wilderson, 2010) challenges us to consider the contempt and disregard for blackness on an existential and ontological level, shaping the entire paradigm of how one sees the world.

This framing of antiblackness is not intended to offer solutions for racial inequities (Dumas, 2016) or fully conceive of Black liberation within an antiblack world. Instead, it allows me to sit with other theories' attempts to actualize the limited forms of humanity, freedom, and liberation possible in the current world until we abolish it and build something better. Furthermore, holding the tension of antiblackness and other theories like Motherwork (Collins, 1994), Marronage (Bledsoe, 2018; Roberts, 2017), and BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016) allows me to understand how everyday Black families are making sense of their freedoms and possibilities in the here and now.

Methodological Approach

My dissertation takes a qualitative approach to examining out-of-school educational beliefs and practices of Black families. Much of my work is exploratory and lends itself well to qualitative methods that permit me to collect rich data (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, quantitative methods would not fully capture these unexamined populations' voices, experiences, settings, and practices. Each of the papers in this dissertation highlights the methodological arc of my journey as a researcher.

Overview of Three Papers

In my three-article dissertation, I conducted empirical studies examining Black alternative education spaces, motivations, decision-making, practices, and their connections to Black liberation. In paper 1: *A Labor Of Love: Black Motherwork In Navigating Homeschooling Motivations And Practices*, I completed qualitative interviews with Black homeschooling mothers in the Washington, DC metro area (pre-COVID-19). Using motherwork (Collins, 1994) as a theoretical framework, I centered the role of Black mothers in the resistance, survival, and freedom of Black children through alternative education. This study revealed the variation of Black homeschooling approaches, the multilayered dimensions of motherwork in Black homeschooling, and how state homeschooling policies support Black motherwork.

In paper 2: *"This Is How We Raise Free People": Black Unschooling As Modern-Day Marronage*, I used reflexive thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to uncover themes of marronage (disengagement with the state to pursue self-sovereignty) found in episodes of a Black unschooling audio podcast. The study explored how Black unschoolers and maroons both employ ideologies and practices of Black self-sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determination through their disengagement with antiblack racism and the state. Findings uncover

how Black unschooling is a modern-day expression of a much older form of Black fugitivity, with deep historical roots in Black liberation.

Finally, paper 3: *This Ain't No School: A Case Study Exploring Self-Directed Education in the Black Community* investigated how Black folks established and tried to sustain a Black Self-Directed Education (SDE) learning community. This single qualitative case study explored how SDE was imagined and practiced by Black adults and children. The study found that the joys and struggles of the learning community were rooted in Black Freedom, tensions between Black culture and SDE, and the potential healing aspects of SDE for the Black community.

Positionality

I am a Sagittarius, ruled by the 9th house of higher learning, so I often find myself in school, but I don't believe it is the only pathway to education. My beliefs about schools are shaped by my experiences as a student and a teacher, which I discuss in the three papers. Despite my traditional path of formal schooling, my beliefs about schools are also significantly influenced by my family, who took less conventional paths. My grandfather left school in the 6th grade to work. He was an avid reader, eventually went to college, and became a high school principal. Neither of my parents graduated from college, but both went on to start and run successful community-based nonprofits for over 15 years. My younger sister was kicked out of multiple schools, and her educational journey was my first introduction to alternative education—small schools, mixed-age classrooms, flexible schedules, and online learning. I remember her frustration and tears when I think of all the ways schools simply did not make room for her to be herself. But I also remember her joy at finding a sense of belonging when she finally attended untraditional schools, which made her feel alive and welcomed. I carry these personal connections throughout my search for alternatives to current schooling paradigms.

Above all, I want Black people to be free and I do this research in service and pursuit of that freedom. For myself, for Black women, for Black children, for Black men. I labor in this freedom work for our ancestors, our elders, and our future generations. I don't think removing Black children from schools is the only path to more freedom, but it is promising and it's where I choose to invest my time, energy, and advocacy.

Significance

Believing that Black families make better choices for their children than the state, I examine how alternatives to schools might recover and maintain the joy, light, freedom, hope, and possibilities that Black children are inherently born with when they enter this world. Through my work, I search for something worthy of Black children—something schools can never be. Furthermore, my research contributes to the gap in empirical research on Black alternative education practices like homeschooling and unschooling. My work increases the visibility of these alternative options while also considering how they might become more viable options in the school choice conversation. By including alternative education approaches in the narrative about Black education, we may increase opportunities for Black families to get free.

Paper 1: A Labor of Love: Black Motherwork in Navigating Homeschooling Motivations and Practices

Abstract

This paper investigates the experiences of Black homeschoolers, a growing but understudied population of families in the United States. Participants in this qualitative study are homeschoolers in the Washington, DC metro area (pre-COVID-19). Drawing from motherwork (Collins, 1994) as a theoretical framework, my study centers the role of Black homeschooling mothers in the survival and freedom of Black children. The research questions addressed in this study are: 1) How do Black mothers demonstrate principles of motherwork (Collins, 1994) in the context of homeschooling? 2) How is motherwork present in their homeschooling motivations, decision-making, and practices? My research aims to advance our understanding of this population, amplify their contextualized experiences, and increase the scholarly discussion of educational alternatives for Black students in the U.S.

Introduction

Mothering Black children is the antithesis [of antiblackness] because of its inherent function in proliferating and preserving Black life- Smith, 2016, p.32

In a world where antiblackness rages against the humanity and survival of Black people, Black mothers are uniquely positioned to nourish the Black spirit and act as conduits for protecting and perpetuating Black existence. Through birthing and raising Black children, Black mothers resist white¹ supremacy and domination. Through acts of nurturing and care, Black mothers prepare Black children for a world not built for them. Through transgenerational refusal, defiance, and struggle, Black mothers alter the possibilities for Black futures.

Black mothers have always been a mighty force in educating Black children and teens, and improving their future opportunities (Elliott et al., 2015). Black mothers have marched on the front lines for school integration, worked multiple jobs to provide college tuition, spent hours helping with homework, or served as teachers and school board members. These efforts have been in service of improving Black children's learning and educational opportunities, and also for educational equity, social justice, and the general welfare of Black children.

The well-being of Black children is of particular concern in schools, which are sites of overwhelming antiblack hostility and suffering (Dumas, 2014). As places of spatialized antiblack violence and terror, schools habitually assault Black students through curriculum, disciplinary policies, language practices, and cultural erasure (Jenkins, 2021). As the mothers of Black children and teens who were injured, incarcerated, or murdered by police have become more

¹ In my work, I adopt Dumas' (2016) approach to the capitalization of Black and not white, where Black refers to a racialized social group and white or whiteness refers to a social construct. He also states "I write blackness and antiblackness in lower-case, because they refer not to Black people per se, but to a social construction of racial meaning, much as whiteness does" (p.13).

vocal, so have Black mothers demanding better teachers, facilities, and treatment for Black children in schools (Powell & Coles, 2021). Although Black mothers have growing evidence for demanding change, schools often remain the same, reproducing the same social injustices and antiblack practices that are endemic realities in the United States (Dumas & ross, 2016).

In recent years, Black mothers have led the charge to pursue alternative educational pathways for their children. Homeschooling is one alternative model of education that has become more prevalent in the Black community. Homeschooling is usually defined as home-based, parent-led education that takes place outside of traditional public or private school systems (Murphy, 2013). In 2019, Black children made up nearly 10% of the estimated 2.3 million homeschoolers in the United States, becoming one of the fastest-growing segments of the homeschooling population (Ray, 2019). Because women are the dominant influencers of homeschooling decision-making (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013), Black mothers are overwhelmingly the primary leaders, teachers, and tone-setters for Black homeschooling environments and practices (Mazama, 2016). In essence, Black homeschooling mothers are charting new educational pathways that do not depend on schools.

Yet, there is limited research about Black families' experiences and practices of homeschooling. Few studies investigate Black mothers' homeschool decision-making. By focusing on the experiences of Black mothers, we gain greater insight into the larger Black homeschooling movement and individual Black homeschooling practices. This research aims to advance our understanding of Black homeschooling by amplifying Black mothers' particular experiences and increasing the scholarly discussion of educational alternatives for Black students in the United States. This study centers on the roles of Black homeschooling mothers in the survival and freedom of Black children while navigating education without schools. Specifically,

this research asks: 1) How do Black mothers demonstrate principles of motherwork (Collins, 1994) in the context of homeschooling? 2) How is motherwork present in their homeschooling motivations, decision-making, and practices? These questions aim to reveal how motherwork (Collins, 1994) is enacted when Black women educate Black children on their own terms. As a theory, motherwork emphasizes the racial, historical, social, and political factors that shape how women of color mother their children. This work of persistence, innovation, and endurance by Black mothers is a labor of love.

The article is organized as follows: I provide a brief overview of homeschooling in the United States, followed by a literature review on Black homeschooling, its motivations, and practices. Next, I review the theoretical framework of Motherwork to emphasize the racialized aspects of mothering that affect Black mothers' homeschool motivations and practices. My qualitative methodology follows with details about participant recruitment, data collection, participant highlights, and data analysis.

Literature Review: Home Schooling in the United States

Homeschooling, also called home education, is a home-based, parent-led form of education that takes place outside of traditional public or private school systems.² The origins of homeschooling in the United States are both complex and controversial, spanning several decades and vastly different legal and ideological histories. Because education law is a state

² For the context of this article, it is important to note that I refer to schools and schooling as public, state-mandated forms of education as well as private education that takes place in school settings. For my work, home-based education or homeschooling emphasizes parental educational decision making and parent-led learning that happens outside of schools. Homeschooling is different from unschooling or self-directed education which is a form of home or community-based education that is child-led.

issue, rather than a federal one, Gaither (2017) asserts that each state has its own story when it comes to chronicling the foundations of homeschooling in the United States.

Education at home was the primary model of schooling in the United States until 1850-1918, when compulsory schooling mandates went into effect across all states (Murphy, 2013). Although many “founding fathers” and leaders of the United States are touted as being schooled at home (e.g., George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson), Murphy (2013) and other scholars argue that home education that took place pre-compulsory schooling mandates is markedly different from contemporary homeschooling.

Home education of the 1800s was substantially abandoned as a practice until modern-day homeschooling began in the 1960s and 1970s as school reformers pushed for change and alternatives to compulsory public schooling (Murphy, 2013). This shift is largely attributed to two primary leaders of two very different (and opposing) homeschooling movements (Gaither, 2017; Murphy, 2013). On the political liberal left, a humanistic, child-centered, progressive approach to homeschooling was led by John Holt (Murphy, 2013). This side of the contemporary homeschooling movement had strong roots in unschooling, child-led learning, and flexible learning environments (Murphy, 2013). On the political conservative right, Raymond Moore is credited with leading the religious, Christian fundamentalist homeschooling movement (Murphy, 2013). This conservative camp of homeschoolers eventually made up a significantly larger portion of modern-day homeschoolers and primarily focused on pushing back on the secularism of public schools and the conflicts with Christian moral values being taught by parents in the home (Murphy, 2013). Both factions of the contemporary homeschool movement heavily critiqued the public school system and championed or influenced the laws that govern homeschooling today.

Homeschooling and the Law

Homeschooling is now legal in all 50 U.S. states, but the legislation that led to legalization in each state continued into the early 1990s, with some states still considering homeschooling a crime until then (Bales, 2020). Through historical research, Gaither (2017) details the court cases, arrests, hearings, and legislative battles that led to states legalizing homeschooling over the years. Since 1983, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA)³ has been another significant (and controversial) organization that has been involved with the legalization of homeschooling in the United States. In addition to advocating for state laws that protect homeschooling freedoms and reduce burdens to homeschooling families, HSLDA also monitors state-by-state homeschool laws and regulations and provides legal defense and advice for its members (HSLDA, 2023).

Although homeschooling laws vary by state, there are similar areas of consideration that guide state policies. HSLDA (2023) includes the following nine areas of state policies for homeschooling families: 1) whether or not parents must notify the local school district of their intent to homeschool, 2) who can teach homeschooled children, 3) what qualifications (if any) are required to teach children at home, 4) which subjects (if any) are required to be taught and if curriculum must be approved, 5) whether or not standardized assessments of learning are required by homeschoolers (and how often), 6) what language children must be homeschooled in, 7) homeschool attendance requirements, 8) immunization requirements, and 9) whether or not

³HSLDA has been criticized for its ties to the religious right and its advocacy for various conservative political and religious causes. They are controversial for their conflicts of interest, emphasis on minimal state oversight, presenting biased data, and supporting parents as natural, God-given authorities over their children. More information about the organization is publicly available and also detailed through the Coalition for Responsible Home Education at <https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/why-homeschooling-needs-oversight-responding-to-hslda-and-world/>

home visits from the local school district are required. Furthermore, each state also varies in how it classifies homeschooling, whether as its own type of education, as private schooling, or as a private religious school with exemptions (HSLDA, 2023). States may also have different regulations for homeschooling with private tutors instead of parents, homeschooling as an individual family, or homeschooling as a group of families (HSLDA, 2023). Many states have more than one option for families to select when deciding to homeschool their children, and even within states, the regulations can vary by district (Coalition for Responsible Home Education, 2023).

HSLDA categorizes states into the following four categories based on their level of homeschooling regulation: 1) no notice, low regulation, 2) low regulation, 3) moderate regulation, and 4) high regulation. According to their website, HSLDA states that the first category means that families do not have to declare their intent to homeschool with the state. The second category requires parents to notify their local school district of their intent to homeschool. States in the third category “require parents to send a notification, test scores, and/or professional evaluation of student progress to their local school district” (HSLDA, 2023, n.p.). The final category includes “states that require parents to send notification or achievement test scores and/or professional evaluation, plus other requirements (i.e., curriculum approval by the state, teacher qualification of parents, or home visits by officials)” (HSLDA, 2023, n.p.). By category, 11 states are no notice, low regulation; 22 states are considered low regulation; 13 states are moderately regulated; and 4 states are listed as highly regulated. Using these metrics, Maryland is considered a low-regulated state for homeschooling.

The Rise of Black Homeschooling

The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) claims there were about 3.1 million homeschooled students in 2021-2022 in grades K-12 in the United States (roughly 6% of school-age children)⁴ (NHERI, 2023). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates that the homeschooling population is just over half the number of students enrolled in charter schools (NCES, 2019). In light of these numbers, it is confounding that more attention is not given to homeschooling research, where minoritized families are well represented. According to a nationwide study, 41% of homeschooled students identify as Black, Asian, Latinx, and others (i.e., not White/non-Latinx) (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Within this expanding population, Black or African-Americans are the fastest-growing segment of homeschoolers (Fields-Smith, 2015; Ray, 2019; Eggleston & Fields, 2021). In the following sections, I examine the historical perspectives, motivations, and practices of Black homeschoolers as a foundation for understanding how Black mothers use homeschooling as a practice to protect and nurture their children.

Although the dominant homeschooling literature portrays Black homeschooling as a relatively new phenomenon in the United States, there is a long tradition of African-Americans operating outside the boundaries of state-sponsored schools and formal systems of education (Williams, 2009). From self-taught literacy on slave plantations, Freedmen schools during Reconstruction, private and community schools started before desegregation, to the Mississippi Freedom Schools and Liberation Schools led by Black political organizations, there is a rich history of Black self-reliance in education (Williams, 2009). These pursuits reflect the efforts of Black people to liberate themselves from tyranny and oppression through education that

⁴ The National Center for Education Statistics estimated 1.7 million in 2019, but homeschooling researchers believe this is lower than it should be (NHERI, 2023).

embraces their histories, identities, knowledge, and culture. Because the Black community (free or enslaved) could not wait for a racist government to grant them access to resources for learning, they forged their own educational pathways by any means necessary. Whether it meant taking books and learning to read by candlelight, hosting schools in church basements, or boldly creating political education programs to empower Black youth, Black people in the United States have always led self-determined endeavors to obtain their freedom (Williams, 2009). Modern-day homeschooling is one of many extensions of these Black radical traditions.

Research on Black Homeschooling

Although the field of Black homeschooling research is growing, a systematic review of the literature confirms there is limited empirical research on the topic. Within this small field, most of the literature is about Black homeschooling motivations, with scattered peeks into Black homeschooling practices. Studies conducted by Fields-Smith & Williams (2009), Mazama & Lundy (2012), and Fields-Smith & Kisura (2013) collectively surveyed, interviewed, and held focus groups with over 100 Black homeschooling families in the Metro-DC, Metro-Atlanta, Midwest, and East Coast areas of the United States. These studies revealed Black homeschoolers' unique schooling perspectives and challenged the notion that homeschooling families primarily fell into the categories of Ideologues (religious homeschoolers) or Pedagogues (homeschoolers against government interference), as cited by Van Galen (1987). Moving beyond these binaries, Fields-Smith & Williams (2009) demonstrated that experiences of racism played a more significant role in Black families' motivations for homeschooling, regardless of their religious views and whether or not they took issue with the government's involvement in their children's learning. These findings firmly established the argument that Black homeschooling is in a category of its own.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted all U.S. homeschooling broadly, and Black homeschooling specifically, by increasing the number of families practicing this form of alternative education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (cited by Eggleston & Fields, 2021), U.S. homeschooling rates doubled (from 5 to 11 percent) between spring 2020 and fall 2020. For Black families, there was a fivefold increase in homeschooling from 3 to 16 percent during the same period. These numbers do not include families who were participating in virtual schooling through traditional schools. Though the numbers have decreased slightly post-pandemic, many Black families have chosen to remain homeschoolers despite schools reopening (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). The pandemic's Black homeschooling numbers are important to note because COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in visibility and resources given to the Black homeschooling population. As I discuss in the methods section, data for this study was collected prior to the shutdowns of 2020, but the role of the pandemic in Black homeschooling still remains an important factor and should be studied in future research.

Black Homeschooling Motivations

Black parents cite multiple motivating factors for homeschooling their children and teens, including racism, violence, religion, and inadequate school quality (e.g., low-quality instruction, antiblack curriculum) (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Mazama & Lundy, 2012). In their work titled, *African American Homeschoolers: The Force of Faith and the Reality of Race in the Homeschooling Experience*, Mazama & Lundy (2014) detail the ways that Black families from various faith backgrounds incorporate religious teachings, moral instruction, and spiritual practices into their homeschooling. Mazama & Lundy (2014) also found that racism and religion are not mutually exclusive motivations for Black homeschooling, demonstrating that the desire to homeschool for religious reasons does not exclude Black families from also homeschooling

for racial reasons. Because participants in this study identified as non-religious homeschoolers, this review of the literature will be limited to homeschooling motivations informed by various forms of racism.

As a psychological, cultural, structural, and epistemological force that continuously mutates, racism permeates Black existence and is intertwined in decision-making for nearly every facet of life, including schooling (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Racism is by far the most prevalent homeschooling motivation acknowledged by Black parents, as it is nearly inseparable from other motivations (Baker, 2013; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2012). It is evident from the literature that race infiltrates homeschool decision-making for Black parents as they encounter inequities, prejudice, discrimination, and individual and institutionalized racism related to the education of their children.

Racism as a motivation for homeschooling reflects the same historical inequities that have plagued the education of African-Americans in the U.S. since slavery. These historical roots of injustice are important to highlight because they are essential to understanding how and why Black homeschoolers' motivations are different from their non-Black counterparts. Beyond improving educational outcomes for their children, Black homeschoolers are also motivated by the need to resist white supremacy and heal antiblack violence. Next, I examine how Black homeschooling is motivated by school system-based interactions and experiences of racism in school systems, classrooms, curriculum, and forms of violence.

Racist School Systems

Due to historical and structural racism, many Black children are forced into under-resourced, low-performing schools (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Many Black parents decide to homeschool because of the impact of racism on sociopolitical factors like school zoning, school

funding, and the overcrowding in schools that often leaves Black students behind academically (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Frequently, many of these parents note that they had no other choice or that homeschooling was their best available option (Mazama & Lundy, 2015; Wu, 2013). Fields-Smith & Kisura (2013) also refer to these limited choices as “push-out factors” (p.272) that eject Black parents from traditional school systems. Black parents are priced (or discriminated) out of private schools or cannot access better-quality public schools because of district policies (Baker, 2013; Fields-Smith, 2017; Wu, 2013). Black parents perceive that public schools are not only failing, but they are specifically failing Black children (Lickstein, 2010; Mazama & Lundy, 2015). Racially segregated schools, which often lack educational resources, further push Black parents to see public schools as sites of “limited possibilities and opportunities” for their children (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009, p.385).

Racist Classrooms

At the classroom level, curriculum and instruction play a major role in the motivation to homeschool Black children. The interactions between Black parents and students with individual teachers, their instructional practices, and their curricular choices all inform decisions to remove Black children from traditional schools. Black parents find that many of the classrooms in these schools have low-quality teaching and inadequate instructional practices, which consist of overemphasis on testing, arbitrary curricular pacing, a focus on rote memorization, excessive time spent on classroom management routines, and a lack of play-based learning for young children (Baker, 2013; Benson, 2018; Fields-Smith, 2017).

While negative instructional experiences are harmful to all students, Black children and teens are harmed through racialized, structural, and epistemological violence that leads their parents to seek out alternatives to schools. Black parents who choose to homeschool are

disappointed with the low expectations that teachers (white teachers in particular) have of their Black children. These low expectations are demonstrated through barriers to access to gifted services, over-identification of Special Education referrals, and feeling that their children are not being challenged academically (Fields-Smith, 2017; Mazama & Lundy, 2015). Furthermore, Black parents find that classrooms do not provide enough individualized instructional focus and attention for their children (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Ray, 2015).

When it comes to curricular choices, Black parents are also motivated to homeschool their children because of their commitment to expose children to a substantially less Eurocentric curriculum, that is culturally congruent and relevant to Black history and culture without negating, ignoring, or minimizing African American contributions (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Lickstein, 2010; McDowell et al., 2000; Wu, 2013). In addition to desiring more representation in the curriculum, Black parents find that the traditional school curriculum is too narrow, with limited attention to the arts, life skills, and languages (Mazama & Lundy, 2015), and is generally disengaging, boring, and too adult-led (Baker, 2013).

Race-Based School Violence

Black parents also homeschool because interactions with the school system expose their children to multiple forms of violence (Boutte & Bryan, 2021). By avoiding traditional schools, Black parents avoid exposing their children to dangers like bullying, corporal punishment, microaggressions, antiblack discourses about achievement, and curricular violence through Black cultural erasure and misinformation (Fields-Smith, 2015). School discipline practices that lead to the criminalization of Black children are also seen as an unsafe aspect of school (Mazama & Lundy, 2014). Black parents consider that these disciplinary practices are racist, unjustly implemented, and easily lead to entanglement with the criminal justice system (Mazama &

Lundy, 2012). Whether because of schools being in unsafe neighborhoods, school violence in the form of coercion and peer pressure, fear of drugs or sexual assault, or lack of safety interventions by school administration, Black homeschoolers find home to be less harmful than schools as learning environments for their children (Mazama & Lundy, 2014). Furthermore, Black parents cite a litany of reasons for homeschooling related to the social, emotional, and racial traumas their children experience in schools. The nonphysical assaults on Black students' spirits and minds are a major consideration for homeschooling because the trauma that Black children experience in school has negative consequences for their overall emotional and psychological safety.

Homeschooling as Hope

In summary, when it comes to their children's day-to-day learning experiences, Black parents decide to homeschool because they want more rigorous instruction, higher expectations, more meaningful and engaging instructional practices, more opportunities for play, independent and individualized experiences, and more exposure to Black history and culture. Black parents, overall, find that homeschooling allows them to resist negative racial stereotyping of their children (Fields-Smith, 2017), stop further emotional harm, and avoid environments that cause shame about being Black (Llewellyn, 1996). Additionally, homeschooling provides more nurturing learning environments, helps to instill a positive sense of self-identity, and builds more racial and cultural pride to combat school-based antiblackness (Fields-Smith, 2017; Llewellyn, 1996; Mazama & Lundy, 2013). In short, Black parents homeschool to keep their children safe in response to real or perceived physical, emotional, and psychological threats and violence.

Black Homeschooling Practices

Black homeschooling practices reflect the wide range of values, structures, interests, and needs of Black families. Black parents' approaches range from pre-made curriculum to unschooling, flexible scheduling, to rigid routine skill mastery (Mazama, 2016). While there are varied practices, some commonalities among Black parents' approaches include involving extended family, using curriculum to resist white supremacy, and innovatively creating new approaches to learning that are necessitated by antiblackness.

Despite outdated visions of homeschooling around the kitchen table, Black homeschoolers are engaged in different types of instructional models led by various instructors. When starting their homeschool journeys, many families may follow a typical school day schedule, have assigned subjects during certain hours, or utilize a structured curriculum; with time, many homeschoolers relax from strict structures and begin to find rhythms that work best for their specific family dynamics (Baker, 2013). Black homeschoolers' learning environments include homes, co-ops, homeschool association gatherings, and vital community spaces like libraries, zoos, museums, community colleges, and churches (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2015; Mazama, 2016). Black homeschooled children are also involved in recreational and competitive sports and church-related activities like choir, dance, theater, and enrichment (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2014) offered through many types of programs and services available in their local communities and online.

The literature confirms that mothers take on the majority of the load for educating their children and maintaining the home, which can be taxing for women (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Accordingly, Black mothers take primary responsibility for educational decision-making, but Black homeschooling instruction also often includes relatives, grandparents, and older siblings (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama, 2016). There is limited information on the role of

Black fathers in homeschooling, but one study revealed that they are generally on board with homeschooling decisions, are typically the breadwinners, and are involved with instruction, contributing as they're able through things like field trips, sports, and other activities (Mazama, 2016). Certified teachers (including private coaches and tutors) are often used for advanced subjects, or as learning content becomes more specialized in middle or high school grades (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Black homeschooling families also rely on community members in various settings as content experts (Mazama, 2016).

The Black homeschooling curriculum landscape includes many traditional subject areas like art, sports, math, languages, and music, as well as non-conventional subjects like farming and carpentry (Mazama, 2016). Many Black parents focus on experiential learning and blending life values together with learning (Baker, 2013). This blended learning is favorable to Black homeschoolers as it allows for blurring lines between academic and informal learning (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Black parents are also very concerned about using curricula that incorporate more Black history and culture than what is taught in public schools. Black parents are often supplementing or creating curricula to expose their children to Black history, culture & heritage (Wu, 2013). As noted by Mazama (2016), homeschooling is often “a site of resistance to White supremacy and a potent remedy to Black invisibility and insignificance” (p.37). To combat the low-quality, Eurocentric curriculum taught in schools, Black parents center teaching Black history, culture, and racial pride into their homeschooling practices.

New and established homeschoolers of all races tend to seek out or rely upon other homeschoolers for support in finding curriculum, building social networks, pooling resources, and planning group activities (Kunzman & Gaither, 2013). Black families and non-religious

homeschoolers are often in the minority among homeschool populations (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013), so community support from other minoritized homeschoolers is critical to starting and maintaining their homeschooling practice. Unfortunately, Black families still experience racism within the homeschooling community.

In the past, Black parents reported feeling ostracized by the predominantly white homeschool community and that they shouldered additional pressure from school officials and community members to make sure their children were performing as well or better than their traditionally schooled peers (Llewellyn, 1996). Antiracism persisted through homeschool conferences, meetup/co-op groups or classes, and published curriculum materials and books (Llewellyn, 1996; McDowell et. al, 2000; Romm, 1993). Specifically, Black homeschoolers found that the market for homeschool curriculum assumed that all homeschoolers were white and Christian (Romm, 1993). In response to feeling socially ostracized, Black families started creating their own conferences, meetup groups, and materials (Llewellyn, 1996). As the number of Black homeschoolers has increased in recent years, the creation of curriculum, social media groups, podcasts, and homeschool centers and communities has also multiplied and become more widely accessible.

There is a wide spectrum of approaches to Black homeschooling, including how much it is modeled after traditional school. In earlier accounts of Black homeschooling research, it was suggested that antiracism caused Black families to model homeschooling very closely to traditional school models out of fear that deviating from state practices could lead to negative consequences (McDowell et al., 2000). Therefore, Black parents were initially highly structured and rigid in their homeschooling practices (Romm, 1993). These ideas, though not corroborated in more recent literature, reflect the racialized concerns and fears that Black homeschooling

parents have about how society will perceive the education they provide to their children as their teachers (Llewellyn, 1996). Today, Black homeschoolers are embracing the freedom to educate their children on their own terms with less pressure to conform to school practices.

Though the literature acknowledges that Black women are the primary leaders of the Black homeschooling movement (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Kunzman & Gaither, 2013; Mazama, 2016; Ray, 2015), the specific nuances of their experiences have yet to be studied. Fields-Smith (2020) recently published a book on single Black homeschooling mothers, which begins to expand our knowledge of the contextualized experiences within this population. My work aims to deepen our understanding of Black mothers' homeschooling practices and to uplift the experiences of Black women whose labor significantly contributes to the well-being of Black children.

Homeschooling in and beyond the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted all U.S. homeschooling broadly, and Black homeschooling specifically, by increasing the number of families practicing this form of alternative education. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (Eggleston & Fields, 2021), U.S. homeschooling rates doubled (from 5 to 11 percent) between spring 2020 and fall 2020. For Black families, there was a fivefold increase in homeschooling from 3 to 16 percent during the same period. These numbers do not include families participating in virtual schooling through traditional schools.

For many Black families, the rising interest in homeschooling in 2020 was a result of witnessing the combination of deficiencies of remote learning, racial uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd, health concerns about returning to classrooms amid COVID-19, growing backlash to Critical Race Theory, and book bans on content related to issues of race

(Dennis & Fields-Smith, 2020; Huska, 2022; Johnson, 2021; Parks, 2021; Reid, 2022; Reilly, 2022). As the pandemic opened more Black parents' eyes to failures and limitations of their children's schools (public, private, and charter), they joined the ranks of those who had been homeschooling prior to 2020 in such increasing numbers that social media groups, curriculum purchases, and parent conversations about how to homeschool soared (Huska, 2022; Park, 2021; Powers, 2021). Flexible work schedules, online learning platforms like Khan Academy & Outschool, and more readily available BIPOC curriculum also fueled the transition to homeschooling for Black families who may have previously not considered it a viable option (Huska, 2022; Parks, 2021). Even conservative organizations like the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) sought to increase the diversity of their board and grant opportunities to parents of color as a result of the surge in Black and Brown homeschooling families (Parks, 2021).

Despite COVID-19 as a catalyst for pandemic homeschooling, when students returned to classrooms, Black families chose to remain at home for the same reasons pre-COVID parents chose to homeschool their children. Virtual schooling revealed the same violence, low expectations, racism, and lack of Black history curriculum that Black parents had been concerned about for years, motivating them to remove their children from schools. While keeping children home to protect them from COVID-19, Black parents realized they had the tools and desire to offer their children something better than virtual schooling (Dennis & Fields-Smith, 2020). Post-pandemic, these families have chosen to remain homeschoolers at increasing rates. The pandemic also helped Black parents to see that they wanted more for their children than they had for themselves, and homeschooling became one way to make this a reality (Johnson, 2021; Reilly, 2022). Though some tension and nuances exist between pre- and post-

COVID homeschoolers (Powers, 2021; Ali-Coleman, 2021), there has been greater attention to this population (and more resources available) than ever before.

Theoretical Framework: Motherwork

Black women are the epicenter of the Black homeschooling movement. At the macro level, Black women are the most prominent faces and voices shaping what we know about Black homeschooling today. In research, popular news outlets, and social media, it is primarily Black women who are interviewed, surveyed, and provided with platforms to share insight into this growing phenomenon (Richards, 2016). At the micro level, in Black homes and communities, Black women are the primary leaders and influencers of homeschooling decision-making and practices (Mazama, 2016). As Black homeschooling is amplified through these public and private outlets, it is evident that we rely on Black women's knowledge and experiences as trusted sources for understanding Black homeschooling.

To further examine Black homeschooling choices, motivations, and practices, I employ a theoretical lens that recognizes the unique positions Black women hold between a white-dominated society and their homes. It is important to recognize that Black women's roles in society and the home are often in tension when it comes to raising Black children. Black mothers must navigate the tensions between their low status in the racial hierarchy outside the home (in society at large) and their place of esteemed status within the home and the Black community. Additionally, Black women must manage the tension between preparing their children for antiblack violence and oppression while also equipping them with Black love and tools for freedom. Furthermore, to study Black homeschooling, it is imperative to utilize a theoretical framing that discerns the complex layers of oppression while being a Black woman and a mother.

Patricia Hill-Collins' (1994) theory of Motherwork⁵ is essential to understanding Black mothering and the contextualized experiences of raising Black children in an antiblack world. This study investigates the efforts of Black mothers towards securing their children's well-being, which is central to the Motherwork framework. As I discuss throughout the findings, this theory demonstrates how Black mothers (re)define their roles based on their social context, experiences of racism, and hopes for their children. Motherwork is a broad theory on Black mothering, and I can apply it to Black homeschooling mothers' practices because home education is a significant and defining aspect of their roles as mothers. Motherwork invites us to understand Black mothering as a labor of love.

Motherwork

Motherwork is a seminal concept that builds on Collins' previous theory of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990), which prioritizes the racialized and gendered experiences of Black women. In contrast to other feminist theories that claim to be race-neutral and inclusive, Collins (1994) argues that motherwork includes the experiences of "reproductive labor" (p.47) and mothering that women of color are engaged in for the survival of their children.

Reproductive labor refers to the unpaid domestic work women are expected to take on in a capitalist, patriarchal society and includes work such as caregiving, domestic housework, and raising children (Niemanis, 2002). This uncompensated reproductive labor is often in addition to work and careers outside the home, which is markedly more prevalent for Black women than for white women. Collins (1994) notes that as mothers, women of color are laborers who have the added pressure of keeping their children alive within dangerous systems of oppression. In the

⁵ In this paper, I capitalize Motherwork when referring to the proper name of Collins' (1994) theory. When discussing how motherwork is practiced or employed through Black homeschooling, I use lowercase to differentiate acts of motherwork from the theory of Motherwork.

particular context of Black women, they have to shoulder the additional burden of antiblackness while mothering for their children's survival.

According to Collins (1994), the three major themes that form the foundation of the *Motherwork* are survival, power, and identity. These themes reveal how racially ethnic women resist oppression and white supremacy through their mothering:

“That is to understand the importance of working for the physical survival of children and community, the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity is to grasp the three core themes characterizing the experiences of Native American, African-American, Hispanic and Asian-American women.” (Collins, 1994, p. 49)

In *Motherwork*, Collins (1994) unpacks each of the core themes as she theorizes mothering through the historical, social, and political contexts of women of color in the United States. Survival highlights the ways mothers of color fought to keep their children alive and physically safe. With the added threat of having their children taken from them, survival also includes efforts by mothers to keep family units intact. Survival also speaks to the harsh conditions of slave and domestic labor that these mothers endured in hopes that their children would not have to. Furthermore, survival addresses how work outside the home produced maternal separation from children and led to the adoption of othermothering (caretaking for nonbiological children) for the survival of family units and the collective racial community. Finally, the theme of survival demonstrates the tension between mothers' labor as a means of providing income and opportunities for their children, and also as a source of oppression.

The theme of power describes the ways mothers of color navigate obtaining or retaining power with and for their children while also being powerless themselves within society. As Collins (1994) points out, this theme is directly connected to histories of slavery and indigenous genocide. She notes that Black mothers had minimal control over their own bodies and the choice to even have children since their bodies were commodified and central to the reproduction of Black slave labor. Collins (1994) further contends that both Black and Indigenous mothers had no control over who stole, sold, educated, or hurt their children. This theme highlights that women of color want to reclaim the power that is lost through intersecting systemic oppression. Although these mothers had limited control and authority regarding their children, motherwork nuances how these women use their power as mothers to reduce disempowering, white supremacist influences on their children, including education.

The theme of identity in motherwork deals with women of color's commitment to their children's ability to name and own their racial and cultural identities. The theme addresses how these mothers cultivate racial pride despite oppression and marginalization. In defiance of white supremacy, these women instill values of racial confidence and cultural self-esteem in their children. Collins (1994) argues that mothers of color also "make varying choices in negotiating the complicated relationship of preparing children to fit into, yet resist, systems of racial domination" (p.58). Specifically, Black mothers do the work of guiding their children to safely navigate having Black racial pride while learning to survive white supremacist systems.

Motherwork in Education

While Motherwork theorizes Black mothering across multiple contexts, there is research that has considered the framework within the specific context of education. Cooper (2007) contends that motherwork includes maternal responsibility for educational decision-making and

school choice, through which Black mothers seek to improve their children's life opportunities and outcomes. Cooper (2007) connects Black children's survival with Black people's historical belief that education is "a tool to gain freedom and justice, along with economic mobility" (p.498). In this regard, motherwork is deeply engaged in the education of Black children. Because educational decision-making takes place both in and outside of schools, motherwork is an ideal lens for emphasizing Black mothers' use of homeschooling as a practice to pursue the well-being of their children.

Within K-12 school contexts, Watson & Baxley (2021) examine how Black women educational leaders employ motherwork to reduce harm and fight for the well-being of Black children. Through practices, policies, and resources that reduced criminalization and increased restorative and safe spaces, Black women in their study enacted the physical survival of Black children by helping them to navigate an antiblack school system (e.g., using classrooms as safe spaces to be subversive). According to Watson & Baxley (2021), the power theme of motherwork was revealed through Black women educational leaders' practices of raising Black children's consciousness, rejecting standardized tests, and honoring Black children as knowledge producers. For the identity theme in motherwork, the authors found that Black women educational leaders fostered a sense of Black community in their schools and embraced curricula that called out racism or fostered Black resistance.

Outside schools, Black women utilize similar methods and ideologies of resistance in their home education practices (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013). I examine how dynamics of survival, power, and identity are navigated by these women in their homeschooling contexts when it comes to motivations, decision-making, and practices. Their perspectives shed light on how Black homeschooling reflects critical practices of mothering that refuse to rely on schools.

The motherwork theory positions Black homeschooling mothers at the center of power for reducing and resisting the antiblackness and suffering that happens to their children in schools and in U.S. society at large. Motherwork is excellently situated to examine the interconnected mothering and homeschooling contexts of domestic work, education, child-rearing, labor outside the home, and preparing Black children for an antiblack world.

Methodology

Participant Recruitment

Each of the four participants in this pilot study was recruited through a multi-racial homeschool umbrella organization for the state of Maryland. Homeschool umbrella organizations manage paperwork with the local education department on behalf of the homeschooling families. They also provide social network opportunities for family members through events, meetups, tools for getting started with homeschooling, peer coaching, and other services.

To recruit participants, the founder of the organization circulated the IRB-approved recruitment materials through their Facebook group or solicited Black families directly. Black families who were interested in participating contacted the researcher directly by email. In 2019, about 6 respondents reached out to participate in the study, and they provided another 3 names (snowball sampling). Of these 9 potential participants, 4 participated in the study.

Data Collection & Settings

In keeping with the theoretical framework of motherwork, Black homeschooling mothers were invited to share their lived experiences through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol included questions to build participant-researcher rapport and questions intended to elicit responses about Black homeschooling mothers' educational philosophies, approaches, and

decision-making factors. Demographic information was also collected to determine the family household size, education levels, employment, and nationality (Appendix A included in the semi-structured protocol). This information helped me to situate these mothers in the broader context of other Black homeschoolers and the homeschooling population broadly.

The interviews lasted between 45-75 minutes (an average of 60 minutes) and were conducted in a location of their choosing that provided privacy (two interviews took place in a community space, such as a grocery store or a park), and two interviews took place virtually by Zoom. Rapport was established through open, introductory conversations, reviewing the goals of the study, making sure participants felt comfortable, and obtaining consent. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed to analyze the data. Respondents did not receive any compensation for their participation.

Participants

The four participating mothers lived in the state of Maryland and homeschool their children in Prince George's County, which allowed them to access the resources available in the greater Washington, DC metro area. Next, I provide a brief description of each participant (using pseudonyms):

Jeanette: A single Black American mother of two children. She homeschooled her 24-year-old daughter from middle through high school. At the time of the study, she was homeschooling her eight-year-old son, who has Asperger's and is on the autism spectrum. Her son attended school for a few weeks in preschool. Jeanette works full-time (remote three days/week) and lives with her mother in the home. Jeanette uses a loosely structured approach to homeschooling where her son completes four and a half hours per day on an online program (formal education online curriculum), but he decides when those hours are completed. He also

participates in community activities, including sports, throughout the week. She also stated that family members (nuclear and extended) all help with homeschooling, locally and when the family travels.

Sylvia: A married Black American mother of two boys, ages 10 and 12. Her children were in Montessori programs before starting homeschooling around ages seven and nine. Both Sylvia and her husband work full-time, but she primarily works remotely from home. Her husband was not as involved at the beginning of their homeschooling journey but has recently become more active through trips and activities. Her homeschooling approach includes a range of structured and unstructured activities based on her children's interests— at home, online, in the community, and with family members. Her children attend a local STEM co-op center multiple days a week that offers classes, science labs, and field trips. They also take classes through Outschool.com, an online learning platform. Her children are active in sports and other activities in the community. Sylvia's sister is a former Montessori teacher and provides instruction two days a week, along with her parents, who also support homeschooling.

Marcia: A married Black African mother of four children, ages 12 weeks, two, seven, and nine years old. Both Marcia and her husband were born in West Africa. She began schooling in her home country before attending school in London for grades 2-12, while her husband received all of his K-12 schooling in West Africa. The children have been homeschooling off and on for several years and recently started back again. Her husband works full time, and she is a full-time stay-at-home mom, but was working during previous homeschooling periods. Her husband is the primary advocate for their homeschooling decision, and he supports this through various activities with the children. She describes her approach to homeschooling as a combination of homeschooling and unschooling. She says her children have a lot of free time and free rein over

their learning and schedules, but also participate in some fundamentals like reading through an online curriculum. Her children participate in sports and other clubs in the community. Marcia's parents live locally and assist with supporting the children, but do not approve of the decision to homeschool.

Laura: A married Black American mother of two daughters, ages four and six. Although she reported that her oldest went to preschool briefly, her daughters have been homeschooling since birth. Laura and her husband both work full-time with flexible schedules. As homesteaders, they aim to be self-sufficient and grow their own food, raise and hunt animals, and live in a rural part of the county. Her husband is an active participant in their homeschooling practice and leads various aspects of learning (e.g., farming and raising animals). The family has a live-in nanny, and all three adults help with homeschooling. Laura's approach to homeschooling includes a computer-based program that she uses to build her own curriculum. It also includes a lot of unstructured time for play, being outdoors, growing plants, and raising animals. She states that field trips, friends who are tutors, and other family members who live in the area also assist with keeping the children and providing homeschool support. Her daughters also participate in community learning and social activities that are offered in their area, including classes and meet-ups with other homeschooling families.

Data Analysis

Drawing from Saldaña (2009), multiple rounds of coding were conducted, and analytic memos were created as the iterative process occurred. I developed a codebook and in the first cycle of coding, I used deductive codes from motherwork along with descriptive codes derived from the interview protocol. A second cycle of coding focuses on recurring inductive codes not captured by the first round. Using inductive and deductive coding strategies allows me to explore

and identify overarching categories that become themes describing Black homeschooling mothers' experiences.

Positionality

I identify as a Black American woman, educator, birth worker, and future parent. I believe there is nothing greater than being a Black woman, and that Black mothers may be the highest form of life on this planet. I trust Black women with my life. I treat their knowledge, lived experiences, and metaphysical essence as equal to the Divine and privilege their voices and stories.

Like the participants, I was not homeschooled and attended private, public, and charter schools for my K-12 education. I am a former public school teacher and youth worker whose experiences left me disgruntled and frustrated with the school system. In addition to questioning traditional schooling approaches, I value nonhierarchical power structures between youth and adults. As such, I recognize my biases towards unschooling, self-directed education, and child-led approaches to learning. I believe uplifting Black youth voices and their self-leadership is essential to Black freedom. With these biases, I experience tensions with more authoritative or adult-centered approaches to home education, or attempt to make comparisons with more unstructured educational practices. I engaged in reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking to continuously check my biases. Furthermore, I leaned into my theoretical framework as a tool to guide my analysis, keep analytic memos, and provide my codebook for transparency.

Finally, my perspectives about the world and education are informed by BlackCrit and Afro-pessimism, which lead me to accept that antiblackness is endemic to the planet and true liberation is only possible through abolishing this world as we know it. Although I remain deeply

committed to illuminating Black practices of resistance and freedom through educational spaces outside of schools, I recognize that the true liberation we seek will never exist in this world as we know it.

Findings

In the following sections, I report on the findings from my four participants. I made the analytical choice to report on each participant individually in the findings section and to discuss themes across participants in the discussion section. After organizing the findings in different ways, I found that reporting on compiled themes without individual stories lost too much of the essence of each participant. Although Black homeschooling is on the rise, empirical studies remain limited, and the nuances of homeschooling motivations, decision-making, and practices are still not understood. Homeschooling is not a monolith, and neither is Blackness. Therefore, I have left individual stories intact to ensure the individual voices and experiences are not lost. Each of the four participant sections follows the same format. I use the pseudonym to identify the participant, then I provide a significant quote that reflects the essence of their personality or homeschooling, next I describe their homeschooling motivations and practices, and finally I provide findings for each of the three motherwork themes according to my interpretation. In the discussion section, I follow up with themes of motherwork and Black homeschooling across participants.

Jeanette:

I think our school system sucks. How we educate kids sucks. What we do to kids in schools is horrendous. The American government has not cared about educating nonwhite children since Reconstruction. And so I homeschool from that space.

They're not going to like my kid, no matter what he does, there's always gonna be a problem.

Motivations for homeschooling

Jeanette's homeschooling motivations are unique because although she was homeschooling her eight-year-old son at the time of this interview, she had previously homeschooled her daughter, who is 16 years older than her son. She pulled her daughter from PG County Public Schools when her daughter was in seventh grade and homeschooled her through graduation. Having already seen success with her daughter, who graduated from homeschool and college, Jeanette felt even more confident that she could homeschool her son, whom she has homeschooled since kindergarten. Throughout the interview, she recounts different aspects of her homeschooling motivations with her two children. With her daughter, she homeschooled "out of necessity" because she was laid off from work and could no longer afford private school. As a resident of PG County, she also felt the local public school was "the luck of the draw. You might get a good teacher, you might not."

In addition to feeling limited options in the school system, Jeanette also had an encounter with school staff that confirmed her concerns about the sustainability of keeping her daughter in a public middle school. Recounting a situation with an administrator at the all Black school her daughter attended, she shares how the vice principal (a Black woman) spoke to her in a very condescending way because she was a young parent. Jeanette says, "That was one of the issues I had when I pulled my daughter. I was like, ah, I can't, I can't feasibly do this until she graduates, cause I'm going to catch a charge." She was motivated to homeschool because it meant removing herself from situations where she had to deal with school staff in unhealthy ways.

With her son, Jeanette decided much sooner that traditional school would not work. Although he did attend preschool, when it came to enrolling him in kindergarten, she saw red flags that led her to believe that regular school would not be a good fit for him.

He's on the autistic spectrum and he has Asperger's. When he went to preschool, he was already counting to a hundred, and he's doing basic math. He is an advanced student, and in Maryland, no matter where you fall academically, you have to take kindergarten. ...I was like, okay, I'm homeschooling you lil dude. And that's how it happened.

Additional findings from Jeanette's story reveal ways that her son's neurodivergence and advanced academic levels continued to affirm that she made the right decision to homeschool her son. The combination of the cost of private school, Jeanette's frustration with the school system (broadly and specifically to her local district), seeing the success of homeschooling her oldest child, and her son's incompatibility with traditional school requirements drove her to view homeschooling as the best viable alternative for her and her family.

Homeschooling Practices

As a working single parent, Jeanette utilized many flexible approaches to homeschooling both of her children. Already having multiple resources in place from homeschooling her daughter, Jeanette was able to build a nontraditional homeschool schedule. On the days Jeanette works in the office (Tuesday-Thursday), her son stays home with Jeanette's mother and goes to activities like skating and Kung Fu. More traditional academic practices happen during Jeanette's days off and over the weekends. When asked about a typical homeschool day for her son, Jeanette says:

I only work Tuesday through Thursday, so he does schoolwork, Friday through Monday. He doesn't wake up until 10:30, 11:00, or whatever. And he starts working around 1:00 pm. Some days he'll finish at 2:30. Some days it might take him til 5:00 pm. Just depends on what his mood is. A lot of his free time is Kung Fu or Cub Scouts, and other activities.

When it comes to curriculum, Jeanette primarily uses online learning platforms, lessons, and activities with her son, with a focus on reading, writing, and math. Jeanette talked to other parents and had to navigate finding age-appropriate materials and resources to support his developmental stage. She recounts that it was much more challenging to find materials for her daughter because there weren't as many resources for homeschoolers.

Outside of the online programs, Jeanette utilizes multiple homeschool groups or co-ops that provide classes, field trips, and social activities for homeschoolers. In particular, she discusses a group that centers Black history and culture, "But I'm also in a black group, the Sankofa group. And that group does fun things too. They do a lot of co-op stuff and they have the Frederick Douglass writing group". Jeanette's homeschool practices also emphasize letting her son choose activities independently, like taking Spanish classes, roller skating, and wrestling. Jeanette also describes the informal learning and "curriculum" that she sees as equally important for her children's development. Activities like cooking, trips to the museum or the grocery store, or spending time with relatives are all part of her homeschooling practices. By incorporating nontraditional education opportunities, such as storytelling and strategy games with grandparents, Jeanette confirms that "learning doesn't necessarily look like a book, a notebook, pencil, and sitting."

Jeanette's homeschooling practices are centered around flexible scheduling, online learning, co-op activities, extracurricular clubs, and learning through life and family.

Motherwork Themes

Survival

One aspect of survival that Jeanette's story illustrates is protection. As a Black homeschooling mother, a priority for her was protecting her son's innocence. Jeanette's homeschooling efforts prioritize safety, not just by physically removing him from the dangers of schools, but by creating a safe environment to fully experience the joys of childhood without the shadow of antiblackness.

He's a little black boy, and they [black boys] never get to just be little kids. You know, the school-to-prison pipeline. They don't view you as a little boy when you walk in the building.... I wanted to just make sure he got a chance to just be a little boy.

Another form of survival present in Jeanette's story is teaching her children survival skills through independent learning. By encouraging her children to think for themselves, independently complete tasks, and engage in learning through real-life situations, Jeanette sees homeschooling as an opportunity to make sure her children will be able to navigate the world without her. She aims to build their confidence through learning for the sake of learning, not just by focusing on academics, saying, "Life happens. You may have to learn something else to survive, but you're always going to be learning". She believes that this reflects her desire for "my children to feel confident no matter what setting they're in, whether it's all white, all black, whatever, that they are comfortable in their own skin."

Power

When it comes to the theme of power, Jeanette's story highlights the way her homeschooling motherwork shows up as resistance, reclaiming power, and empowering her children. Shedding light on Collins' theory that Black mothers must navigate the space of both

lacking power and trying to obtain power to reduce the harm of white supremacy, Jeanette uses homeschooling as a way to push back against a school system that does not share her values. Jeanette recalls how she lacked power when she was a student, which informs her ideas about schooling for her children. “When I was in school, it was stupid. I don't have to be here all day. Why does it take us a whole year to get through one fucking book? ...I can't. This process is too slow for me.” She asserts that she homeschools to stop the cycle of insanity (traditional schooling) by doing the same thing repeatedly without getting different results.

Jeanette’s power was also reflected in her choice to resist and eliminate homeschooling curriculum that she saw as too white and too religious. While homeschooling her older daughter, the existing resources had a heavy conservative Christian influence. Rather than just accepting what she could access, she (and her daughter) refused this form of white supremacy as the norm and decided to figure out another option.

With my daughter, we had to stop using a curriculum because a lot of old school stuff originally was for a lot of really religious people. She was like, it's all creationism. I mean, it didn't teach anything from evolution at all. It was absolutely nuts, the stuff that was in this book. I was like, alright, we're not even doing this.

Identity

The final theme of identity in motherwork was most significantly demonstrated by Jeanette’s navigation of Black racial identity. Although Jeanette fully recognizes the negative influences of white supremacy and antiblackness in schools, she also has strong reservations about imposing too much Black history and Black political thought onto her son. Throughout our conversation, she wrestles with preparing her son for an antiblack world without disrupting his

childhood. She primarily discusses this in the context of the Black homeschool group she belongs to and how it exposes her son to aspects of Black culture.

And [the homeschool group], it's super blackity black. So I have to balance some of the blackity black stuff with regular stuff...Up to this point we haven't done a lot of [Black] history, and that's intentional. Because my theory is if I am indoctrinating you with all this blackity black stuff, I'm doing as much damage as when you step out into the world. Now that doesn't mean he doesn't need to be prepared for it, so we started slowly doing things about race.

Sylvia

When people find out you homeschool there are all these school questions...‘What do you do with them? How do you know when they're ready for the next thing?’

There's no, this place that I live and breathe from, in this journey with my children, there is no educational emergency. There is NO emergency. Because they are right where they should be. And it's so comforting just to be able to follow your child on this journey.

Homeschooling Motivations

Sylvia identifies the 2016 election of Donald Trump as a pivotal marker in her decision to homeschool her two sons (at ages seven and nine). During the election cycle, she “felt a need to pull them closer to me” because of what was happening in the world. Her sons previously attended multiple private Montessori schools since they were three and five years old. Sylvia loved the Montessori approach for her children, but said, “It was because of the way things were going [with the election]. I felt the need to nurture them in a different way, and I wanted them

close.” The 2016 campaign cycle already had her on edge, and Sylvia recalls how the election amplified her interactions with a white teacher, which ultimately led her to start homeschooling.

So the campaigning starts, and the news gets very weird. It gets very confrontational.

And I began to look at my son, he’s like eight or nine, and starts having some interactions with his white male teacher. I wasn’t quite sure what was going on. I just know it made me feel uncomfortable.”

She explains that whatever it was, she could see her son losing confidence. She recounts how the teacher (unprovoked) told her he was not giving up on her son. Because the teacher gave no reason for the comment, Sylvia questioned whether this teacher ever supported her child. Her apprehension about white men in the 2016 Donald Trump era collided with the experience of this white male teacher causing her son to lose confidence. Frustrated and concerned, Sylvia questioned, “Did I miss this? Are you *that* white guy? Have you been hiding?” Shortly after, she removed her children from school.

Homeschooling Practices

Sylvia teleworks Monday through Friday and is the primary parent involved in homeschooling. She coordinates with multiple people and community resources to manage her homeschooling program. For example, Sylvia’s parents live within walking distance of her home and take an active role in homeschooling with her boys. Her sister, a trained Montessori teacher of 20 years, also works with her nephews twice a week, including weekly field trips and projects. Sylvia also utilizes a drop-off homeschool co-op center once a week, where her children take classes. On days that it is just Sylvia and her sons, they may be at home learning or in the community. In her own words, Sylvia describes a typical week as follows:

On Mondays, he [youngest son] and I work some on reading and language arts. He would go and do chess and other kinds of educational games with his grandfather. On Mondays my oldest son walked to his Grammy, and they did literature and writing. She's been a college professor for years. So she worked one-on-one with them, and they wrote papers. They were with my sister on Tuesdays and Thursday she did a class called, adventure quest. On Tuesday would be lecture, project, research, that's the lesson portion of it and then on Thursday is the adventure portion, the field trip. On Wednesday they go to Cheverly STEM [co-op]. And then on Fridays was our day just to do lots of different things.

Through various activities, the curriculum that Sylvia's sons engage in lead to a wide variety of learning experiences. Informed by a Montessori foundation, Sylvia ensures her children engage in customized classes, field trips, and deep study of various topics. The scope of topics that Sylvia discussed her sons studying included: pottery, African drumming, math, chemistry, Black history, ancient African civilizations, political science, sociology, domestic and international travel, physics and lots of time outside. In addition, Sylvia orders materials for science experiments, her children would learn using YouTube, they attended camps, and they would select classes from Outschool.com⁶ that lasted anywhere from a one time workshop to an entire semester.

In one example of how home learning looks for her oldest son, Sylvia describes how the combination of different STEM experiences has fostered her son's love of math and science.

⁶ Outschool is an online learning platform that is used by many homeschoolers. It allows instructors to market themselves directly to children and parents through the website. Teachers identify their own qualifications, schedules, class size, materials, and pricing. Topics are not limited to academic subjects and the website essentially serves as a hub or marketplace for learners to find courses they want to take.

He was 10 and he picks up a Rubik's cube like 'so mom, I've got like 42 algorithms I've learned and that's why' ... I said stop! You got what? How do you even know the word algorithm? I didn't teach you that. Because he was on YouTube ... So that's your lesson for the day. Go research it on YouTube, come back to me and tell me all about it.

Sylvia's experience as a student in the Gifted and Talented program caused her to resist homeschooling with too much testing or emphasis on being smarter than others. Sylvia's story prioritizes teaching her children to explore their interests above all else so that they are not bound by other people's limitations about who or what they can be. Through her homeschooling approach, she teaches them to "move intentionally toward what drives them instead of being caught in this space" of needing an end goal to pursue their interests.

Motherwork Themes

Survival

The theme of survival in Sylvia's motherwork is reflected in her desire to rescue her children from what she witnessed happening to them in school environments. She had multiple encounters at the private Montessori schools her sons attended that ultimately led her to homeschooling. In one example, she shares how she first considered homeschooling when she pulled her sons from one of the Montessori schools because she witnessed a white teacher treating Black children disrespectfully.

The teacher had a huge stack of notebooks. She was just writing furiously. And she would call the kid's name, and toss the book on the floor, and went to the next book. A classroom full of black children. She would write in that book. And she'd toss it on the floor, then call them up to get it. I said, they got to get out of here... And they were five.

They can't come home and really tell you that. And I started thinking of all the things that he couldn't come home and tell me.

This was one of her early signals that she wanted to safeguard her Black children from environments where they were not treated with respect and dignity. After encountering more disheartening experiences at the second Montessori school, Sylvia determined that a home environment would be best.

A second form of survival in Sylvia's motherwork is wellbeing. Beyond physical survival and safety, Sylvia practices homeschooling in service of her boys' ability to thrive. Unlike traditional school, Sylvia believes that being able to offer unique learning experiences that are highly individualized creates dignity and self-worth for her children, saying, "I don't think I can express this enough how important it is to the well-being and growth of each child to be able to cater things for them."

Power

The motherwork theme of power in Sylvia's story is evident through her resistance and autonomy. Sylvia takes pride in reclaiming power over her sons' education and taking ownership of their learning experiences. Sylvia delights in resisting the system and creating another pathway with her sons and described a moment of pride when they brought it to her attention that she was a rebel.

My sons told me you're a revolutionary. They said educating your own is a revolutionary thought, you're doing it, so you must be a revolutionary...That's what homeschooling is like. It's a moment of defiance. It's a moment of liberation. It feels like I'm a revolutionary, but it's just in this space of knowing.

Beyond her own homeschooling efforts, Sylvia's story also highlights the way she shares power with other Black moms who are new to homeschooling. She demonstrates the communal and collective power of the village that is necessary for taking the leap on this alternative path. Sylvia uses her power as a veteran Black homeschooler to give other families the confidence to move forward with the decision to homeschool. She views it as a part of her role in the community to help more Black children get out of harmful school environments. By joining several Facebook groups, Sylvia eagerly responds to other Black DMV moms who want to start homeschooling. She uses her power as a veteran homeschooler to encourage and support others,

SIS, what you need? Yes, you can do it! SIS, you can do this! Reach out to me anytime, let me know...and I know that they never thought it would be possible to take your child out of this space where you are seeing he's being mistreated, he's being abused, his soul is being crushed. Take him out! Y'all can do it.

Identity

Identity is a theme of Sylvia's motherwork demonstrated through her careful attention to building racial pride through homeschooling. To achieve this, she discusses the need to remove her children from the white gaze or spaces where Blackness is perceived as less than.

So it was not a desire to remove my children from the influence of all things white, but yet it was, right? It was to remove them from that filter that saw them as less than...It's intentional that they are in spaces that don't see them through this lens of failure, of less than, as problematic.

After removing her children from antiblack school spaces, she created a homeschool environment and curriculum that intentionally prioritized Black history, culture, and brilliance. Sylvia increased the number of Black teachers who worked with her sons and enrolled them in

courses that immersed them in Black culture through literature, math, science, drum circles, and ancient African history. Sylvia discusses the importance of building this Black racial pride when describing the 10-week African civilizations course her sons took early on in their homeschooling journey, noting how important it is that they know their roots, “that they understand themselves as descendants, not as slaves, but as this entire continent that spawned the world!”

Sylvia’s motherwork also reflects the theme of identity as she navigates balancing the need for Black racial pride with her desire to have her children in diverse spaces where they could be supported as Black boys. This is reflected in her choices to join the African-centered homeschool collective along with the multiracial STEM centered co-op and homeschooling umbrella organization. She says that this intentional choice was because, “I was aware of what my desire was about, it was definitely about putting them in spaces and communities where they were going to be supported as the young men they were going to be—as these black men.”

Marcia

Just honestly, the freedom, the level of stress comes way down [with homeschooling], especially for the kids. They have so much more time to be children, they're not testing. I mean, that's just not what we choose to do in our homeschool. So they play, they spend so much time outdoors exploring. So the stress level has come down a lot.

Homeschooling Motivations

At the time of this study, Marcia was on her second round of homeschooling her two oldest children (of four). She initially pulled her son from preschool and homeschooled him and his sister (two years younger) until her daughter insisted that she wanted to attend regular school for kindergarten. They both attended traditional school for two years before she brought them

home again. In both instances, issues with teachers and the stress of school environments (for Marcia and her children) led her to homeschooling.

Marcia experienced a trending pattern of teachers complaining about her son's behavioral noncompliance, which made school difficult for her and her son. At age four, despite being academically capable, her son was dismissed by his Montessori preschool because "he had issues with transitions and then there were certain things that would trigger him or upset him". Marcia describes that her son had issues with being made to do things he didn't want to at school. Despite Marcia "seeking, psychological help, the school was very impatient" and did not wait for a diagnosis. She says that ultimately the testing was inconclusive, but "the school said, we can't have him here. They let him go", which led her to homeschooling the first time.

Returning to traditional school was her children's idea. They wanted to ride the bus and be in class with their friends. Marcia emphasized that it was important for them to have options and not force them, so she supported their decision. The second time back in school was worse than the first experience. For her daughter, "she said they just suck all the fun out of [learning] for her. And so she was just ready [to go back to homeschooling]". Her son was requiring even more meetings with the school counselor, psychologist, and teachers in third grade every other week. Marcia was becoming frustrated, "I just couldn't, I was just like, what's, what's the point of this? I'm spending more time there [at school] and he's not thriving. And they were both falling behind academically actually". She recalls that homework was a critical aspect of stress that contributed to her decision to homeschool again, saying, "Homework was a drag. It was terrible. There's no data to support that. Giving them all this work and it's not gonna make them any brighter after they've just spent six hours in school." Marcia's own stress levels while managing school visits, her children's unhappiness, full-time work, having another baby, and being in

graduate school were overwhelming. Having seen her children thrive before in homeschooling, she decided to take the path again.

Homeschooling Practices

Marcia is a stay-at-home mom who left the workforce two years prior to this study. As a mom of four (including an infant and toddler), she takes on the primary tasks for homeschooling with support from her husband. In their first round of homeschooling, she expressed that her husband's lack of involvement was a source of stress and something they had to revisit before deciding to homeschool again. In the second round of homeschooling, Marcia is still primarily the parent with the children, however, she describes the change in his involvement.

Now, if there's something going on, homeschool activity, or family meet up, he'll be there, he'll go to that. He can even take time to do tutorials with the kids. So he is actually very hands-on, so it plays a huge role, and it just makes everything smoother when we are on the same page as a family, as a couple, and the kids benefit from that.

Marcia refers to her relaxed approach to homeschooling as “free-spirited type of learning or child-led learning” with software programs for more academic subjects. This was a change from her first iteration of homeschooling, where she says, “I really started out very traditionally, you know, because that's what I understood school at home, you know, homeschooling to be.” Now, she has transitioned to a less structured approach. Her children work at their own pace and have a lot of freedom to choose how they spend their time. Marcia's children engage in recreational activities in the community (e.g., art, dance), but do not participate in classes or a homeschool co-op for teaching and learning.

For curriculum, Marcia's homeschooling focuses on fundamentals, real-life experiences, and interest-based learning. She uses interactive software to support her children's learning math

and reading, and makes sure it doesn't feel like "a lot of bookwork." The family loves to read and spends time at the library. She also ensures her children are exposed to science and social studies, including through their family's international travel in the summer and getting "to know more of their global community." Marcia uses real-life experiences like trips to the grocery store to help her children learn about budgets, selecting produce, and science, demonstrating that "learning is everywhere, in every opportunity." Her children's interest-based learning includes anime, drawing, time outside, karate, and gymnastics. Marcia expresses her excitement at her children's interests and believes school was creating scheduling barriers to their participation in extracurricular activities they love, saying, "now the door's open in terms of how many different things they want to fit in there really."

Motherwork Themes

Survival

Marcia's motherwork illustrates the theme of survival through preserving her children's dignity, independence, and individuality. Marcia's homeschooling provides a refuge for her children where they have the freedom to be themselves and engage their education in ways that don't force them to conform to one-size-fits-all standards. In reflecting on her son's experience in school, she knew there had to be a better way to accommodate his needs and personality.

I find that everything [stress, behavior issues] escalates once he is forced into that [school] building. So I think it was really with [my son], if you push him too much or you push him in a way he doesn't want to go, you get a lot of resistance. So it was just kind of like, okay, let me step back. How else can I approach this?

When asked about the primary reason she homeschoools, Marcia comments that her son was "thriving better outside of the traditional school system." Rather than "tons of worksheets,

tons of sitting at her desk,” Marcia says homeschooling also offered an opportunity to re-ignite “the color and all the vibrant things” her daughter loved about learning when she was in kindergarten. Marcia initially thought she would keep her daughter in school because she was compliant and did not have the same issues as her son. However, she discovered that her daughter was unhappy and no longer enjoyed school because “the academics were killing the joy of learning.” For Marcia and both her children, homeschooling has increased their joy, lowered their stress, and provided a space for them to recover from school burnout.

Power

Marcia’s motherwork exemplifies two dimensions of power, which focus on her using her voice and role as a mother to advocate for her children’s needs. The first aspect of power expressed through Marcia’s story is her decision to homeschool despite her parents’ wishes. As African immigrants to the United States, Marcia’s parents disapprove of her homeschooling their grandchildren.

We pulled our kids because we want to teach them, and my parents, being from West Africa, it's just like, what are you doing? You're going to destroy your children. School [for them] is brick and mortar, and education is extremely important to my family because it forged a way out. It's the one thing no one can ever take away from you. So, I feel for them. They’re just like, Lord, this child doesn't know what she's doing. My family just gave me so much flak for being a weirdo and [said] my kids were going to be weirdos. They had a lot to say and a lot of judgment. So yeah, no one understood.”

Knowing that her parents live nearby and are very involved in their grandchildren’s lives, the pressure to send them to school was very strong. At times, their questioning of her decisions or

their unwillingness to support her was frustrating and disheartening. But because of the ways she has seen her children thriving, Marcia refuses to back down on her choice.

The second dimension of power in Marcia's story is how she uses her role as a mother to empower her children in ways she did not experience as a child. Recalling her anxiety as a second grader because of a white teacher who did not like her, Marcia says she "was miserable" and would even have stomach issues from the stress of going to school. As she considers her own childhood, she shares that the desire to empower them is part of how and why she homeschools, noting that she began putting herself in her children's shoes and remembered things she didn't like about being forced to go to school. Instead, she and her husband prioritize "just letting them be who they are."

This aspect of empowering her children is also demonstrated through Marcia's husband and his support for their homeschooling choices because of his childhood experiences in Nigeria. Despite the lack of support from her parents, Marcia finds a cheerleader and advocate in her husband because he understands how vital it is for his children to have a voice in their education. Marcia taps into the power of her and her husband's shared upbringing to ensure that her children have something better than what they had.

My experience in Nigeria was traumatic because you got beaten daily. According to my husband, if I had stayed long enough, you get old enough to realize the beatings can't break you. They can't hurt you. I left before I could do that, it never left me. But for him, they were just so relentless with [the beatings] that it made him rail against [that form of schooling]. And so that plays a big role for him. He is more adamant that our kids be homeschooled than anything else. And not to push them too hard, give them time, give

them the space...and just kind of watching them blossom in the freedom to do that and listening to them. That's a big thing. We hear them.

Identity

The theme of identity in Marcia's motherwork and homeschooling is shaped by her experience of living in Nigeria and London before moving to the U.S. for college. She describes how growing up in Africa, surrounded by Black people, delayed her understanding of racial issues in the U.S. She connects Black history across continents, what she was taught about her own history, and what feels important for her children to learn. In discussing the importance of Black history for her children, she recalls the places in Africa where the chains from slave catchers were still on display, but the colonized British curriculum didn't teach about that history. She wants her children to understand Black history in ways she was not taught. Marcia doesn't describe specific aspects of Black history, identity, or culture that are explicit in her homeschooling. While she also confirms that it was white teachers that she had negative experiences with as a child and as a parent with her son, she does not attribute issues of race, racism, or antiblackness as aspects of why she pulled her children from school. Marcia does not discuss negotiating Black racial pride or assimilation as a challenge within schools when her children attended. Like other participants, she does point out that as a homeschooler there is a lack of Black families in the community. Despite this, she does not prioritize keeping her children in exclusively Black learning spaces. She says, "diversity is important to me," and wants her children to engage with a wide range of people.

Laura

We live in the city, but we live surrounded by woods without neighbors. So it was, kind of like, how can we, I don't want to say isolate the girls, but kind of insulate

them from, you know, some of the people that they may encounter at a young age that may not be the best influences while making sure that educationally they are excelling and enjoying what they're doing. So homeschooling slash unschooling was really the solution for us.

Homeschooling Motivations

Laura and her husband's primary reasons for homeschooling are their self-sufficient lifestyle and disinterest in enrolling their children in the local public school system. Because of their desire to own a farm and live off the land, they always wanted to homeschool, even before they had children. This desire was further solidified by the lack of quality schools in their county. The private schools they liked were too far away, and they didn't want to take their chances on the lottery system for charter schools.

Before we had kids, we knew that we would homeschool. We came to that just because of where we live [in PG County], so public schools are really bad. They have a lottery system for the charter Montessori schools, but they're still not great. The other alternative is private school, but the closest private school is still almost 45 minutes to an hour away. They don't really have them [private schools] in the county anymore that aren't religious. Like they're all Catholic. Which is not something that I was interested in.

Laura refers to their decision as a “process of elimination.” Although her daughters did preK3 and preK4 in traditional schools, she didn't have significant interactions or issues with the school system before deciding to homeschool. Based on her knowledge about local schools, Laura says, “We knew enough people whose kids were in public schools who were doing terribly. We didn't want to do that to our children.”

Homeschooling Practices

Laura describes her homeschooling approach as “kind of a hodgepodge,” where she mixes homeschooling and unschooling with teaching some basics and doing a lot of activities centered around traditional and nontraditional educational topics. Laura and her husband have full-time jobs with flexible schedules, and they’re both involved in homeschooling their two girls. They are supported by a live-in nanny who “fills in the gaps” when neither parent can leave work. Laura describes their homeschooling as a “team effort.” She also discusses extended family members and friends as their “village” who take part in homeschooling through formal and informal education with her daughters, many of whom are teachers or former teachers.

Laura utilizes multiple learning modalities to homeschool her young daughters. These include: a software program for academic subjects, family trips and activities, homeschool classes offered by the county, worksheets Laura creates based on various curricula, YouTube, homesteading activities, and the library. In a typical day, Laura’s daughters wake up, have breakfast, and do various learning activities for three to four hours. After lunch, they go to activities offered by the county. This is their schedule for about three days a week, and on the weekends Laura and her husband engage with them through structured hands-on activities that they’ve built with them throughout the week. Laura also notes that they do not take breaks from this schedule in the summer.

Laura’s children are four and six, so she prioritizes socialization and exposure to different topics over heavy or rigid academic content. For her homeschooling approach, Laura emphasizes, “I don’t want it so structured that we don’t have the flexibility to give them what they’re interested in”. Although Laura may have initially had more strict ideas about how to run

her homeschool environment, she discusses that her practices evolved through talking with other families.

I have [met] some people that are very strict. They really are almost... It's like regular school, just at home. And I wanted to make sure the girls kind of got the benefit of homeschooling, which is for me a looser schedule and more natural learning versus, you know, you're going to sit down and write your name and I mean, even our pediatrician was kind of like, they'll learn to read, they'll be okay there. You don't have to rush it. So that's kind of been a process and it's definitely evolved.

At this stage, Laura says they're not hiring any outside teachers or tutors, and don't belong to any co-ops where parents take turns teaching. Instead, Laura builds a customized curriculum based on grade level and developmental milestones. She uses benchmarks like "100 things first graders should know" and creates customized activities based on her children's interests. Rather than using the county for standardized testing, Laura uses a computer software program to identify gaps or mastery in her children's learning through built-in tests and quizzes. Laura, her husband, their nanny, and other adults also offer insights and support on areas the computer programs may miss, like handwriting mistakes.

For curriculum, Laura discusses the wide range of topics her daughters engage with. Her girls study math, social studies, reading; they take music and piano lessons with their uncle, other family members coach them in sports, and they participate in archery, dance, and gardening. Through the county's homeschooling classes, they take swimming lessons and STEM for young children. Laura uses her daughters' interests in things like slime and bugs as opportunities to teach science topics like chemistry, photosynthesis, and entomology. Family time and real-life

experiences are always infused with teaching and learning, whether it happens locally or while traveling.

If we go to Florida, then we're learning about gators and the indigenous birds and animals, or like we're homesteaders as well. So we do a lot of growing our own food, canning, and my husband hunts. So they also have a lot of opportunities for the less traditional educational experiences. So, hunting, shooting, they're both into at this age. Or they're into our chickens and where the eggs come from, we have bees, so they understand where honey comes from and that whole process. Now we're studying photosynthesis, which usually, you don't get in kindergarten or first grade.

Motherwork Themes

Survival

Despite her children having minimal interactions with schools, Laura enacts a preventative form of survival through her motherwork as a homeschooler. Rather than responding to actual harm she or her children have experienced through schools, Laura preemptively kept her children from schools based on her knowledge of other people's stories. Laura did not take the risk of putting her children in potentially harmful situations. Instead, she decided very early to keep them home to help them thrive.

No child left behind, I just think that's a bunch of garbage because I've seen how detrimental it is to children in the public education system. I've seen this happen with other family members. Their kids should have been excelling, but all of a sudden, they're bad kids because they can't sit still. They want to say, 'Oh, he's got ADHD because he can't sit still.' Well, the child is bored because he's already learned what he needed to

learn in this class, and you won't let him move forward! I didn't want that to happen to my kids.

Having chosen to homeschool, Laura is affirmed in her decision as she only sees her daughters engaging with education in ways that are enjoyable, fun, and tailored to their interests. Her motherwork is a form of survival because she did not allow school to become a place that extinguished her children's love of learning. Furthermore, the family's homesteading lifestyle prioritizes living from their land and being self-sufficient, which affords their children many nontraditional learning opportunities. Consequently, Laura's children are learning literal survival skills like raising animals, farming, hunting, foraging, canning, and being self-reliant.

Power

The power in Laura's motherwork is exemplified through her confidence in her family's ability to outperform the school system. Laura retains her power to create the education her children desire by not handing them over to the local school system. Laura's confidence in herself, her husband, her children, and their extended family all signal that she trusts the power of their knowledge, resources, and experiences more than public schools. She has few doubts about what she and her husband can handle academically with their girls, "we're both really smart. We have advanced degrees. This will be easy." With the power of being a homeschooler, she envisions much greater possibilities for her daughters now and in the future. Laura believes that homeschooling will also empower her children to excel well beyond what they would in a traditional school. In discussing the ways that homeschooled children are often academically advanced compared to their peers, Laura shares that she and her husband encourage their daughters to make great achievements and be successful.

There are a lot of, I don't want to say famous homeschooling families, but you know, the thought is that homeschoolers are like Dougie Howser...homeschooled kids are 12 years old and they're taking college courses or graduating from college. Or they're 16 and working on a master's degree. And that was really kind of where we were coming from. We don't take breaks in the summer. We are just learning machines. They don't look at learning as like, oh, we go to school from September to June. They look at learning as part of life and just what they do. I mean, I want her [oldest daughter] to be a neurosurgeon when she's 20. That's the goal.

Identity

Laura's story reveals little about how Black identity, racial pride, or instances of navigating Black history and culture are present in her homeschooling or motherwork. When asked about how issues of race or racism have been part of her homeschooling experience, Laura speaks more about how accepting and progressive she has found people to be in the homeschooling community. She attributes this to her religious Unitarian Universalism identity (the same affiliation as the homeschool umbrella organization she belongs to), where members welcome people of all backgrounds.

Like other participants, Laura mentioned that she thinks it is important for her children to be exposed to cultures outside their own and those outside the United States. In response to questions about teaching Black history, Laura expresses the desire for her children to have a global perspective in addition to understanding more about their own history.

Because my husband is biracial, we certainly try to make sure that, culturally we talk about everything. For us...we learn all these things about the United States. But we're one country in the world...We wanted them to have a broader education. I didn't want it

to be so focused on George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. You need to understand where our people, as African Americans, come from and all the things that people of color do. People in this country learn so little about anything else, and I didn't want that to happen.

Discussion

Looking across participant narratives, several themes connected individual stories, highlight patterns of Black motherwork, and reveal insights about Black homeschooling. These themes helped me answer my research questions and understand nuances of Black homeschooling that were outside the scope of my research questions.

Homeschool Umbrellas Strengthen Black Motherwork

Although participants were recruited through a homeschool umbrella organization, I was surprised that the umbrella group was an unsung hero and quiet champion of Black motherwork. The religious exemption provided by the Unitarian Universalist homeschool umbrella group shelters the participants from state-mandated monitoring. Across participant narratives, it became clear that the umbrella provided a place of safety, refuge, and protection that enabled these Black mothers to engage in motherwork acts of survival, power, and identity through homeschooling. All participants expressed frustration, stress, or concerns about engaging with schools or the school system in PG County, and joining a homeschool umbrella eliminated the need to engage with either. As members of the umbrella, participants no longer dealt with the state, making homeschooling easier. The umbrella provides safety for participants to homeschool (or unschool) freely, without worrying about whether or not their activities would be 'approved' by an external authority. The umbrella offered a place of refuge from the white gaze, where they were not scrutinized as Black mothers or forced to make their Black children prove themselves under

white standards. Furthermore, the umbrella welcomes all religious and non-religious faith backgrounds and strongly emphasizes social justice, religious freedom, and humanitarian values. The women in this study regarded these values and the umbrella as important to them in various ways, and it helped them to feel supported and welcomed as Black families in the umbrella group.

Homeschooling as a Maternal Act of Survival

While my research questions ask about how Black motherwork shows up *in* and *through* homeschooling, participant stories further illuminated that Black motherwork shows up *as* the decision to homeschool, particularly in the theme of survival. It takes incredible courage to make the decision to step outside the paradigm of schools. It takes courage for any family to homeschool, but far more so for Black women, who must defy every social expectation, from the larger society to the local community, from educators and from family members. When thinking about Black homeschooling as a maternal act of survival, it becomes clearer that the entire enterprise of homeschooling itself is, in fact, motherwork. The choice to homeschool Black children reflects the various dimensions of survival that Collins (1994) references in her work. Marcia and Sylvia homeschool to protect their children from schools that label them as behavior problems. Laura homeschools to make sure her daughters have space to thrive. Jeanette homeschools so her son's Asperger's doesn't land him in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Furthermore, homeschooling for these participants is an act of freedom, healing, stress reduction, wellbeing, and self-care for themselves and their children. I argue that these forms of survival discussed in motherwork theory are not only labor that Black mothers do for their children, but it is also for themselves. Across participant stories, these Black mothers share that homeschooling is as much for them as it is for their children. When participants shared how

school was stressful or painful for them and their children, they also discussed the relief and peace that homeschooling brought to their lives because their children were more relaxed. When these Black mothers describe the feeling of safety they felt by not having their children in schools, they also highlight their own peace of mind at not worrying about the harm being done to their children in schools. Similarly, participants who had negative interactions with teachers or administrators found relief from avoiding negative school-based interactions. All participants discussed loving the ease of traveling with their children, increasing their familial bonds, and improving their overall quality of life. As discussed in the homeschooling practices section for each participant, Black homeschooling as motherwork created home education environments aligned with participants' values, schedules, and family dynamics, allowing them and their children to thrive (the ultimate form of survival).

Maternal Power, Collective Support

Another theme that I grappled with was about power in motherwork. While Collins' (1994) original theory emphasized the individual burden and responsibility of Black mothers in oppressive systems, Black homeschooling mothers in my study also shared a strong collective aspect of their motherwork. Although these mothers retained full primary responsibility for their children's educational futures, they leveraged and were sustained by community support in the form of a village. None of these participants were homeschooling alone. There were shared contributions and responsibility among family members, co-ops, online teachers, community-based classes, libraries, and museums. This village also came in the form of advice, online Facebook groups, digital curriculum and lesson plans, books, and other significant resources that made it possible for these Black mothers to educate their children outside the traditional school system. I argue that this study expands Collins' conceptualization of power in motherwork by

recognizing that it is interdependent and collaborative. This does not diminish or undermine the individual leadership of Black homeschooling mothers, but expands and reinforces it. This collective power is a currency that improves how Black mothers can empower their children through their homeschooling decisions and practices. This collective support also increases the viability of Black homeschooling pathways by helping working families and those less familiar with homeschooling to consider that this work takes a village.

Balancing Black Identity

The Black homeschooling mothers in this study value Black culture and history, but expressly shared that they wanted their children exposed to all types of races and cultures. Every participant expressed pride in the rich contributions Black and African people have made, and the significance of their children understanding their connection to that history, while exposing them to others.

In her theory, Collins describes one aspect of identity in motherwork as having to negotiate resistance or assimilation when it comes to Black racial pride. Participants also shared similar elements of negotiation, with noticeable differences among the participants. Jeanette and Sylvia explicitly discuss their desires to ensure their sons engage with Black and African history and culture, primarily through Black homeschool co-op groups. These participants also openly discuss how they navigated issues of race and racism with or within the school system and as homeschoolers. However, Marcia & Laura notably do not emphasize experiences of racism to the degree that it informs their homeschooling decisions or practices, highlighting the range of negotiation that may or may not be taken up by Black mothers. Contributing factors to these differences may include Marcia's background as a Nigerian immigrant or Laura's marriage to a

biracial spouse. Although both women desire for their children to have Black racial pride, these factors may influence their experiences of navigating race or racism as homeschooling mothers.

Overall, these mothers want their children to feel pride in themselves, their Blackness, and their culture. They want them to be in spaces where they are affirmed and feel comfortable being themselves. They want their children to experience wholeness in the places they attend and with the curriculum they engage.

Othermothering Helps Black Homeschooling Thrive

In her work, Collins (1994) mentions othermothering as an aspect of survival, whereby enslaved or working Black mothers relied on other women to care for their children in their absence. She also connects this concept to the survival of the Black race due to maternal separation or nontraditional family structures. In the Black educational motherwork of homeschooling, othermothering serves the same purposes but takes on different forms and expressions. Here, othermothering takes the form of mentoring new and curious Black mothers about homeschooling their children by offering advice, resources, and tools. While Sylvia discussed this more than the other participants, all of them engaged in various forms of sharing their stories, mentoring, or offering resources to other Black mothers who they encountered on their homeschooling journeys.

Othermothering is rooted in the desire to help Black children survive in an antiblack world, regardless of who gave birth to them. I argue that offering support and advice to new Black homeschooling mothers is a form of othermothering Black children still being harmed by traditional schools. While potential Black homeschooling mothers look for answers and resources, these established Black homeschoolers are stepping in to help newcomers safeguard their children. Participants are engaging in practices of othermothering by expressing care and

concern for Black children who have not yet been removed from schools and by making themselves accessible to support new Black homeschooling moms. This increases the viability of homeschooling for more Black families and promotes more opportunities for freedom for the Black race. Participants' support significantly helps other Black mothers build the skills and confidence and courage to remove their children from schools. This form of othermothering through encouragement and resources helps build the early support systems new Black homeschooling mothers need to take the leap or to sustain their practices and not return to traditional schooling. This concern for other Black mothers and their children builds trust and safe spaces for mothers to ask questions or to navigate their early challenges and concerns. This form of othermothering may have also impacted the rise of Black homeschooling post-COVID19. The visibility of Black homeschooling mothers, their creation of curriculum for Black children, the rise of virtual conferences and support groups, the forums that moms use to research how to homeschool, and the normalization of Black people taking their children out of schools contributed to new pathways for Black mothers to join the homeschooling community.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size of four participants, study findings cannot be generalized to the Black homeschooling population. In addition, this study focuses entirely on the perspectives and experiences of mothers. The voices of children, fathers, or others supporting the homeschool unit are not included in this study. Despite these limitations, the study can add value to the significant gap in Black homeschooling research.

Conclusion

This study focuses on one of the fastest-growing, but significantly understudied populations of students in the U.S. Black homeschoolers continue the historical legacy of Black

liberation, resistance, self-reliance, and self-determination that has marked every generation of African-Americans living in the U.S. As such, centering Black mothers' roles in this work contributes to our understanding of how Black women conceptualize and participate in the survival and thriving of Black children in a racist, antiblack society. This study offers scholarly significance by uncovering how an educational approach that has been largely associated with to married, religious, stay-at-home white women not only exists but is growing among Black women of various backgrounds.

This study provides insight into how Black women embody motherwork in their homeschooling contexts as they navigate their motivations, decision-making, and homeschool practices. Centering their voices through the motherwork lens provides important insights and connections to their multilayered identities as Black women, mothers, and homeschoolers. The study intentionally names Black mothers as the driving force of the Black homeschooling movement and seeks to share their stories and experiences. Additionally, it amplifies educational pathways that do not rely on schools for Black children who are exposed to gratuitous violence by merely engaging with the school system. Furthermore, this research highlights pre-COVID-19 Black homeschooling experiences, shedding light on an important demographic that is likely mentoring post-COVID Black homeschoolers. Through this work, I hope to increase the scholarly discussion of educational alternatives for Black students in the U.S. and to extend the scholarship that connects Black motherwork to educational decision making.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol- Paper 1

Intro: Describe research and personal interests. Review consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Review estimated length of time for interview, recording procedures and hopes for what will happen with this data/project. Thank them for their time.

Icebreakers

1. Tell me about your family and who lives in your home.
2. How would you explain homeschooling to someone who isn't familiar with it?

Education Approaches to Homeschooling:

1. What does homeschooling look like for your family?
 - a. Please describe your approach to homeschooling And a typical day where you are working with your children.
 - b. What is the influence of having multiple children (if applicable)

Probe for:

- c. Type of homeschooling approach (ex: classical, relaxed, eclectic, unschoolers, etc.)
- d. Curricular choices, Systems used, Subjects/Content covered
- e. Pedagogical approaches (routines/practices, independent and self-directed spaced, activities outside home)
- f. Lesson planning and time management

Experiences of Homeschooling-General

2. What are the main benefits of homeschooling your child/dren?
3. What are the main challenges or concerns that you have around homeschooling?

Experiences of Homeschooling- Racialized

4. Tell me about some of your experiences as Black homeschooler and navigating
 - a. Being a Black mother
 - b. Raising Black children
5. In what ways (if any) are Black culture, history or experiences incorporated into your approach to homeschooling?
6. How do you see homeschooling as serving Black children and families? (provide examples)
7. Describe your relationship with other Black homeschooling parents and families.

Probe for:

- a. other families of color and white. homeschooling parents and families

Decision to homeschool (HOW and WHY):

8. How did you first become interested in homeschooling?
 - a. Probe for sources, research.
9. What are your primary reasons for deciding to homeschool? What other factors played into your decision?

- a. Probe: finances, training/experience as a teacher, extended family approval, religion, special education, job, wanting more time with children, previous experience with local schools, child(rens) future plans (e.g., college, the arts, medicine)
- 10. What role (if any) has race played in your decision to homeschool?
- 11. What concerns did you have when you started home schooling?
 - a. Probe: self-confidence
- 12. Describe your transition from the desire to homeschool to the decision to homeschool.
 - a. What challenges did you experience?
 - b. Probe for process for registering as a homeschooler

Education philosophy:

- 13. How do you see your role/s as the parent of a homeschooled child?
- 14. What do you believe is the purpose of learning, or goal of education?
- 15. What role (if any) has race played in the development of your beliefs about the goals of education, or the purpose of learning?
 - a. How did these beliefs about education develop?
- 16. How did your beliefs about education lead you to become a homeschooler?
- 17. How do you see the current school systems as serving Black children and families? (provide examples)

Wrap up/Close:

- 18. Is there anything that I've not asked about that you would like to share with me?

Demographic Survey (asked at end of interview)

- 1. What is the highest level of education the mother has received?
 - ☐ Less than high school (specify a grade, if less than high school)
 - ☐ High school graduate
 - ☐ Some college/vocational/technical
 - ☐ Associate degree
 - ☐ BA degree
 - ☐ Post-graduate: Specify _____
- 2. Where you born in the United States?
 - ☐ yes
 - ☐ no
 If no, where (in what country) were you born? _____
- 3. Does you work outside the home?
 - ☐ yes
 - ☐ no
 If yes, what kind of work do you do? _____
 - Do you work _____ Full-time or _____ Part-time?
- Children's names & ages:
- Genders:

Appendix B

Codebook- Paper 1

Physical Survival- of children and community

My Definition: homeschooling decisions made in response to real, imagined, material, & metaphysical experiences of threats, danger, or harm. *This survival happens despite maternal separation and labor constructs according to Collins.

Codes:

-Protection: Black homeschooling mothers' attempts to shield their children from known and unknown threats/danger/harm by: 1) standing between them and their children, 2) attempting to avoid pain (including pain derived from their own schooling experiences), 3) utilizing physical proximity (through homeschooling) to keep a more watchful eye on their children.

-Wellbeing: When Black homeschooling mothers attend to the wellbeing (thriving, not just surviving) of their children through attempting to heal past/present school wounds (including their own) and creating safe space through their homeschooling decisions.

-Teaching survival skills: The ways that Black homeschooling mothers teach or model survival skills (implicitly or explicitly) for their children to be able to make it on their own in an unsafe world.

Power

My Definition: The persistent struggle between experiences of powerlessness and attempts to reclaim power by Black homeschooling mothers. (As Collins points out, this is directly connected to histories of slavery and indigenous genocide in which Black mothers had minimal control over their own bodies in choosing to have children and Black and Indigenous mothers had no control over who stole, sold, educated, or murdered their children.)

Codes:

-Maternal Power: When Black homeschooling mothers use their agency (power) to decide what's best for them and their children. When their mothering and homeschooling decisions reflect beliefs that they know better than systems or can figure things out themselves.

-Village* Power>(*collective, collaborative): The decisions around using communal approaches to homeschooling that value the shared wisdom, power, resources

and knowledge of “extended” family and a familial worldview. *Othermothering could be included

-Kid Power: The intentional collaboration with Black children to have power over their learning, time, and space. This can be reflective of both empowerment children did not have in schools or power that Black homeschooling mothers did not have themselves as children (or adults).

-Resistance Power: The resistance to external structures (i.e. schools) exerting power and influence over the lives and minds of Black children. This includes calling out and naming the harm that the dominant systems cause and challenging beliefs on what authority systems should have, what knowledge is valued/valuable, and who controls what’s being learned. *Collins emphasizes this is tied directly to racial, ethnic, and cultural preservation and survival.

Identity

My Definition: The ways Black homeschooling mothers navigate tensions to foster Black racial pride in an anti-black world. This tension forces these mothers to negotiate degrees of assimilation (and subordination) and bargain between racialized coping, surviving, and resisting with their children.

Codes:

-Negotiating Assimilation: How Black homeschooling mothers resist or welcome varying degrees of assimilation for themselves and their children through educational decision making.

-Black vs Anti-black: The ongoing tension between emphasizing Black racial and cultural pride and countering anti-black messages and experiences.

-Personal Identity: The emphasis on cultivating self-esteem and self-pride in children’s own interests and abilities.

-(Re)Naming & Reframing: When these mothers choose to identify themselves, their children, or their race as something different than what schools or dominant culture have labeled them as. This includes Black mothers’ articulation of their personal mothering and homeschooling identities.

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Paper 2: “This is How We Raise Free People”: Black Unschooling as Modern-Day

Marronage

Abstract

Amidst marginalization by traditional school systems, Black U.S. families are increasingly turning to alternative education pathways (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009). Despite Black families being recognized as the fastest-growing demographic of home educators (Ray, 2019), Black unschoolers remain unstudied. This study explores unschooling among Black families seeking to decolonize education and parenting practices, drawing from Black radical traditions. Using marronage as an analytical framework, it examines unschooling as a tool for Black liberation focused on self-sovereignty, autonomy, and self-determination. Research questions include: 1) What characteristics do marronage and Black unschooling share as practices for pursuing Black self-sovereignty? and 2) What practices do Black unschoolers implement in their pursuit of freedom? Reflexive thematic analysis of the Fare of the Free Child podcast by Black unschooling mother Akilah S. Richards informs this study. As more Black families opt out of traditional schooling, I contribute to understanding alternative education options unexamined in academia.

Introduction

We can't keep using tools of oppression and expect to raise free people- Akilah S. Richards

This quote has been stirring my spirit ever since I first heard Akilah Richards speak in 2017. It has shifted my paradigm for thinking about schooling, shaped the foundation of my doctoral work, and guided the intentions of my research agenda. It reminds me of my priorities in engaging with young people and supports me in my pursuit of Black liberation. Akilah's words are a stinging critique of schooling and parenting practices that suppress Black children's freedom. In just a few words, she suggests that the very strategies we have ascribed to as beneficial for many years are the same ones that are actually restraining Black liberty. Her words also offer hope that if we desire a world where young Black people are free, then we must employ a different set of tools than the ones we have historically relied upon. We must abandon the oppressive instruments and ideologies that intentionally choke out Black freedom, starting with schooling.

Research and the lived experiences of Black people in the U.S. confirm that schools are sites of oppression and Black suffering (Dumas, 2014). Also, despite over a century of concerted efforts to improve the schooling conditions and outcomes for Black students, there has not been enough improvement. It is time to try a different approach. In the search for alternatives to schools as tools of oppression, unschooling is one strategy being used to raise free people because it troubles notions of education vs. schooling, adult/youth power dynamics, and what is truly required for learning. It brings into question the role of schools, teachers, curriculum, mass learning systems, compulsory attendance, physical spaces, and the desired outcomes of education. In essence, unschooling questions our dependence on educational strategies we've 'always used' and makes us deeply reconsider why we do things the way we do.

We already know that Black families in the U.S. are increasingly choosing alternative pathways to education (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009) in response to traditional school systems that marginalize, oppress, and kill their children. While Black families have been widely recognized as the fastest growing demographic in the homeschooling population (Ray, 2019), a lesser-known group are Black unschoolers. Unschooling is a form of self-directed education that resists traditional schooling practices (Holt, 1977) and shifts power from parents to children as the primary agents of educational decision making. Black unschooling considers additional layers of Black historical context, structural antiblack racism, and the pursuit of Black liberation. Of note, I consider Black home education and Black unschooling to be significantly different sets of practices for Black learners. Home education illuminates Black parents' resistance efforts to provide safety, culturally affirming curriculum, and personalized learning environments for their children (Fields-Smith, 2020). Conversely, Black unschooling emphasizes nontraditional power structures between adults and children, does not focus on curriculum, and is entirely led by children instead of adults. Despite similarities between homeschooling and unschooling, Black home education is often rooted in school-based practices like lessons, subjects, benchmarks, standards, assessments, mastery, and structured times for learning. Black unschoolers resist the belief that these practices are important or necessary for learning and are generally critical of school-based learning ideologies. There are no identified learning requirements for unschoolers, other than those set by the learner themselves. Black unschooling philosophies of education are often diametrically opposed to those found in schools and they center liberatory learning practices for Black children. In light of the task and responsibility of educational researchers to uplift solutions and new possibilities for Black learners, it is concerning that Black unschooling has not been a point of focus in the field.

In this article, I use marronage as an analytical framework to understand Black unschooling. I argue that the Black unschooling movement draws from Black radical traditions of liberation, self-autonomy, self-determination and shares characteristics with marronage as a pathway to Black freedom. Simply defined, I see marronage as Black people's disengagement from the state in order to pursue self-governance. I use marronage as an analytical framework because I consider it as one of the first liberatory practices that Black enslaved people exercised to exist outside of the oppressive system of slavery. As an analytical framework, marronage centers self-sovereignty and shares many characteristics with Black unschooling.

The research questions posed in this study are: 1) What characteristics do marronage and Black unschooling share as practices for pursuing Black self-sovereignty? and 2) What practices do Black unschoolers implement in their pursuit of freedom? Using the *Fare of the Free Child* audio podcast (Richards, 2016), I employed qualitative research methods to analyze selected episodes. In this article, I center the efforts of Black unschooling families to unlearn school-based ways of being and consider the risks they take in trying unconventional approaches to educating and parenting their children. I also gain insight into Black unschooling strategies for getting free from systems of oppression. The remainder of the article is organized as follows: a literature review on marronage and unschooling, research methods and data sources, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Historical Marronage

Spanning many countries, cultures, and historical landscapes, maroons have existed in every place where Black people were enslaved. Originally believed to come from the Spanish word *cimarrón* for wild or untamed livestock and horses (Sweeney, 2019), the word maroon

evolved and eventually came to be associated with escaped or runaway enslaved Africans. Marronage, another form of the word, can also be used to describe the various acts of flight by people who refused to remain captive to slavery:

In response to the brutal forms of racialized violence Afro-descendant populations experienced in the colonial epoch, there existed numerous ways in which the oppressed sectors of society fought against their marginalization. From suicide to work stoppages, petitioning powerful actors or seeking to assimilate to the dominant society, individual acts of rebellion to carefully coordinated, large-scale uprisings, Black populations in the Western Hemisphere found myriad ways to assert their humanity and attempt to remove themselves from enslavement. Marronage—the creation of autonomous communities by runaway slaves—was a central form of such struggle. (Bledsoe, 2018, p. 45)

Marronage refers to the individual and collective acts of fugitivity, refusal, and escape by enslaved Black populations in response to slavery (Roberts, 2017). Roberts (2017) notes that discourses on marronage generally fall into two categories: petit marronage and grand marronage. Where “individual fugitive acts of truancy” describe the first form of marronage, the second form is distinguished by large scale isolated communities that formed territories beyond the reach of slavery or “a regime of unfreedom” (Roberts, 2017, p.220). As such, the words maroon, marronage, and their historical and present-day contexts can take on different interpretations depending on their geographical location.

Outside the U.S., maroon communities of the grand marronage variety are particularly notable and were located in Brazil, Jamaica, Haiti, Suriname, Cuba, Puerto Rico, St. Vincent, Guyana, Dominica, Panama, Colombia, Mexico, and the Amazon River Basin (Reed, 2017). In many of these places, maroons fought wars to legalize and legitimize their ownership of the

territories to which they escaped. In other cases, these locations were so hard to reach, so treacherous or uninhabitable that they were simply left alone by would-be pursuers. Many maroon communities established in the mountains, highlands, and jungles continue their legacies today in those regions and have maintained their autonomy. Mooretown, Jamaica and the quilombo settlements in Brazil are just two examples of such communities that still exist today.

As evidenced above, the act of marronage has a very location specific context. U.S. maroons, like those in other places, used a high degree of creativity to exert their agency. They found their way to new places with limited navigation tools, established systems of trade, gathered, grew, or hunted their own food, invented methods of communication, taught themselves architecture, and maintained transit modes of safe passage while trying to remain invisible. The places where they made their homes—these hard-to-reach places—caves, underground dens, trees, mountains, and swamps—were the epicenter of their individual and collective self-sufficiency.

Maroons fled from plantations and all systems of enslavement to create new societies that completely abandoned previous power structures and conceived new ways of life on their own terms (Bledsoe, 2018). These radical communities disrupted systems of oppression, challenged dominant societal norms, and established transformative spaces of life and humanity (Roberts, 2017). Though geographical contexts may differ, in these autonomous Black spaces, freedom was conceptualized and defined outside the bounds of the enslaved condition (Bledsoe, 2017).

Maroons are people who refused slavery and civil society. While violence, servitude, and death surrounded them, they created a “parallel culture” of their own making (Winston, 2019, p. 51). They chose neither the plantation nor legal freedom by going north when it became an option. Rather, they chose autonomy over everything. They chose living on their own terms.

They chose to be self-governed (Bledsoe, 2017) knowing that dependence on resources beyond themselves and their community could result in death. Although these makeshift homes in undesirable spaces may not have provided the fullness of life available outside the systemic oppression of chattel slavery, these men, women, and children accessed some level of self-humanization through their refusal and fugitivity.

Maroons were living, breathing, beings walking in full defiance and violation of slavery's laws. Their very (well known) existence posed a threat to the entire system that held others captive. Their "freedom" wasn't dependent on manumission papers. They didn't ask anyone for permission. These lawless people defied any legal definitions of sovereignty and ownership by being self-sovereign and self-owning. One scholar puts it this way:

People rendering themselves unavailable for governing trips up the system, more often than not, leading to crises of authority and further exposing elite incompetence and delinquencies... the ungovernable withhold both consent and legitimation, and, in the process, render the state and its allies more transparently incompetent, brutal, and imperial. (Quan, 2017, as quoted in Winston, 2019, p. 65)

Marronage is the categorical rejection of slavery's conditions and rationale so that Black humanity, self-liberation, and autonomy can be asserted (Bledsoe, 2018). By "creating territories of Black humanity" (Bledsoe, 2018, p.46), maroons engaged in Black worldmaking. Roberts (2015) notes that the refusal to engage within the logic or spatiality of enslavement and its byproducts, means that, "in its attempt to create a fully autonomous community, marronage must attend to multiple scales, relations, and expressions of anti-Blackness, and ultimately establish wholly new ways of being in the world" (Roberts, 2015 as quoted in Bledsoe, 2018, p.33). In addition to the individual and collective practices of marronage, this work examines the

characteristics of maroons that supported them in figuring out how to subversively preserve and reimagine Black life under the certainty of state-sanctioned Black death.

Unschooling

Seemingly worlds apart from the fugitive life of hiding in plain sight, there exists another group of people defying established social conventions. Primarily led by John Holt in the 1960s and 1970s, the unschooling movement in the U.S. brought together communities who rebelled against compulsory schooling, standardized curriculum, and rigid learning structures (Murphy, 2013). While this humanistic, child-centered, progressive approach to education and living has gained traction over the years, it continues to remain on the fringes of society, under the radar, and not widely recognized as an acceptable way to educate or raise children.

Unschooling is a form of self-directed education that does not adhere to any prescribed curriculum, benchmarks, or learning objectives. It is not school or homeschool. There are no tests, grades, homework, or required assignments. Learners are free to pursue their interests for as long (or little) as they like and there are no expected academic outcomes (Gray, 2013). Learning is conceptualized as natural, intrinsically motivated, and happening all the time (Holt, 1977). As such, placing arbitrary milestones or conditions on learning is unnecessary.

In addition to taking a child-led approach to learning, unschooling parents (and adult facilitators) also depart from hierarchical, authoritarian, and coercive parenting practices in favor of partnership, trust, and mutual learning (Rolstad & Kesson, 2013). Unschoolers believe that trustful relationships with children build their self-autonomy and self-leadership while disrupting oppressive and violent practices of adultism. For most families, unschooling is not only about education but a way of living in respectful relationships with children (Richards, 2016; Riley, 2020).

Unschoolers can be difficult to study because they often prefer to stay under the radar, similar to many homeschoolers (Ray, 2015). Though homeschooling is legal in all 50 states in the U.S., oversight and regulations vary from state to state, with some being more restrictive than others in what documentation is required from homeschooling parents. Most often, unschoolers are registered as homeschoolers in their state (Riley, 2020) and their involvement with state education offices varies. This is relevant because most unschoolers started their journeys as homeschoolers who gradually became more and more relaxed (Riley, 2020).

Modern-Day Marronage and Black Unschooling

What does it mean for marronage to exist today if slavery was legally ended but still exists in new forms? Today, the fight for Black freedom persists everywhere that state-sanctioned violence is enacted against Black bodies. Quan (2017) argues that present-day marronage, “includes school truancy, gender nonconformity, border crossing, run[ning] toward freedom and building communities away from conditions of bondage, hyper-surveillance, and unending incarceration” (Winston, 2019, p. 49). Despite the legal end of chattel slavery, the need for Black flight, escape, and safety has not ended. Slavery’s mark has been permanently left on Black bodies in the form of antiblackness (Hartman, 2008). Therefore, temporary and permanent forms of fugitivity like marronage will always be needed and practiced.

To better understand modern-day forms of marronage in the U.S., we can look at the ways Black people are choosing to disengage from systems of oppression. The Black home education movement is quickly demonstrating evidence of such disengagement practices. With their increasing numbers and visibility pre- and post-COVID-19 school shutdowns, Black home educators have been laying fugitive foundations for decades. It is their practices of educational refusal and resistance that trailblazed the pathways for Black unschooling as a modern-day

form of marronage. Educating Black children at home has liberated many students from oppressive school systems and normalized alternative approaches to education. It is this abolition work of Black home educators that made it possible for Black unschoolers to push beyond the boundaries of school-based ideologies into the unconventional realms of unschooling, much like maroons who relocated themselves into unconventional dwelling places.

The literature has yet to address the population of Black unschoolers and the ways they voice their particular concerns and experiences. Black home education literature does not fully attend to the aspects of self-direction and autonomy of unschooling, and the few studies on unschoolers do not recognize the specificity of Blackness within the unschooling experience. This group has its own unique culture, language, and practices that should be examined. This research aims to address both gaps by examining characteristics of marronage to learn about Black unschoolers' racialized experiences and challenges when choosing self-directed education over traditional pathways.

It is not hyperbole when Black unschoolers identify schools as sites of slavery (Richards, 2016). Schools are literal sites of dehumanization, surveillance, policing, state-sanctioned violence, and death for Black children (Wun, 2016). Though unschoolers might label schools as plantations (Richards, 2016), Dumas (2014) calls them sites of Black suffering where antiblackness and the impossibility of Black humanity have become ordinary pains. While certain school policies and practices lead to the criminalization, imprisonment, and eventual death of many Black children, schools are also sites of spirit murdering--the slow death of Black souls by sustained systemic humiliation and deprivation (Love, 2016). As such, Black unschoolers, like their historical maroon relatives, seek permanent escape.

By declining state-sponsored education, Black parents reject policing, surveillance, and school-based government oversight so they can partner with their children to figure out life and learning together. Black unschoolers' marronage practices create space for Black children to own themselves and their learning. By breaking away from dominant schooling paradigms, these modern-day maroons use alternative education and parenting approaches to affirm an existence that refuses the structures, forms, and practices of modern-day slavery.

It is worth noting that Black unschoolers do not all share the same ideas and assumptions about freedom. For this paper, I employ Akilah Richards' (2016) concept of freedom as self-ownership or self-sovereignty. When she states that, "unschooling essentially says we believe that people should own themselves, we believe that people are sovereign" (Richards, 2016, Episode 45) she guides the way that freedom is discussed in this study. I draw from her ideas of schools as plantations, freedom as an inherent right to people of all ages, children being trustworthy, and antiblackness as a denial of freedom and full living to Black people (Richards, 2020). Therefore, I adopt what she calls "raising free people" (Richards, 2016, Episode 0) as a form of Black unschooling that means not only removing children from schools that deny them autonomy but also eliminating adult practices that infringe on Black children's rights to self-ownership.

Black unschoolers, like their Black home education counterparts, are becoming more visible through popular and social media outlets, despite receiving little attention from academic researchers. This study elevates the work of Black unschooling families within the broader conversation on Black liberation. Using marronage as an analytical framework, I connect the purposes and practices of the Black unschooling movement to historical maroon practices that also fought for Black self-sovereignty and freedom. Marronage is one of the

strongest connections between Black unschooling and historical practices that emphasize Black agency, autonomy, and liberation within the U.S. Because of their unique shared contexts of fugitivity and Black self-sovereignty, marronage is the lens through which I illuminate similarities with Black unschooling discussed in the *Fare of the Free Child* podcast. In the results section, I analyze the ways the characteristics of marronage are manifested within Black unschooling. I will also discuss the dimensions of Black unschooling that fall outside the lens of marronage.

Methods & Data Sources

This work is part of multiple studies on Black unschooling. Using the *Fare of the Free Child* audio podcast as a primary source (<https://www.raisingfreepeople.com/podcast/>), I employed Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis to analyze selected episodes. The show is created and hosted by Black unschooling mother Akilah S. Richards, who regularly interviews and co-hosts with other leaders of the unschooling movement, including her husband and two daughters. She is a founding board member of the Alliance for Self-Directed Education and has established the Raising Free People network, which consists of Black, Indigenous and people of color who utilize unschooling, self-directed learning, and decolonized parenting practices to experience liberation for their families. Since starting her podcast in 2016, Akilah has become the most cited and consulted voice in the Black unschooling movement. The show contains 200+ installments. Episodes last about 40 minutes and have a show notes page with a description of episode topics, guests, and relevant links. The introductory episode (Richards, 2016) describes the podcast as being:

For Black and Brown parents who practice alternative parenting options to the traditional educational model. Options like unschooling....[for] people of color looking for real

viable options to the oppressive systems that our children are expected to live and learn inside of....This podcast though will center Black and Brown voices in the self-directed education movement....I'll talk about ways to make self-directed education more accessible for Black and Brown people....I want to use this space to create community for adults to find and support each other....[to] talk about the layers of unconventional Black parenthood and how we can use that mindset as a way to get free. (Richards, 2016, Episode 0)

For my exploratory analysis, I included episodes that provided a broad understanding of Black unschooling or that connected with themes of marronage. I began by skimming through the show notes pages of the first 174 episodes (the number publicly available at the time of this project). If the title, introductory information and content seemed relevant to my topic, then I listened at a sped-up pace for the first 5-10 minutes of the episode to gauge whether or not to include it in my study. After skimming the entire catalog, I went back to episodes that I highlighted as still interesting or relevant for this project and listened to the entire episode at a sped-up pace. Of the 52 episodes I listened to and identified as potentially relevant, I narrowed it down to 14 episodes (including one Ted Talk) to include for this project, while keeping the others in mind for other purposes. Episodes that were not included were primarily more focused on relevant topics outside the scope of this study, including: racial equity in self-directed education, healing generational trauma, self-care practices, intuition and spirituality, and resources for families doing self-directed education.

The 14 episodes used in this study (Figure 1) were from seasons 1-4 (2016-2019) and ranged from 15-58 minutes long, with the average being about 22 minutes. Each episode was transcribed using voice to text software from Google Docs. The episodes were then played at

half speed to clean up the transcriptions. During or after the transcription editing process, blocks of quotes/text were identified as “potentially” (p.62) interesting, according to Braun & Clarke’s (2012) approach to thematic analysis. These interesting quotes were put into a separate spreadsheet for analysis, using episode and line numbers to keep them organized. Through this process, each of the 14 episodes were listened to 3-4 times and then read through multiple times before (and as) quotes were extracted. A total of nearly 300 quotes were identified as interesting and in need of further analysis.

Figure 1: Podcast Episodes Included in Study

Fare of the Free Child Podcast Akilah S. Richards 2016-Present	
Episode No.	Title
TED Talk	Raising Free People
0	Welcome and Why This Show
1	Unschooling Explained
9	BONUS: Unschooling Away the Plantation
13	Why Liberated Parenting is Vital
27	Missing Girls, Major Fears
45	Practicing Unschooling
74	What Does Raising Free People Mean?
80	Curing Colonized Imaginations
82	Moving Abroad to Design Your Liberation
124	What is Confident Autonomy
134	Busting the Deschooling Myth
139	Teaching Consent & Bodily Autonomy
142	Check the Unschooling Vocab

After the process of familiarizing myself with the data (phase 1), I continued with the other five phases of Braun & Clarke’s (2012) six phase approach. I went through the interesting segments of quotes/text and generated initial codes trying to account for both latent and explicit content (p.61). Next, I constructed themes according to patterns, clusters, and unifying features (p.63). Then I reviewed the themes by comparing them across the data set and the individual quotes selected (p. 65) before defining and naming them (p.66) for the analytical write up (p.69).

Throughout this process I also employed the invaluable process of analytic memo writing as recommended by Saldana (2009) for qualitative researchers.

Findings

Marronage is a practice of Black self-sovereignty that rejects conditions of slavery and antiblackness by disengaging from state practices of colonization. Maroons reject the conditions of slavery through physically and psychologically abandoning plantations, ultimately refusing forms of ownership that are not self-governed. Maroons reject the condition of antiblackness through asserting Black life, humanity, and freedom. Finally, maroons disengage from state practices of colonization by establishing autonomous Black spaces that do not employ ideologies of domination or systems of oppression. These characteristics of marronage guide and inform the analytical framework I use to analyze the Black unschooling podcast discussed in this study. As previously argued, marronage and Black unschooling are manifestations of Black sovereignty in very different eras, but understanding the historical significance of maroon practices provides considerable insight to our understanding of Black unschooling practices. In the results section I will first analyze how the dimensions of marronage are manifested in Black unschooling then I will examine the practices Black unschoolers use in their pursuit of freedom.

RQ1: What characteristics do marronage and Black unschooling share as practices for pursuing Black self-sovereignty?

Rejection of Slavery

Maroons and Black unschoolers both reject the conditions of slavery through their physical and psychological practices of refusal and abandonment. While historical maroons rejected literal slavery and the brutalities of the chattel system, Black unschoolers reject current

dynamics of enslavement contained within the U.S. school system, which Richards (2016) refers to as plantations in episode 9:

Schools are one of America's most effective and productive plantations...It encourages them [our children] to compete with other children around whatever information the state says you should know. The same state that shoots us down in the streets. Our women, our girls, our boys, our men, repeatedly...And so I get how scary it is to choose to unschool...the courage that it takes for us to remove our children from the plantation to have them not become a part of the system. To have a representation of our willingness to rebel and to push back against the things that oppress us and that try to disappear aspects of our Blackness and try to make us live in fear. Self-directed education is the f*** you to THAT sentiment. It is, but no, I will not allow my children to be shepherded through your system. (Richards, 2016, Episode 9)

In the previous quote, Richards mentions that schooling practices and the state-sanctioned murder of Black people are inextricably connected, along with the plantation system of slavery. Physically removing children from the plantations or schools, reflects maroon practices of flight and fugitivity to locations detached from the system of slavery. In particular, Maroons and Black unschoolers largely seek refuge and safety in places that are explicitly hidden, hard to find, or under the radar. Where maroons lived in trees, underground caves, and swamps, Black unschoolers are often cloaked under the label of homeschoolers in their states. Maroons lived in spaces where they had no legal authorization to be, constantly facing threats of violence, punishment, and death. Similarly, Black unschoolers who exist outside the authority of schools are often criticized, surveilled, and ostracized when they are discovered as living in defiance of

state-mandated schooling requirements and dominant paradigms of education (Gray & Riley, 2013).

Beyond the physical relocation from sites of slavery, both Black unschoolers and maroons engage in practices of psychological and metaphysical rejection of slavery's conditions. The most evident form of this practice for maroons was making permanent dwelling places outside the reach of slavery, essentially declaring a refusal to return to plantations. In doing so, they committed mentally, spiritually, and emotionally to a life of figuring things out on their own. Similarly, Black unschoolers commit to navigating the unfamiliar and unknown without a clear guide, they rely on internal knowing and navigation rather than external systems, essentially "using a compass instead of a map" (Richards, 2016, Episode 124). By refusing to rely on schooling logics and ideologies, Black unschoolers learn to survive "off the plantation" through intuition, trusting themselves, and faith in other unschooling community members for support. When they abandon common school practices like curriculum, Black unschoolers are guided by internal belief systems to make decisions for their unconventional lives:

I trust myself to facilitate learning. I trust the communities that I'm part of. I trust my children. I trust the resources to which I have access despite racist America's best efforts, the resources to which I have access. I trust those things. I trust the belief in a force that connects all people. And by embracing self-directed, personalized learning in everyday life with my partner and our daughters I stand up. (Richards, 2016, Episode 9)

In episode 74, *What Does Raising Free People Mean*, Richards says, "So to raise free people is to unschool ourselves from the habits and beliefs that are incongruous with how we want to make space for our children to own themselves." This quote recognizes that Black

unschoolers, much like maroons, employ practices of abandoning conditions of slavery through their refusal to be owned and their pursuit of self-governance.

Rejection of Antiblackness

Through asserting Black life, humanity, and freedom, maroons and Black unschoolers reject the conditions of antiblackness. In opposition to the systems that try to extinguish Black existence, maroons and Black unschoolers protect and preserve Black humanity through their acts of self-removal from slavery and practices self-sovereignty. Both groups refuse to accept the dominant conditions, despite risks to their safety while trying to live on their own terms in Black bodies.

In her very first podcast episode, Richards (2016) confirms that Black unschoolers have very different concerns than their white counterparts because, “white parents are focused on the rights that their children should have, black people are worried about the safety of our children” (Richards, 2016, Episode 0). In other episodes, Richards and guest co-hosts argue that Black children in schools are exposed to many dangers and those who are unschooled are also at increased risks for being targets of antiblack racism because of their strong sense of autonomy and self-ownership (Episode 27). Podcast hosts further consider that history has favored more rigid forms of education and parenting to protect Black children from threats, violence and death (Episode 13). However, like maroons, Black unschoolers reject practices based in fear of white supremacy and instead take risks to live more freely through noncompliance with the norms of antiblackness. In episode 27, Richards and guests have the following conversation:

When we talk about the cost of raising free people of color, inside a system that continues to dehumanize us, it stands to reason that we feel like we're not allowed this thing. It feels like a luxury, a privilege, a false idea. I don't want to raise my child with this false sense

of liberation when everybody else around them, specifically white people, don't see us as human, don't see us as people who have the right to be free...as I stand to try to protect my two little black girls, how can I say that I want them to be free? I want them to express themselves? That I want them to give their opinions without fear? I'm tearing up because I get it. I get why it doesn't feel not only [not] safe, but it doesn't feel rational. It feels like we need to guard them and have our bodies around theirs as we all run through this minefield and hope that we all make it to the other side. That's one feeling. But y'all if we act on that feeling, if we parent based on that feeling, then nothing will change. And I believe that a part of the answer is to do the work of raising free people. (Richards, 2016, Episode 27)

As the previous quote reflects, Maroons and Black unschoolers reject antiblack conditions through their refusal to exist as subordinate subjects of domination. When Black refusal collides with systems of white supremacy, it results in various forms of Black death, justifying the feelings of fear that Richards names in the quote above. Black unschooled children are being raised to have expectations of being treated as equal humans to adults, white people, and authorities. They are not expected to shrink in the presence of these groups and are supported in their autonomy to own themselves and respectfully communicate their dissent (Episode 27). This assertion of Black freedom and humanity is a form of defiance that mirrors the risks maroons took to challenge white tyranny.

Similarly, maroons and Black unschoolers calculate the risks of taking back their freedom and becoming self-sovereign beings. For maroons, the risks were being discovered or recaptured into slavery. For Black unschoolers, it is the risk of sending free thinking Black

children into an antiblack world that denies their autonomy and humanity. In both cases, Black unschoolers and maroons considered the cost of liberation to be worth the risk:

But then how do I turn around and raise free people?... How do I do that and then still face my own fears for their safety? The first thing is to question whether you can afford not to do that. If you can afford it to raise a subservient person. To raise a person who is fearful of white power. I think that *that* cost is too high. (Richards, 2016, Episode 27)

For both maroons and Black unschoolers the cost of not pursuing freedom is too high because antiblackness means there is no amount of obedience or subjectivity that will render Black bodies or spaces as safe places. Acts of marronage or speaking truth to power may make Black bodies more visible to antiblack threats, but as Richards states, “history itself shows us that Black children are targeted, not because of what they say or do, but because of the fact that they're black” (Richards, 2016, Episode 27). In response, Black unschoolers and maroons engage in risk-taking practices to contend for Black freedom despite antiblack racism.

Decolonization

Maroons and Black unschoolers both disengage from state practices of colonization by establishing autonomous Black spaces that do not employ the ideologies of domination or systems of oppression created by white supremacy. Maroon communities were not replications of the plantation system or chattel slavery in the same ways Black unschooling communities do not rely on school-based practices of learning or coercive forms of parenting. In essence, both groups engage in practices of decolonization by recognizing that it takes more than just removing themselves from physical sites of oppression to counteract the influence of colonization. As Black people born into, raised by, living within, and reliant upon systems of oppression for multiple generations, decolonization work primarily takes place as a psychological, emotional,

and spiritual practice of unlearning. For Black unschoolers, this unlearning often begins with ideas and behaviors based in schools, including rewards and punishment, competition, the need for assessment, age or grade-based learning standards, and what counts as learning. Akilah Richards uses the word schoolishness (a combination of school and foolishness) to describe what she and other community members are attempting to decolonize for themselves and their children. In the episode *Check the Unschooling Vocab*, Richards offers listeners definitions of various unschooling terms, and in the following quote, she suggests that a schoolish mindset is a binary one, with only right and wrong ways of doing or perceiving the world. Specifically, she addresses what she deems as schoolish ideas about authority, appearance, and professionalism, whereby certain attire or accents are considered to be superior to others:

That's a very schoolish thought because it isn't actually true. That actually is rooted in a colonized mindset...I would say, and colonization and schoolishness often go together... Schooling is a means of colonizing. And so when you are thinking in a way that focuses on what you learned in school as right or wrong then you are absolutely in a space of colonized thinking and we all, myself included, are constantly recognizing the ways that we consider things from a colonized perspective and have to do the work to really undo that. (Richards, 2016, Episode 142)

Throughout the podcast, Richards and guest co-hosts share decolonizing tools with and from the Black unschooling community. In many ways, the podcast itself is a weekly practice of decolonization that challenges listeners to reconsider their own colonized mindsets and invites them to notice where they're being called to make change.

Another way Black unschoolers and maroons practice decolonization is by establishing

self-governed Black communities with norms that are countercultural to the dominant, oppressive structures from which they escaped. Free, autonomous, Black spaces that have no obligations to white supremacy are central characteristics of marronage and Black unschooling. In some cases, maroons had limited abilities to consistently bring other enslaved people along with them to self-ruled Black spaces similar to the ways Black unschoolers face challenges of helping other Black families to step into the world of unschooling. It is daunting for Black parents to consider making the shift from a school system that spells out exactly what a child will do every day for 12+years, with dedicated buildings and learning resources, and a clear pathway into college or work, into a loose set of ideas and practices with little structure, and few proven outcomes. Given the decades-long fight to access schools for Black children, and the challenges of taking on the full responsibility of monitoring children all day, many Black parents do not see unschooling as an option they can or would pursue. Akilah Richards recognized the need to support others through the unschooling process in her introductory podcast episode and offers this support on nearly every episode. As a practice of decolonization, she aims to ensure current Black unschoolers and those who are curious have spaces run by other Black people where they can safely navigate questions, doubts, and concerns about leaving traditional paradigms of education and parenting, as noted in episode 80:

So the cost and perhaps the barriers to access unschooling are about many things, not just money and we need to work together to disappear these barriers... in our homes and in our communities, [we need to] test out ways and research ways to feel safer about where our children are spending their days if we don't subject them to forced schooling. And this has to become our priority so that it's a normal, accessible option for anybody. And that can't happen if we're focused on fixing or fitting into these systems more than we're

focused on living and thriving despite the pervasiveness of those systems. We have to imagine, not just surviving schooling, but supporting communities in living and learning freely, openly, in collaboration with local and virtual community. (Richards, 2016, Episode 80)

As part of her decolonization practice, Richards says does not focus on schools in her podcast (Episode 80). As seen in the quote above, she seeks to create Black owned spaces that depart from schoolish norms in order to build communities where Black people can see themselves “beyond these systems of oppression” (Richards, 2016, Episode 80).

RQ2: What practices do Black unschoolers implement in their pursuit of freedom?

This section discusses the aspects of Black unschooling that are specific to unschooling. This section acknowledges that although the characteristics characteristics of marronage and Black unschooling may be intertwined, each practice responds to different contexts and realities for Black people. It is also worth noting that while these elements are common to all unschoolers, the added layer of unschooling in a Black body adds nuance, context, and complexities that are not present in the same ways for non-Black unschoolers. These elements will be addressed in more detail in the discussion.

Self-Direction

The core element of unschooling is self-direction, as noted in all the episodes reviewed for this analysis. Often used interchangeably, the terms unschooling and self-directed education both encompass a system of education that is led by the learner. Extending beyond self-directed learning and learner-centered education, self-directed education (unschooling) places more agency and autonomy in the hands and responsibility of the learner. This means that unschoolers (whether adults or children) are not just “allowing” learners to choose between pre-selected

options for educational topics, activities, and outcomes. Instead, the learners completely set the agenda and pace for all aspects of their education, with the support of facilitators. There are no predetermined “acceptable” subjects of study, no age or grade level benchmarks to meet, and the only “requirements” are those set by the learner. In episode 142, *Check the Unschooling Vocab*, Richards describes it in this way:

So what I like to say about self-directed education, a lot of us like to say this, two main things for you to be able to say is this self-directed or not? Two things: 1) did the child choose to do this activity? (Or the person, cuz unschooling and SDE--Self-Directed Education--it's not just for kids.) Did the person choose to do this activity? And then secondly, 2) can they quit whatever they're doing with no recourse or push back from an adult? Okay? So those are the two things. That's to help you distinguish is this self-directed education or nah? The first thing is did the person choose to do this activity? And in the case of a child can they quit whatever it is that they're doing with no recourse or push back from an adult? (Richards, 2016, Episode 142)

Because unschooled children and youth are self-directing their own education, there are no external parameters set by parents or adult facilitators on what “counts” as education or learning. Adults do not decide how much time is spent on a subject and they do not determine how much an unschooled child needs to know about a topic they choose to study. As such, the role of adults (particularly parents) in unschooling is about facilitating resources and opportunities that support the interests of the learner (if the unschooled child wants support at all). Rather than setting their children’s educational goals, unschooling parents focus on ensuring the safety, access, and materials necessary for assisting their children in pursuing their interests. As noted by Richards and other unschoolers on the podcast, adults do not regard themselves as children’s teachers, but

as facilitators who make room for children to direct their own learning. In this paradigm of self-directed education, adults' primary functions are to help unschooled children to follow their interests and to collaborate with them to build skills around communicating their support needs.

This concept of encouraging children to completely direct their education for themselves can be an uncomfortable and unfamiliar shift away from traditional schooling and power norms. To provide a more familiar idea of what self-directed education looks like, Richards compares how adults learn to the ways unschooled children learn:

So much like we as adults, when we start a new project, whether it's at home or at our jobs, we have to be resourceful, right? We use the resources around us, the books, the people, the web-based resources, whatever it is that we need to get an understanding of what this project is going to call for and how we in particular need to approach it in order to maximize the chances of getting the result that we want. Unschoolers take the exact same approach. So something feels relevant in their life, whether for personal reasons, or to make money, or to be a part of something, and they go down a path to become more versed at that thing. And children do that just as adults do because that's not an adult thing, that's a human thing. Children in particular are extremely curious beings and they go after what they want to know. (Richards, 2016, Episode 1)

Through this comparison, many components of self-direction are revealed. First is the innate human curiosity and desire for learning. Unschoolers, like adults, are driven intrinsically to seek out information, skills, and knowledge that serves them for a variety of purposes. It demonstrates that unschoolers do not need competition, grades, punishment, or coercion to be compelled to learn. Secondly, it highlights the multiple pathways unschoolers use to obtain knowledge and information. Unschoolers are not limited to teachers and textbooks for

learning. They utilize numerous resources like YouTube, libraries, family members, and social media without privileging one over another as a more “valid” source for educating themselves. Another subtle aspect of self-direction noted here is the emphasis on relevance and timing to the learner’s life. Similar to adults, when unschooled children are ready, interested, and internally driven towards learning something, they will gravitate towards it on their own, without compulsion. Until then, unschooling adults learn to trust that if a child has not developed an interest in learning something yet (i.e. they are not choosing it), they may do so as a need arises within their lives. While this can be a controversial topic about unschooled children when it comes to skills like math, reading, and writing by certain ages, the philosophy of self-direction emphasizes that if children are learning how to learn, they will learn what they need to, when they need to, like adults.

A final dimension of self-direction discussed on the podcast is the unschooling relationship to schools, schooling, curriculum, and teachers. Throughout the episodes, Richards and guests assert that learning is natural, happening all the time and it is not so separate from living that a special environment is required (Richards, 2016, Episode 1). Furthermore, they maintain that learning is not limited to academic subjects. Because the self-directed education or unschooling paradigm supports that there is nothing compulsory for children to learn, it seems not only countercultural to schools and schooling, but perhaps also incongruent. However, as Richards and guests point out in a previous quote—self-directed learners are in charge of their learning and may choose to take a class, to attend a program, or enroll in a college course. Even though unschoolers might decide to participate in a traditional school setting for some of their educational interests, it does not diminish their autonomy because they have chosen that setting as one of many approaches to learning. Unschooling families may also work with teachers, hire

private tutors, or ask facilitators at learning centers to offer very traditionally structured lessons around a particular subject. As noted in episode 142, *Check the Unschooling Vocab*:

And self-directed education just basically means that it's learner-chosen and learner-driven, even though it's not always learner-led. Okay? So in self-directed education you can still have a teacher. You can still have a straight-up teacher that's telling you exactly what to do, exactly when to do it, but you chose it for yourself, it wasn't forced upon you. And that's why it would be different than conventional schooling. (Richards, 2016, Episode 142)

It's also evident when she says, "as unschoolers we don't see school as the primary place to learn and everywhere else as places to take breaks from learning" (Richards, 2016, Episode 1), that school is just one of many pathways to learning and is not excluded from unschoolers' toolbox. What is excluded however, is a reliance on the state to fully decide what children should learn:

In this space I want to make it clear that I believe that people should be able to create and participate in—children in particular—should be able to participate in their own learning journeys and not have that mandated by anybody. And for damn sure not the state who will probably not know sh*t about your child or their interests or your culture. (Richards, 2016, Episode 1)

Partnership

Another major aspect of unschooling discussed in the podcast is the partnership-based power dynamic between youth and adults. Building from the practices of self-directed education which place children in charge of their learning, the adult-child partnership component of unschooling deepens the emphasis on trusting children, co-collaboration, and non-hierarchical power structures in education and relationships.

As with other elements of unschooling, shifting from an authoritarian power structure to a partnership-based relationship with children can be challenging for adults. This critical reframing is captured by Richards in episode 1 when she says:

So our jobs are not to teach them anything at all. We're not their teachers. We are facilitators. We are a support system. We are partners. We partner with them as they explore and express and discover who they are and how they want to show up in the world. (Richards, 2016, Episode 1)

This shift requires adult facilitators and parents of unschooled children to lean into trusting children to own themselves in ways that extend well beyond just learning. In order to do this, adult unschoolers are continuously aiming to become more self-aware of the ways they may be contributing to practices of oppression, coercion, or silencing children. They are also engaged in ongoing practices of listening, observation, asking questions, and collaborating with children rather than just deciding things for them. As Richards points out in her Ted Talk, this work invites adults to acknowledge and address a lot of fears about what a partnership-based approach may mean for their children's educational and life outcomes. She discusses how unschooling challenges traditional notions of how to confront these fears:

So here's the deal, so we have these fears around raising certain types of people in the world, but the way we assuage these fears is to let them lure us into a sense of parenting and educational practices that are themselves rooted in fear and lack of trust. So we want to raise trustworthy people, but our approach is to control children-- their time and their tasks--effectively keeping them far away from the types of life experiences that help to build trust. Essentially, we tend to trust young people based on their level of compliance to us. But is that how trust works? (Richards, 2019, Ted Talk)

The importance of trust in unschooling needs to be underscored. It is the key that unlocks adults' ability to be in partnership with children. In pursuing non-hierarchical relationships with children, unschooling parents and other adults put into practice the belief that young people can be trusted to decide what they want, choose how to spend their time, and become healthy adults without needing to control them. Unschoolers are careful to point out this does not mean their children are left to fend for themselves in the world, but rather, they engage in respectful, non-coercive parenting practices that mirror communication between adults. In these partnerships, children can ask questions, disagree, and voice their preferences without being punished as being disrespectful. As a result, unschooling parents and children communicate openly and honestly, while learning to navigate each other's boundaries and needs. One example is when guest co-host, Tamika, recognizes she has stopped partnering with her son and is instead trying to control his choices:

There are times when things are a little more like, so there are definitely times they're not quite as light as you know... me offering a book or you know some moments definitely where I'm definitely coming from a place of fear around things like math. You know sometimes—and I have to catch myself or we'll start something with—we started doing the life of Fred series and he was really interested in it and he really enjoyed it for a while. And then I realized that I was taking the fun out of it... And I've also... basically I'm trying to force curriculum on you that—and you're resisting me—and I'm not paying attention to the resistance and where is this coming from. And so there's definitely been moments when I do have to pull back and it is a lot of apologies, a lot of conversations where I'm like you know what, I'm really sorry. I'm really sorry about where I was in that moment. And I'm really sorry that I was pushing you into that and if you're not into it

anymore like that's cool. You know... that's cool—we can take a break, we can pause from that. We can stop doing it all together if you feel like it. (Richards, 2016, Episode 1)

Finally, partnership and trust in unschooling is also centered around adults safely allowing young people to test, try, and figure out their own interests, boundaries, and capabilities. This may range from having children set their own bedtimes, not having limits on screen time, or providing safety measures for trying risky physical activities. Sometimes, as Richards points out, “support can mean discussions around your reasons for concern about any choice that they make. Support can also mean allowing your child to make a mistake, so that they can see the results of a choice for themselves.” (Richards, 2016, Episode 124) As evidenced here, the outcome for unschoolers is to help children to learn how to own and manage themselves in safe and healthy ways without needing to be externally controlled or coerced. When unschooling adults act from places of trust and partnership (instead of fear and control) they contribute to children’s self-sovereignty in significant ways, as Richards notes:

Essentially, respecting our children's autonomy is about the line between giving our children space to get comfortable making choices about their own lives and standing in our responsibility to provide boundaries and context within which they can safely explore their environments and respectfully communicate their needs and preferences. The lines are blurry sometimes but if we continue to pay attention and choose observation and trust over fear, our children will show us in words, and in action, how to give them the room to become whoever it is that they are meant to be. (Richards, 2016, Episode 124)

Bodily Autonomy & Consent

Children’s bodily autonomy was another key dimension of unschooling highlighted across episodes of the podcast. With self-sovereignty and self-ownership as foundations of self-

directed education, the right to be in charge of one's body is another hallmark of unschooling. Rooted in consent culture and the children's rights movement (Riley, 2020), unschooling emphasizes the need to respect children and their bodies as sovereign beings. In episode 139, Richards (2016) recognizes the connection to bodily autonomy and unschooling for liberation may not be readily clear to listeners as she says,

I want to talk about the relevance of bodily autonomy in our raising free people practice. Why does it matter that we attempt to control or decide for a young person what their body should look like, what they should wear, you know how they should do their hair? Seemingly small things like that and the implications of that into larger issues that we'll talk about in a minute. (Richards, 2016, Episode 139)

For more seasoned unschoolers, the relationship between children and their own bodies, voices, and agency may be clearer, and it is this wisdom that guides Richards as she offers why this conversation matters for unschooling and sovereignty.

I am saying though that if we don't look at bodily autonomy, which is at the root of consent culture for children, we'll continue to do things that compromise the self-confidence, the sense of safety, and bodily autonomy, and the mental wellness of the children we love. Because the reality is that children are coerced into situations where their bodies are treated as the property of their parents. The instances vary from making them hug a family member, all the way over to trading their body for sex, for drugs, or even food. All of these instances can send a message to children that their bodies are not their own. They also blur the lines between safe and unsafe touch or consent versus coercion and make it difficult for many children to identify when they're being inappropriately or uncomfortably touched by an adult or another child. Many of us adults

send messages that lessen children's ability to recognize and trust what feels safe and what feels uncomfortable for them, as well as how to confidently communicate with an adult that they trust when their personal boundaries are violated by anyone, including an adult or child that they know or trust. (Richards, 2016, Episode 139)

Here, Richards points to both the significance of this conversation and what stakes are at risk by not engaging in it. She points out that children's capacity to understand that they own their bodies is equally critical to adults' capacity to understand when they are coercing children against their wills, even in seemingly innocent ways. Through centering consent and bodily autonomy in unschooling, adults offer children opportunities to navigate and discern their bodies for themselves. By recognizing children as human beings with natural rights, unschoolers prioritize reducing adult violations of children's personal boundaries and help children to own their bodies and voices. Ultimately, they aim to build children's autonomy so they can communicate independently with adults and other children.

This aspect of unschooling recognizes that adults (including parents) can oppress children, ignore their personal sovereignty, and violate their consent. Rather than lead with authoritarian or coercive parenting, unschoolers encourage children's agency and self-leadership by honoring their right to tell adults no, to respectfully disagree, and to dissent without fear of violence or threats from adults. Counter to dominant frameworks of interacting with children, unschoolers aim to treat children as human beings with the right to their own freedoms of thought, speech, movement, expression, and choice. In this way, unschooling families try to intentionally shift power dynamics when it comes to things like what children wear, how they style their hair, when they take naps or go to bed, and how they play with other children. Finally,

unschoolers advocate for reducing adults' harmful practices of control, coercion, and policing of children's bodies, time, and learning.

Unschoolers assume children have rights (bodily or otherwise) rather than making them earn them. Through eliminating school practices like having to ask an adult to go to the restroom, or requiring permission to move one's body freely in a space, "...unschooling is helping children to build their self-confidence. They fail at things without being shamed for it, they check in with their own bodies instead of being told when to eat or when to go pee." (Richards, 2019).

Unschooling families see bodily autonomy and consent as powerful tools for children's self-regulation and their ability to independently respond to their own physical and emotional cues like hunger, sleepiness, frustration, and anger. Because this attuning to oneself is supported, unschooled children are regularly checking in with adults about their intuitive feelings, sense of safety, their needs, and desires. Richards suggests these ongoing practices help children to trust themselves in ways that may lead to greater wellbeing as adults:

As well meaning observers, we adults often infringe on personal boundaries within children's interactions—coercing a reserved child to hold hands and dance around with an outgoing child—that thinking might feel like we're helping that child to develop good social skills, but what we might actually be doing is teaching them that it's okay for other people to force them to do what makes that other person feel comfortable. And in later years that can cause some children to feel like they need to be forced to do things or that their natural tendency is somehow not okay. This can also have long-term negative effects on their social skills because self-esteem and authentic friendships are difficult to form and maintain when a person isn't okay with who and how they innately are.

(Richards, 2016, Episode 124)

In summary, unschooled children who are not dependent on adult consent to exist in their bodies are able to build what Richards (2016) refers to as “confident autonomy” and this is the reason why she connects bodily autonomy with self-ownership and self-sovereignty through unschooling.

Deschooling

Deschooling is an element of unschooling that describes the process of continual unlearning for youth and adults alike. With all the ways that unschooling pushes back against traditional norms in education, parenting, relationships, and power, deschooling practices never truly stop for unschoolers. In some spaces, deschooling can be described as a period of time when unschoolers (or homeschoolers) who are transitioning directly from school take a hard stop from doing academic instruction. It is considered the space and time needed to get out of the schooled mindset to make room for a child's (and family's) natural rhythms and interests to recalibrate after years of being required to learn in restrictive ways and environments controlled by an external school system. In her podcast, Akilah Richards rejects the idea that deschooling is a fixed time period and instead sees it as a lifetime process that is necessary for adults and children well beyond academic practices.

Deschooling is essentially recognizing and moving away from the patterns and habits and beliefs that you took on unconsciously. Things that are rooted in the fears and baggage of the people who raised you or helped to raise you. Deschooling, moving away from, shifting away from, the ways that you developed (of being) that were about surviving something. Recognizing those things as potentially an old story and therefore doing the work, asking yourself questions, putting yourself in the community (or communities) that allow you to develop new patterns, new habits around things that are important to you—

like the ways that you show up as a mother or a father. Like the way that you show up as a partner, whether that's romantically or business-wise. For many of us who end up at this intersection, of this podcast, for whatever reasons we come here—one of the most recurring or one of the strongest threads is the deschooling journey. We relate to what it means to break old patterns, old cycles, old agreements, to look at old stories in our lives and to be really deliberate about not bringing those old stories into our new way, or into the way that we want to normalize. (Richards, 2016, Episode 34)

From this perspective, deschooling is a process that may begin with education, but often ripples out into many areas of living and learning.

One of the primary functions of deschooling as described by Richards and guests is disruption. Deschooling disrupts the rhythms, norms, ideas, and practices that are based in schooled ways of existing. It stops, pauses, or slows down the process of resorting to oppressive or coercive habits of engaging with young people and their education. In episode 74: *What Does Raising Free People Mean*, Richards (2016) describes disruption as:

Deliberately installing temporary barriers to the behaviors within ourselves that go against our belief in raising free people. Loving self-inquiry and the consistent decision to choose silent witnessing over reactive parenting are two of the powerful tools for this part of the journey. Here we get to acknowledge our use of the far too normal, harmful tactics of force, manipulation, punishment, and silencing. And we start testing out ways to stop those behaviors even when we're not sure what to do instead. (Richards, 2016, Episode 74)

Disruption is what takes unschoolers off auto pilot or “default thinking” (Richards, 2016) and into more conscious forms of parenting and relating with children.

Throughout the podcast, practical applications of deschooling are offered to listeners regardless of where they are on their unschooling journey. Primarily targeted at unschooling parents, these examples are intended to help adults to observe their children more intentionally and to notice their own triggers when it comes to releasing old beliefs. In episode 45, *Practicing Unschooling*, one example being discussed with Akilah and guest co-host Itiel is about a listener's concerns about curriculum and transitioning to unschooling:

And so as Itiel said—put away the curriculum if you're using one. Start feeling through the space that you create with your children. So if you're already homeschooling— I assume that's why you asked that question—back away from the structure a little bit. If you usually have 4 or 5 hours a day where a certain curriculum or certain curricula is being covered, stop. Or go down to maybe 2 hours and yeah talk to them a little bit more about what they want to do and see how you can make space for that and just keep doing that Malika. Keep doing that, that's how you transition. It's a daily gradual path and it doesn't have a prescriptive methodology. It just means that you have to put things down that make you *feel* like you know something is happening and pay attention to what *is* happening so that you can be in support of that...so you can engage with what's actually happening for your children in their lives with their interests now. (Richards, 2016, Episode 45)

Other practices named included: asking questions, pausing, noticing, observing, critical self-reflection, unlearning, listening, being present to discomfort, making small changes, and not reacting from autopilot mode (Episodes 1, 9, 13, 45, 74, 134, 139). A powerful example of deschooling is when Richards encourages a listener to, “ask yourself in the middle of being angry with a child, is my reaction a symptom of something I myself need to work through and

not something I need to resolve in my child” (Richards, 2016 Episode 74). The host also names the deschooling practice of not continuously comparing their unschooled children to those in public schools, because “we cannot continue to use that system as a benchmark for success” (Richards, 2016, Episode 13).

In summary, deschooling practices disrupt norms and stop or slow down old ways of thinking. Through the removal of old paradigms and practices, new pathways and possibilities become available. Deschooling helps unschooling adults and children to move from default “schoolish” (Richards, 2016) ideas of safety into uncharted paths with attention, observation and intention.

Discussion

In this article, I have examined characteristics that maroons and Black unschoolers share as practices of achieving Black self-sovereignty. I have also identified the practices that Black unschoolers engage in their pursuit of freedom. Through the *Fare of the Free Child* audio podcast, I have illuminated aspects of unschooling that are unique to Black unschoolers. It is evident from this analysis that the ties that bind maroons and Black unschoolers are rooted in slavery, antiblackness, and colonization.

As practices that blatantly defy the normalization of white supremacy, both marronage and Black unschooling offer unorthodox pathways towards liberation that may make some uncomfortable. The idea of making a life in an underground cave or swamp may evoke the same fear and aversion as removing a child from school to let them self-direct their own education or learn to read when they’re ready. But these are the risks both Black unschoolers and maroons take as they pursue freedom and self-sovereignty into the unknown wilderness and on their own

terms. Their wildly radical approaches differ in implementation but are rooted in the same spirit that refuses subjection to slavery, even at the cost of their own comfort.

The risks that Black unschoolers and maroons face are enmeshed with the same historical experiences of slavery and antiblackness. In the U.S. and abroad, maroons dealt with the very same antiblackness that results in suppression, exploitation, commodification, and annihilation of Blackness today. Studies in Black geographies tell us that the Black body isn't authorized anywhere (Browne, 2015), so whether in Virginia or Brazil, in a cave or a classroom, there is no safety while existing as Black. Surprisingly, it is this same fear that drives both maroons and Black unschoolers to take the considerable risks they do. It is the fear of these uncertainties that lead them to break with the current systems. Because if they are not safe anywhere, then why wouldn't they pursue living on their own terms? Why wouldn't they venture into the unknown and take their chances of living more freely? Why wouldn't they bet on themselves to do a better job of sustaining Black life than their oppressors? If no place is safe, then why wouldn't they choose the path of self-sovereignty over incremental system change? Why would they wait and endure oppression if present and historical experience tells them that change may never come?

Enslaved and emancipated Black people in the U.S. often endured horrors for generations perhaps because the suffering that was known was safer than risking their safety for the unknown. Remaining on plantations was the only option for some and was the best means of survival for others. To remain alive within systems of slavery and oppression by not absconding from the plantation was another approach to preserving Black life. It is also an aspect of colonization that makes discussions of Black liberation more complex because in the ongoing liberation struggle, improvements in suffering became known as progress, increased freedom, and more safety. Whether through the legal end of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, or Brown

vs Board of Education, we can point to victories that made drastic improvements for Black humanity. At the same time, we see how some of these changes kept us safe(r) without eradicating the roots of oppression. Maroons and maroon societies pushed the boundaries of what change might look like, even if it was not safe. Black unschoolers embody these same characteristics as they move beyond school-based education reform and “safe” traditional education models. Maroons and Black unschoolers boldly disrupt systems of oppression and colonization. In making choices that may seem nonsensical to the norms deemed acceptable by dominant standards, they both offer distinctively alternative approaches to Black liberation that offer distinctively alternative approaches toward liberation for all Black children.

Using the *Fare of the Free Child* podcast as a platform, host Akilah S. Richards shares her perspectives and experiences unschooling as a Jamaican-born Black woman living in the U.S. Her particular ‘flavor’ of unschooling centers Black folks, people of color, and is unequivocally focused on liberation. Undoubtedly, hailing from a country where maroon settlements still exist, her approach to unschooling has been influenced by ideologies of marronage. She is intentional in not just naming that she is an unschooler, a deschooler, and an advocate of self-directed education—but she is deeply embedded in what she calls Raising Free People work. Her podcast illuminates the multilayered dimensions of unschooling that extend beyond educational practices to include aspects of relating with children and other adults, her own liberation as a parent, and confronting antiblackness in the alternative education space. She openly shares her questions, struggles, concerns, and learning with her family in real time and invites guest co-hosts and listeners to do the same. She normalizes that these unschooling principles and practices are not just for white people or children, but are key tools for all Black people seeking to do liberation and healing work. Her emphasis on self-sovereignty and self-

ownership are the aspects of Black unschooling that helped me to make connections to similarities with marronage.

The endemic nature of antiblackness (Dumas & ross, 2016) complicates the relationship between blackness and humanness, freedom, and existence. Black scholars argue about the nature and possibility of freedom for people in Black bodies (Roberts, 2007). Some even argue that maroons were not truly free because they lived in hiding under a constant threat of being caught (Moten, 2016). Black unschoolers are not necessarily hiding and do continue to rely on the state for many aspects of their lives outside of schooling. My intent is not to glamorize maroon life as the pentacle of freedom or to settle whether or not maroons and Black unschoolers are actually free. Antiblack onto-epistemologies make simplifying these ideas nearly impossible. What I do attempt to do is consider how Black unschoolers are naming and understanding freedom and liberation for themselves and make connections between Black unschooling and marronage.

By doing this, we can add another layer to the conversation on Black liberation, its vision, strategies, and intended outcomes. Furthermore, this research specifically seeks to underscore the need to include liberation for Black children as part of this discussion. Children experience all the same forms of antiblackness as adults, with the added surveillance, invalidation, and lack of access to bodily autonomy that comes with being a person who is young. Legally, socially, and systemically children and youth are denied access to freedom of self-expression, movement, and autonomy. For Black children and youth, the impacts of these intersecting oppressions are heightened both inside and outside their homes. When Black parents and adults engage in harmful or oppressive practices in order to “protect” Black children, the lines between masters and slaves, parents and children can become blurred. When Black parents

and adults ignore, deny, or minimize children's experiences of oppression through school or parenting, they contribute to generational narratives that regard suffering as something to be expected, encouraged, and rewarded. Maroons and Black unschoolers disrupt the notion of enduring oppression until the system changes or better options become available to everyone. While still maintaining a collective sense of community and identity, both movements support the permanent removal of Black people from conditions of enslavement and uncharted pathways to freedom.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented a radical approach learning and parenting Black children through the practices of unschooling. I believe this perspective offers a pathway to not only liberate Black people from an oppressive education system, but also holds deep transformative power to heal many layers of trauma we have experienced in this country.

My research investigates unschooling as a practice of Black liberation. Marronage is one form of fugitivity that Black people have used to get free (or closer to free) in a world that continually denies our right to exist. It is essential that Black people engage in acts and movements of marronage from state sanctioned sites of violence, oppression, and death. Unschooling is one approach that intentionally seeks to establish, maintain, and defend Black agency, autonomy, self-ownership, and joy. By examining the *Fare of the Free Child Podcast* (Richards, 2016), I gained insight into Black unschoolers' strategies for getting--and remaining--free from systems of oppression. In these unprecedented times of COVID-19 and antiblack racism, Black families are looking for alternative ways to educate, protect, and parent their children. The urgency of this work is not solely intellectual, but also practical as more Black families opt out of traditional education in search of something more liberated and healing.

Appendix C
Codebook- Paper 2

Code	Description
Self Direction	Speakers are discussing aspects of self-direction or self-directed learning or education. Including specific practices, or ideas about why this approach to learning and education is beneficial more than traditional forms of education. Emphasized through ideas on independence, agency, autonomy, choice.
Learning is natural	Speakers are discussing the ways that learning happens naturally as a means to explain/justify why curriculum is not necessary for learning or education. Includes ideas about discovery, how adults learn, not forcing activities become academic or teachable, creating environments and opportunities for exploration.
Partnership	Speakers are discussing partnering with children, not just limited to learning. Includes ideas about respectful relationships, trusting children, non-coercive parenting, and flattening hierarchies between children and adults. Is also emphasized through ideas on decolonizing parenting.
Children's Rights	Speakers are naming the inalienable rights that belong to children as human beings that cannot be denied because of age. This is emphasized through ideas about bodily autonomy, the right to speak their minds and disagree with adults, and generally that children have the right to take up space and have boundaries.
Deschooling	Speakers are discussing the process, practices, and thinking that is engaged to move from old ways of doing things into something new. This is in relation to parenting and education. It is emphasized through ideas about pausing, disrupting, listening, and asking questions. This is also when speakers are discussing intentionally not enforcing specific rules/routines around learning during the transition period between school and homeschooling or homeschooling and unschooling.
Marronage	Speakers are discussing themes related to marronage, as it relates to the physical, metaphysical, or mental aspects of abandoning state-mandated or school based practices. It is primarily emphasized through ideas about self-ownership or self-sovereignty, comparing schools to plantations or slavery, and practices that reflect a sense of going into unknown territory.
Risks & Fears	Less common codes that include: costs/fears of unschooling while Black fears/risks of raising free people general worries, concerns

	barriers to self-direction especially for Black people what society says Black people are "allowed" to do/have moving beyond what's known
Raising Free People	Less common codes that include: specifically defining unschooling according to Akilah How the rationale/work gets implemented practically rationale for why it's needed generational trauma; definitions, defining, not defining unschooling different approaches
Community	Less common codes that include: amplify voices and not being afraid community building being seen Resources found in/through
Other	Lesser codes with no significant connections to each other include: motivations for the podcast racism in alt ed community rationale for why this shift is needed goals of unschooling travel as a means of getting free tools of oppression in schools

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Paper 3: This Ain't No School: A Case Study Exploring Self-Directed Education in the Black Community

Abstract

This study investigates how a Black learning community uses Self-Directed Education (SDE) to create an education space that resists traditional schooling practices that are harmful to Black children. This research illuminates how one SDE space promotes Black self-sovereignty, redistributes power, and prioritizes Black children's liberation. The site for this research is the Brilliant Learning Community (pseudonym), a Black SDE community in the state of Maryland. In particular, this qualitative single case study asks the following questions: 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? Drawing from BlackCrit and literature on antiblackness in schools, a conceptual framework is presented that centers Black Freedom as central to Black SDE spaces and practices. Data sources for this research include interviews with adults in the Brilliant Learning Community, including the founder, Director, Facilitator, and parents. Other data collection includes observations and document analysis of digital artifacts. This single qualitative case study explored how SDE was imagined and practiced by Black children and adults. The study found that the joys and struggles of the learning community were rooted in Black Freedom, tensions between Black culture and SDE, and the potential healing aspects of SDE for the Black community. This research has significant implications for theory, practice, and policy about educational alternatives for Black students in the U.S.

Introduction

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes- Ella Baker

I had bad feelings about schools from my first day as a teacher. Despite my passion for working with young people, I never felt entirely comfortable with the construct of being an authority figure in schools. It made me feel sick to constantly surveil students, discipline them, and try to convince them that coming to their sh*tty school should be their top priority—it was exhausting. The schools I worked in felt like prisons where poor, Black, vulnerable youth were forced to serve their time. I cried most days because I wanted to free my students (and myself) from this system we were all required to attend as part of our mandatory sentence in U.S. schools. I had no idea that my desire to liberate Black students from schools would lead me down a path where I would not just reimagine schools, but I would be able to unimagine them.

Despite what we know about the dangers of schools from academic literature and the lived experiences of Black people in the U.S., we continue to circle back to conversations about how to fix schools and make them better for Black children. This circular conversation is infuriating, unproductive, and harmful at best. Instead, I propose that we invest in conversations about real alternatives for Black families that step completely outside of our school-based paradigms for education. If the rise of Black homeschooling, microschools, learning pods, and co-ops has shown us anything since the pandemic, it's the desire for something beyond traditional schooling. This study explores how a Black learning community uses self-directed education (SDE) to center Black freedom and challenge the antiblack violence embedded in traditional schooling. Rather than seeking to reform existing systems, it documents what it looks like to educate Black children beyond the reach of state institutions. By offering grounded

insight into the joys, tensions, and daily realities of creating liberatory learning spaces, this research affirms the possibilities of educational sovereignty for Black families.

This paper investigates Self-Directed Education (SDE) as an educational alternative to shift power from conventional schools to Black adults and children. Self-Directed Education (SDE)⁷, as defined by the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE), states that SDE is “education that derives from the self-chosen activities and life experiences of the learner” (What is Self-Directed Education, n.d.). The organization, ASDE, uses the term SDE in contrast to what they call ‘coercive schooling’ (What is Self-Directed Education, n.d.), which is forced upon learners. Unschooling (education that does not adhere to any prescribed curriculum, benchmarks, or learning objectives) is one form of SDE with individual families and is typically considered a form of homeschooling (What is Self-Directed Education, n.d.). This paper explores a form of SDE that moves beyond the individual family unit into a more communal or collective type of SDE. I study how a Black learning community (adult facilitators and youth learners) created a freedom-centered education space to resist traditional schooling practices. I focus on the individual and collective experiences of constructing a learning community to understand the challenging and healing aspects of embracing SDE while Black.

The Brilliant Learning Community (BLC; pseudonym) does not operate as a school legally or ideologically, and youth learners are registered as homeschoolers. The community resembles a homeschool co-op group or self-directed learning center, where families bring their

⁷“In line with recommendations by the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (2023), a distinction is drawn between self-directed education with small letters and Self-Directed Education capitalized. The former term refers to the self-directed education that everyone is involved with, regardless of whether they are also being schooled. The latter term refers to a deliberate decision, made by a family, to not send a child to a curriculum-based school or enforce a curriculum at home, but, instead, allow the child to take charge of all their education.” (Gray, 2017, p.2)

children to an out-of-school site that provides learning activities and educational opportunities.

In particular, this qualitative single case study asks the following questions: 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? In this paper, I use the phrase ‘learning community’ (not school) to refer to the case site because this is how members of the BLC refer to themselves. I use this term interchangeably with ‘SDE community’, Black SDE community’, or Black unschoolers because the site explicitly uses a self-directed approach to learning and education, and community members identify as Black or mixed race (with at least one Black parent).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: a literature review of the manifestations of antiblackness in traditional schools and the limited empirical studies in SDE. Next, I present an overview of the conceptual framework guiding this study. This framework provides a critical lens for understanding how a Black community engages in SDE efforts to create liberatory pathways. Following the framework, I discuss the research design of this qualitative single case study and review the rationale for using this methodology. Findings and a discussion of broad themes in the research are presented, followed by a conclusion.

Why Are Schools So Harmful?

Antiblackness & the U.S. School System

Black critical scholars have furthered our understanding of antiblackness and its function by acknowledging its “range from everyday microaggressions to violent assaults against Black bodies”, noting it is the “disdain for blackness, or anti-Blackness, [that] fuels anti-Black racism” (Caldera, 2020, p.16). Antiblackness encompasses various forms of haunting, terror, suffering, fungibility, and malaise (Dumas, 2016; Jenkins, 2021; Love, 2014; ross, 2019). It is

antiblackness that renders schools irreparable for Black children and eliminates the possibility of their healthy existence in U.S. schools. BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016) in education identifies how antiblackness in U.S. schools is a permanent condition, making them “irredeemable for Black children” (ross, 2019, p.3). In the following sections, I contextualize antiblackness and map how it functions against black bodies, minds, and spirits in the context of schools.

Denial of Black Innocence

As children of an already dehumanized group, Black children are perceived as older and in less need of protection, which creates an innocence gap between them and other children (Goff et al., 2014, p. 529). Therefore, non-Black children are permitted access to childhood, but “Black children may be perceived as innocent only until deemed suspicious” (Goff et al., 2014, p.541). Because they are not seen as fully human, Black children are subject to harsher punishments, low tracking, being denied access to academically challenging curriculum, and a myriad of other antiblack actions (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Coles, 2019; Dumas, 2014, 2016; Martin et al., 2019; Wun 2016a, 2016b).

Antiblack Violence

Martin et al. (2019) state that “schooling is inherently violent for many Black children” (p.32). While physical violence is perhaps the most visible type of assault on Black children in schools (Caldera, 2020; Dumas, 2018; Jenkins, 2021; Wun, 2016b), other violations of their humanity occur daily in the education system. Quoting Carter G. Woodson, Boutte & Bryan (2021) assert that microaggressions and “‘lynching of [the] Black body starts in the schoolhouse’ meaning that the disdain for, disgust of and violence enacted toward Black people are rooted in the schooling experiences of Black children” (p.236). Scholars have attempted to categorize the multiple forms of antiblack violence in education by expanding our understanding of the types of

school violence, they include: physical, linguistic, curricular/pedagogical, systemic, symbolic, and epistemological violence (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Martin et al., 2019).

Captivity & Surveillance (Plantations & Prisons)

Sojoyner (2017) argues that unlike prisons, schools are compulsory, and their reproduction of Black violence creates a state-sanctioned enclosed place from which Black children cannot escape. He names schools as “sites of containment” that aim to surveil, discipline, warehouse, incapacitate, and subvert resistance efforts of Black youth (p.523). Once Black children are entrapped in the enclosure of schools, Wun (2016b) argues that school discipline policies become the tools of surveillance and policing, which force Black youth into positions as “captive objects” who are refused access to humanity, bodily autonomy, agency, or self-protection by school faculty (p.174). As Black bodies navigate through schools, they are perceived as criminals, objects, and property.

Within schools’ systems of captivity, antiblack mechanisms for capture, control, and punishment often mirror those used in the plantation system of slavery. Similarities exist between modern-day antiblack school discipline policies and former slave laws, including quantity, location, time, and noise level restrictions around the assembly of Black people (Browne, 2015). Light and lantern laws formerly used to illuminate, locate, and contain Black enslaved people have been reimagined in schools with security cameras, truancy laws, and school resource officers who now monitor Black children and youth both within and outside of schools (Browne, 2015, p. 80). School discipline policies seek to punish Black students at every turn, including criminalization for “falling asleep, standing up for themselves, asking questions, wearing natural hair, wearing revealing clothing, and in some cases engaging in unruly (although

not criminal or delinquent) acts in school” (Morris, 2016, p.57 as quoted in Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020, p. 1426).

In the same way that schools are connected to slavery for Black children, they are also inherently linked to prisons. Policing and the carceral state of schools are extensions of slavery’s efforts to control every physical, mental, and spiritual aspect of Black people’s lives (Scott et al., 2017). Fasching-Varner et al. (2017) acknowledge the school-to-prison nexus (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Noguera, 2003) and argue that schools are key institutions for keeping Black people from accessing wealth or freedom.

Antiblack structures, systems, policies, and surveillance technologies within and outside of schools aim to extinguish all forms of the oppositional gaze and talking back (hooks, 1992) and attempt to render Black people/youth as “docile, nonthreatening, [and] manageable” (Brown, 2015, p. 57). The state-sponsored incarceration of Black children empowers school authorities to justify all efforts to maintain law and order, no matter how grotesque (Martin et al., 2019). As such, in these captive spaces, all Black student demands for peace, justice, fair treatment, or retribution under the same laws will be ignored or subverted. The reality is that schools’ exact purpose for existing is rooted in maiming and containing Black children.

Spirit Murder & Death

Love (2014) offers that this intangible violence results in the humiliation and slow death of the Black child’s soul because it is not treated with the same urgency or noticing as physical acts of murder associated with past or present white attacks on Black bodies. “It is thus fundamental to call attention to the fact that our education system, built on White supremacy and enforced by physical violence, is invested in murdering the souls of Black children, even if they are not physically taken” (Love, 2016, p.2-3). This collection of physical, emotional, and

metaphysical injuries cause “a slow death of the psyche, the soul, and the persona” (Wing, 2001 as cited in Hines & Wilmot, 2018, p. 68). Through acknowledging this permanent condition of Black death through educational violence, it becomes clearer how antiblackness renders schools as unredeemable for Black children.

Why can't schools be fixed?

The neoliberal multicultural imagination is rooted in the lie that “the official stance of the state is against racism” (Dumas, 2016, p. 15). Consequently, the U.S. positions itself as an antiracist society in contemporary race discourses (Dumas, 2016) while perpetuating antiblack systems through schools. Schools cannot be emancipatory for Black students because “the basic racist tenets of liberal discursive practices prevent the incorporation of Blackness into the state” (Sojoyner, 2017, p. 523). The antagonism between Blackness and the neoliberal multicultural imagination ensures that antiblackness will always mutate to suppress Black humanity.

Education reform does not support Black liberation. As reform efforts focus on testing mandates, distribution of funding, and reframing racist practices, they intentionally neglect to enhance any conditions that would lead to Black liberation, encourage Black resistance, or create less dependence on the white benevolence that upholds state power (Martin et al., 2019; Sojoyner, 2017). The U.S. education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) yields interest in actual economic profit to educational reformers who continually tweak the system without significantly changing it. This means it is more advantageous to find or create school problems than to solve them (Fasching-Varner, 2014). As a result, the neoliberal multicultural imagination favors equity reforms over systemic transformation and incremental change over liberation.

Citing Bell's (1991) concept of racial realism⁸, Fasching-Varner et al. (2019) acknowledge that public schools are more segregated now than during the civil rights era and that Blacks' belief in the incremental, 'something is better than nothing' approach to change "merely perpetuates our disempowerment" (p.419). Critical scholars advocate for Black liberation by refusing incremental change and rejecting participation in antiblack systems. School systems founded on antiblackness cannot be disrupted or repurposed to liberate Black people or treat them as equals to others, so we must seriously consider alternatives pathways.

What's the Alternative to Schools?

BlackCrit calls for engaging Black liberatory fantasy, which implores us to look beyond traditional schooling frameworks. Sojoyner (2017) argues that we must abandon ideologies rooted in false hopes of social mobility and other forms of saviorism attributed to the U.S. education system. Liberatory fantasy rejects the current education system and seeks to create entirely different worlds and paradigms for Black humanity to exist. While important research, policy, and practice is being employed to stop the bleeding and triage of Black students in a school system that was never meant for them, not even the most critical scholars have considered Black alternative education practices that do not engage with traditional school systems. Alternatives like homeschooling, unschooling, Self-Directed Education, community-led, and parent-led co-ops may be our best hope for education outside of traditional schools. These

⁸ "Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (Bell, 1991, pp. 373–374)

promising pathways can offer Black families healing from the brutality of traditional schools. Though not without their challenges, these approaches set a clear path forward as antiblackness in U.S. schools has rendered them irreparable for Black children. Helping Black children escape the slavery that is schools will not end antiblackness. But it can signal a refusal to no longer negotiate with the state and trigger “an end to all of this: the destruction of the very conditions of Black suffering, which is, necessarily, the end of schooling as we understand it” (Dumas, 2018, p. 33).

Unschooling & Self-Directed Education (SDE)

If schools cannot be repaired, then alternatives must be considered. Attempts to break away from familiar education pathways are found throughout American history. Although education models like unschooling and Self-Directed Education may seem like new phenomena, forms of progressive alternatives to conventional schooling have existed in the United States for over a century (Kloss, 2018).

Principles & Practices of SDE

Deschooling must be at the root of any movement for human liberation. (Illich, 1971, p. 24)

SDE is a movement to “deinstitutionalize education” (Olson, 2005, p.22) and is rooted in ideologies promoted during the progressive education era and the free school movement.

Proponents of SDE subscribe to the following principles (Occhiogrosi, 2007):

Autonomy & Trust: SDE is grounded in the belief that children are human beings with inherent rights that should be honored by respecting their agency and decision-making abilities (Holt, 1977; Gray, 2017). To support children’s autonomy, adults must trust that young people can learn, think critically, identify their needs, and practice self-leadership (Richards, 2020; Schwartz, 2006). SDE practices encourage children’s independent learning (Fahey, 2008).

Self-Direction: This foundational principle emphasizes that learning and education should be intrinsically motivated, non-coercive, and non-compulsory (Illich, 1971; Goodman, 1977). In other words, children's and youth's consent or initiation is a requirement for learning (Richards, 2020). Using rewards and punishment in education is considered harmful because it undermines intrinsic motivation and promotes coerced compliance (Kohn, 1993). SDE practices are highly individualized, rather than based on a standardized curriculum⁹ (Philosophy of Self-Design, n.d.; Watras, 2006).

Play: SDE emphasizes play as a form of exploration and discovery that is essential to learning (Morrison, 2016). SDE recognizes that free, structured, or self-organized play is education (Schwartz, 2006). SDE practices support activities like games and plenty of unstructured time outside (Gray, 2013).

Community & Connection: Because learning and education are communal, SDE spaces are intentionally smaller than traditional schools. SDE incorporates consensus-building, restorative justice, or democratic citizenship into learning (Fahey, 2008; Kloss, 2018). Children and adults are valued community members who participate in community meetings and/or voting to address individual and group concerns (Riley, 2020; Rolstad & Kesson, 2013).

Reduced Hierarchy: SDE assumes that adults are not superior to children, education is bi-directional regardless of age, and that decision-making should happen through partnerships with young people (Richards, 2020; Philosophy of Self-Design, n.d.). By embracing non-hierarchical

⁹ It is important to note here that learners may choose to self-direct their learning through formal classes with an instructor from within or outside an SDE space. Many choose to take community college courses. The critical component here is that learners chose these courses and may choose to quit at any time without any repercussions from adults. (See Gray & Riley, 2013; Richards, 2020; Riley, 2020)

practices and mixed-age and mixed-ability groupings, SDE reduces competition, educational shaming, and coercive compliance (Holt, 1977).

Lifelong Learning: Learning is happening everywhere and all the time (What is Self-Directed Education, n.d.) so SDE focuses on lifelong learning rather than topical subjects or grades. SDE also recognizes that certain subjects or learning styles are not a priority over others (Occhiogrosi, 2007). In SDE spaces, reading, math, and science are not considered more important or necessary to education than art, board games, or building forts.

Limited Empirical Evidence in SDE

At the time of this writing, there were no empirical studies on Black unschooling or Black SDE spaces.¹⁰ These populations are highly understudied, and few frameworks exist for understanding their experiences.¹¹ There is also limited empirical knowledge about SDE in non-Black populations, but some relevant findings are noted here. Gray & Riley (2013) conducted one of the largest studies on the unschooling population by surveying 232 families. They found that the greatest challenge of unschooling was social prejudice and isolation, and the benefits included improved learning, well-being, and freedom for the entire family (Gray & Riley, 2013, p.15,17). Also, Gray (2017) found that adults who were unschooled became financially

¹⁰ Although there is empirical literature on Black out-of-school spaces, they are not congruent with SDE frameworks and were not used in this literature review. Out of School Time (OST) literature presumes children and youth are otherwise engaged in curriculum-based instruction or school, where SDE does not. Studies on afterschool programs and other recreational or enrichment activities do not treat these spaces as the primary spaces of learning or education in the same way as SDE.

¹¹ Howell (2022) studied the critical pedagogies, practices, and training of teachers in the Mississippi Freedom Schools of 1964. They share many common principles with SDE including, participatory and youth-led curriculum, decentering teachers as leaders, and deschooling. Her findings are beyond the scope of this study but provided valuable insight into alternative Black education spaces.

independent, working in STEM careers, and were easily admitted to higher education institutions because they had already taken community college courses.

While these findings are encouraging, it is important to acknowledge that these empirical studies provided no demographic information or findings related to race, and critical frameworks were not used to analyze or interpret the data. Beyond the current empirical gap in studying SDE broadly, there is virtually no empirical research investigating SDE specifically within Black communities. In a society where conventional schools often fail and harm many children, it is especially urgent to explore alternative education options that may improve outcomes for Black children. Through my work, I aim to contribute to this research gap.

Conceptual Framework for Black Freedom in Self-Directed Education (SDE)

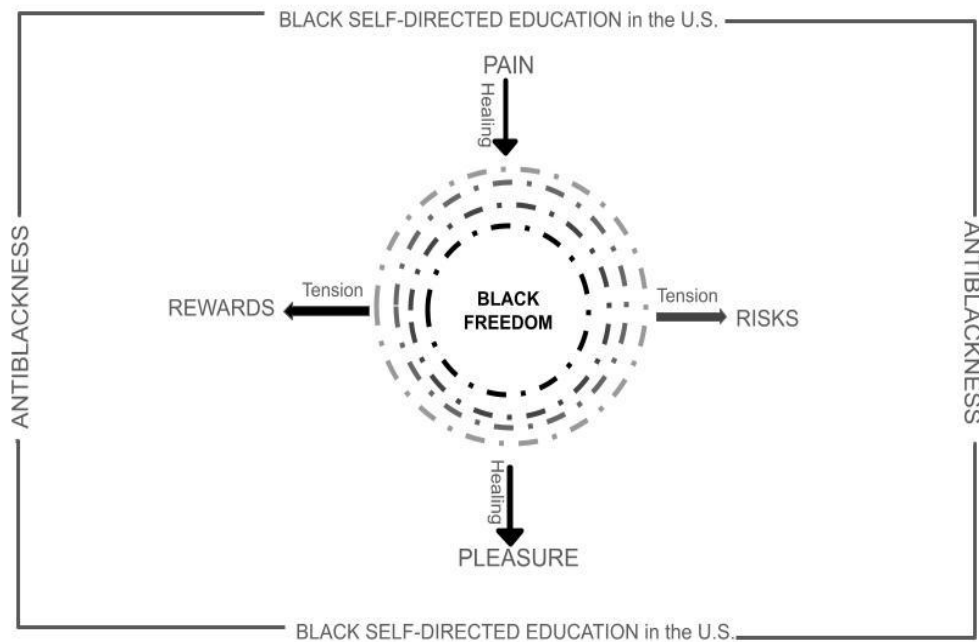
Black unschoolers choose the SDE path with the full weight of chattel slavery encoded into their bodies, psyches, and DNA. Despite its legal end, slavery still maintains its chokehold on Black lives. Non-Black unschoolers in the U.S. do not share this historical and systemic experience of being dehumanized, owned as property, or having an ongoing violent relationship with the U.S. school system. While most unschoolers regard freedom as a top priority for their children, Black Freedom poses dangers, risks, fears, and contradictions that do not exist for non-Black people. Furthermore, while all unschoolers experience some level of agency and challenges, the pursuit of freedom by Black unschoolers causes tension because Black Freedom is subject to more surveillance, control, and retaliation in an antiblack world. Black Freedom is a threat to maintaining the current racial world order that requires Black people to be subjugated, inferior, and dominated. So, when Black people talk about unschooling so their children can be free, it is fundamentally different than what non-Black people mean by freedom in SDE.

I developed a conceptual framework to help me understand the distinct context of practicing SDE or unschooling by Black people in the U.S. My framework supports my position that Black SDE is deeply contextualized by the pursuit of Black Freedom¹² in an antiblack world. The framework also reflects that SDE is a paradigm that explores more than traditional academic measures and outcomes. My framework recognizes that Black Freedom in the context of SDE grapples with reimagining freedom in an antiblack world and results in particular Black triumphs and challenges that extend well beyond educational choices. To unschool while Black is to attempt to raise children who see themselves as free in a world that still depends on their unfreedom. This reality shapes Black SDE families and communities, making their experiences distinct from those of non-Black unschoolers. The desire for Black Freedom is both a catalyst and a source of struggle: it fuels the choice to unschool, sustains families despite systemic barriers, and simultaneously makes them more vulnerable to scrutiny. My conceptual framework (Figure 1) centers on Black lived experiences, unlike other SDE scholarship, which focuses on white, middle-class families without reckoning with the racialized stakes of seeking freedom. I attempt to offer an analysis that centers Black reality, struggle, and possibility.

The remainder of this section provides a visual rendering of my conceptual framework, detailed descriptions of the key elements of the framework, and applications of the framework in my study.

¹² I made the conscious choice not to use the phrase Black liberation in this framework, despite its deep connection to my work. Liberation is all-encompassing in ways that are beyond my work or the practices of Black unschoolers. By my estimation, liberation means freedom from every version and burden of oppression, particularly in structural ways. I do think Black SDE and unschooling is liberatory, but I do not refer to it as liberation because these families are still very much embedded in systems of oppression. Therefore, I use the phrase Black Freedom here to reflect the choices, options, and agency accessible in the context of Black SDE & unschooling.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Black SDE in the U.S.



Key Elements of Conceptual Framework

Context: Antiblackness and Black SDE in the U.S.

The outer square sets the context for my work, which acknowledges the presence of antiblackness as a permanent condition in U.S. schools. My framework draws from theories about building viable options outside of schools that would support Black folks practicing SDE. Here, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that inform my understanding of this context and its implications.

Hartman's (2008) concept of the afterlife of slavery helps make meaning of the context of being a Black unschooler in the U.S., because they are marked by slavery. Despite the legal end of enslavement, "the slave endures in the social imagination, and also in the everyday suffering experienced by Black people" (Dumas, 2016, p.13). To completely uproot antiblackness tied to slavery, some scholars call for us to abolish the world as we know it (Moten 2013; Patterson,

1982; Sexton, 2014; Wilderson, 2010). Although Black SDE does not dismantle antiblackness, it may help with “the creation of an entirely new world” (Sexton, 2010, p. 49).

BlackCrit also shapes my understanding of the outer context of Black Self-Directed Education in the U.S. My framework responds directly to the third framing idea of BlackCrit that calls for Black liberatory fantasy. In my work, I argue for liberatory fantasy as the complete disavowal of and disengagement from all forms of enslavement, especially schools. Black liberatory fantasy acknowledges that Black death and Black life cannot both be upheld in the same space (Hines & Wilmot, 2018) and demands spaces be created on the other side of antiblack school systems, including SDE.

My framework is also informed by Richards’ (2016-2023) concept of Raising Free People, which embraces unschooling and SDE from a Black perspective by centering the racialized experiences and stories of Black adults and children. Her work acknowledges that Black people in SDE always contend with fear and freedom for their children (Richards, 2016-2023). Richards supports Black people in using unschooling, self-directed learning, and decolonized parenting practices to experience liberation for their families.

Core Element: Black Freedom

The desire for and pursuit of Black Freedom (unique to Black unschoolers) influences all other elements in the framework. This concept reflects that Black families engage in SDE not just to escape the limitations of traditional schooling, but to reclaim a freedom that has historically been denied to Black people in the U.S. Pursuing the path of SDE is an act of resistance, survival, and reclamation in a world that depends on Black unfreedom.

Theoretical understandings of marronage inform my conceptualization of Black Freedom. In Douglass (forthcoming), I detail connections between unschooling and modern-day

marronage, which is relevant to this framework. Marronage refers to the individual and collective acts of fugitivity, refusal, and escape by enslaved Black populations in response to slavery (Roberts, 2017). Maroons fled from plantations to create new societies that completely abandoned previous power structures and conceived new ways of life on their own terms (Bledsoe, 2018). These radical communities disrupted systems of oppression, challenged dominant societal norms, and established transformative spaces of Black life and humanity (Roberts, 2017). In these autonomous Black spaces, freedom was conceptualized and defined outside the bounds of the enslaved condition (Bledsoe, 2017). I believe this is an aspect of freedom that Black unschoolers seek while pursuing SDE in antiblack contexts.

Core Element: Concentric Circles

The intentional use of concentric circles surrounding Black Freedom has layered meanings. There are multiple circles to represent different generations of Black families that are impacted by the pursuit of Black Freedom through SDE. The innermost circle represents children, the next circle is parents, then grandparents, and the final outermost circle represents ancestors who extend beyond these three generations. This is an important aspect of Black Freedom because it demonstrates that decisions about and experiences with SDE are not just happening at an individual level, but are intergenerational and collective. When Black parents decide to unschool or when Black children are no longer part of the U.S. school system, the resulting freedom, agency, or tension is connected to generations of Black people who have also been part of the Black Freedom struggle.

The outermost and innermost circles vary in color saturation because the layer furthest from the center is farther from Black Freedom. That is to say, Black children in SDE have access to more dimensions of freedom than previous generations, and this ripples through the collective

Black generations. The lines of the concentric circles are not solid because Black Freedom (and the pursuit of it) is malleable and not rigid. The lines are dashed because of the flexibility and adaptability of how Black Freedom is pursued and experienced within and beyond SDE.

Core Element: Rewards & Risks (Tension)

On either side of Black Freedom are Rewards & Risks. The right and left arrows indicate tensions in both directions, with Black Freedom being the site/source of the tension labeled on both sides. The arrows point in opposing directions because there is a “pulling” effect on Black Freedom toward rewards and risks simultaneously.

The rewards of Black Freedom in SDE are associated with the joys that Black unschoolers name as reasons they started or sustained their SDE journeys. These include: their children having more autonomy and agency, seeing their children happy, or excitement about their children’s creativity outside of traditional schools. The risks of Black Freedom in SDE include fear of state oversight, uncertainty about whether the choice to unschool was a mistake, concerns about college, the future, or children not learning certain subjects. Tensions that may occur in the pursuit of Black Freedom in SDE include cultural differences between SDE and Black culture, handling holidays with family members who disagree with SDE practices, or concerns that Black children raised to be free and expressive will be unsafe in an antiblack world.

Core Element: Pain & Pleasure (Healing)

To survive or thrive in an antiblack context, Black people must constantly transform their suffering into something that counteracts darkness and death. I believe Black people have a unique individual and collective ability to transmute our suffering into beauty, art, laughter, joy, dance, songs, and many other life-giving experiences. Therefore, when Black families pursue

Black Freedom through SDE, it is a process of healing pain into pleasure. The arrows move in the same direction for this element because it is through Black Freedom that pain is transformed into pleasure.

Pleasure is a concept that evokes sensuality, delight, playfulness, and fun. It engages all the senses and requires some level of embodiment. The bodies of Black people have been the site of so much pain and a lack of freedom, and I believe we also heal through our bodies. SDE also intentionally invites pleasure through play, bodily autonomy, freedom of movement, chatter, laughter, and so much that is not ‘allowed’ for children in schools. In her work, Akilah Richards (2020) cites *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Brown, 2019) when recognizing that traditional school systems prioritize working hard, achieving milestones, and ensuring students are composed and on task. The opposite is true in SDE, where the priority is making room for children to enjoy themselves in whatever they pursue.

The pursuit of Black Freedom through SDE heals control, hierarchy, and authoritarianism into partnership and decolonized parenting. It heals slavery and colonization into self-sovereignty and self-ownership. It heals from antiblack rules, metrics, and standards into creating a life that puts Black humanity first.

Applications of Conceptual Framework

My research questions for this study ask: 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? The conceptual framework helped me to identify the joys and struggles of the BLC experience. It also helped me to understand the tensions, risks, and rewards underlying their joys and struggles while establishing and sustaining the BLC. Using this framework, I connected the

implementation of SDE principles and practices to forms of healing that may be present as Black adults disrupt the traditional practices of schools and build alternative pathways with their children. Finally, the framework will allow me to witness how the BLC uses SDE to pursue Black Freedom and respond to the context of antiblackness.

Methodology & Data Sources

My research questions ask: 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? My research investigates these questions through a qualitative single case study focused on a Black learning community (a group of parents and children) that created an SDE initiative in Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland, in August 2023.

Yin (2014) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within a real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p.16). A case study was selected for this study because it seeks to answer a “how” question in a present-day situation and “involves important contextual conditions pertinent to the case” (Yin, 2014, p.16). A case study was also the most appropriate method to answer these research questions because it provides a distinctive situation, multiple variables and sources of evidence, and the necessity of triangulation (Yin, 2014). Other qualitative approaches would have limitations for this newly developed, deeply contextual form of self-directed learning community and its unique educational model. The case study method supports findings that lend themselves to a richer and more expansive understanding of this particular case and context.

The Case: Brilliant Learning Community (BLC)

In the fall of 2023, the BLC was launched in Prince George's (PG) County, Maryland. It was a self-directed, child-led space founded on the principles of deschooling and decolonized parenting, meaning they approached education and parenting from anti-oppressive perspectives. Their learning model prioritized being decentralized and democratic, indicating they prioritized learners' interests over state-mandated curriculum and practiced community consensus. Unlike traditional schools, this community did not have grades, homework, a standardized curriculum, or required subjects. Learners decided how they wanted to spend their time with the support of adult facilitators. The BLC was a center for SDE, and they identified as unschoolers.

The PG County BLC was started by Brandy (pseudonym), a Black unschooling mother of four. Brandy is married, has a master's degree in education, and is a veteran Special Education Teacher who taught in Washington, DC, and Maryland in public, private, and juvenile detention schools. She began homeschooling three of her children in 2019 while still working full-time.

Brandy joined the Brilliant Learning Network (BLN)¹³ in 2022. The BLN guided a network of 5 other SDE learning communities in different states, including a virtual community, all following the same 5-pillar model (described below). As an affiliate of the network, the BLC received support with start-up resources, finances, recruitment, and opportunities to connect with other network members. Excited by the BLN's mission and vision, Brandy stepped into the BLC Director role and started a local PG County learning community (the case study site). As the director, she was responsible for marketing, recruitment, and finding a site location. She was also

¹³ Founded by a Black unschooling mother of six during the pandemic, the BLN initially started as a way for the founder Amina (pseudonym) to share her experiences with people around the world who were interested in or curious about self-directed learning, decolonized parenting, deschooling, and decentralized education. These conversations led her to start an LLC business and launch the first in-person learning community in 2020.

the first person prospective families met after expressing interest in the BLC. By spring 2023, she recruited families and resources to launch the BLC in August 2023.

A few weeks into the recruitment phase, Brandy connected with Janelle (pseudonym), who was seeking an alternative schooling option for her 8-year-old daughter. Janelle is a married, Black mother of two and a stay-at-home mom. She has a bachelor's degree in math, and her background is in education and ministry. Janelle joined as a Facilitator for the BLC and was responsible for day-to-day engagement with children at the BLC. Although the two women already knew each other through church, unschooling their children together, and operating the BLC was new territory for them. Brandy and Janelle figured out how to run the BLC together, care for their children, and navigate home life with spouses who were not involved in the BLC. Both women attended the same HBCU and bonded over music and comedy.

While multiple families regularly visited or attended once a week, the core group of learners at the BLC consisted of Brandy and Janelle's children. They included Brandy's three oldest children, Julius (male /10 years old), Anwar (male /9 years old), and Adrienne (female/9 years old) (twins), and her infant son Baby Avery, who was 13 months old. Janelle's children are Hailey (female / 8 years old) and James (male/5 years old). Asher (male/9 years old) rounded out the core group, and his mother supported the BLC as a Facilitator until she returned to work full-time in October 2023. Although the BLC was renting a space briefly, as enrollment decreased, they started meeting in Brandy's home in October 2023.

Legally, the BLC did not operate under any state laws or guidelines. Members of the learning community were registered as homeschoolers with religious exemptions with the state. The BLC was funded through tuition payments and occasional donations. There was no operating budget, and Brandy and Janelle shared the costs of any materials or resources needed.

The BLC operated independently without formal governing bodies or oversight. The BLC Director and Facilitator were solely responsible for creating and maintaining all aspects of the learning community. In the spring of 2024, the BLC closed after one school year. The BLN founder (Amina), BLC Director (Brandy), and BLC Facilitator (Janelle) authorized this study before the community closed.

Case Selection & Recruitment

I have known Brandy for many years, and in the spring of 2022, she invited me to share about unschooling with her homeschool group, long before the BLC was formed. When Brandy started recruiting for the BLC in 2023, we had several conversations about SDE and the potential of involving their learning community in my research. I have also been friends with Janelle for many years and had conversations with her about unschooling her daughter before she became a BLC facilitator. Both women are familiar with my research interests and were enthusiastic about the BLC's participation in my study.

This site was selected as the case for this study for several reasons. Given my critical research and personal commitment to Black liberation, the site needed to have Black children in mind at its inception (unlike most traditional school systems or SDE spaces created by white people). It was also important that the site was Black-led. This site was selected primarily because it was founded by a Black mother who established this SDE model while unschooling her Black children. Although the BLC was not designed or intended to be exclusively for Black children and families, the founder, director, facilitator, and learners identify as Black. Accordingly, Black experiences and perspectives were centered at the BLC case site. This site also conveyed the realities of being Black while creating a non-traditional learning community and influenced the successes and challenges these learners and parents faced.

This site was also selected because it emphasized liberatory and decolonized learning practices. To understand alternative education models prioritizing Black children's freedom and autonomy, the site needed to be guided by philosophies that do not mirror traditional schools. The BLC's focus on self-direction, unschooling, and the decolonization of education and parenting was a significant consideration for selecting this case. Furthermore, the BLC's guiding principles (the 5 Pillars) established a structure where the foundational philosophies were grounded in practice. These pillars also provided insight into the values of Black SDE communities and how they operationalize learning outside of schools.

Additionally, the case study needed to be an in-person learning community, rather than virtual. Observing the physical space and tangible aspects of the learning environment and interactions was critical to making sense of Black approaches to creating SDE communities. As joys and struggles occurred in real-time throughout the day, I wanted to experience them without the confines or potential technology barriers of a screen. The site's location in PG County, a predominantly Black area, was also a benefit for selecting this site as it further illuminated access to (or decisions about) resources, materials, field trips, and other learning activities chosen by BLC learners or parents.

Finally, the BLC was in its very early stages of implementation, and selecting this site allowed me to research the excitement and challenges of starting a new Black self-directed learning community. While the BLN founder offered guidance and structure, the learners, directors, and parents were navigating startup challenges in real time, and it was a critical moment in the community's development. The BLC provided me with easy access, openness, and a welcoming spirit that may have been more challenging in more established spaces. It was an opportunity for me to witness the development of their new venture. When I became aware

that the BLC might close, I continued with my research because I knew the realities of their challenges would shed light on what Black SDE spaces need to thrive as sustainable options for Black children and Black communities.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study between the fall of 2023 and the spring of 2025. Preliminary interviews with the Director and Facilitator were completed in the fall of 2023, and focused on understanding Brandy and Janelle's timelines with joining the BLC, the nature of their roles at the BLC, and information about how they learned about SDE and unschooling. One informal observation also occurred in the fall of 2023. Informal conversations and one visit happened in spring 2024, and formal interviews were conducted from winter 2024 to spring 2025. This study included the following types of data collection: semi-structured interviews, informal observations, and analysis of documents, including digital artifacts.

Interviews

I interviewed the BLN founder, the BLC Director, the BLC Facilitator, and one BLC parent. I interviewed the BLC Founder, Director, and Facilitator twice, and the BLC parent once, totaling seven interviews (not including the preliminary interviews). Interviews averaged 1.5 hours each and were all conducted virtually on Zoom. The BLC was closed during the interviews because of IRB delays. Because the core BLC learners were all Brandy or Janelle's children (except one who left the BLC in December 2023), the only BLC parents eligible for interviews were Brandy and Janelle's husbands. Brandy's husband (Allen, pseudonym) was interviewed, and Janelle's husband had scheduling conflicts and was not interviewed. Through interviews, I learned more about the racialized experiences of operating an SDE community. I discovered how adults navigated individual and collective challenges and growth with their children and within

themselves. I learned how they defined their SDE practices, what informed their decision-making, and how they followed or diverged from common SDE practices. The interview findings have been integrated as stories, quotes, and themes.

Observations & Field Notes

I participated in the “Brilliant Conversation” (discussed in findings) and conducted an informal onsite observation before the BLC closed. I initially planned to conduct multiple onsite observations, but IRB delays and the timing of the BLC closure did not allow me to complete more observations. Through the Brilliant Conversation, I participated in the onboarding conversation led by Amina (BLN Founder) for anyone interested in learning more about the BLC. In that two-hour conversation, I experienced the depth and emotion inspired by Amina as she guided me and another participant through questions about “what’s not working” in traditional schools.

Through the one preliminary observation I completed while the BLC was open, I saw the facilities, daily activities, and relevant community meetings. I stayed the entire day and participated in activities, which allowed me to observe the full scope of a typical day at the BLC. In my observation, I noticed the materials used, adult/child interactions, scheduling of activities, individual and group play, and interactions between learners. I witnessed evidence of joy and tension, routines, and how group dynamics and culture were navigated. Although no information from these observations was included in the findings, they helped me to triangulate stories and information told through formal interviews and document analysis.

Document Analysis

I reviewed documents and completed content analyses of relevant online materials. These included the BLN website, three blog posts, and several YouTube videos. Analysis of the

website included the BLN origin story and background about the founder, visuals and messaging about recruitment, SDE principles and practices, BLC values, funding strategies, and mission and vision statements. The Blog posts corroborated insights about the BLC funding model, the SDE problems the BLC wants to solve, and concerns addressed in the Brilliant Conversation. The YouTube videos offered valuable information about Black fathers in SDE. Brandy's husband, Allen, participated in an unschooling dads talk on the BLN YouTube channel from the year before I interviewed him. Because he was new to the SDE journey at the time of the video, I used information from that talk to inform my interview protocol and conversation with him. Document analysis helped me learn more about the BLC core values, guiding principles, and how they align with implemented practices. Document analysis was also a source of triangulation.

Data Analysis

Drawing from Saldaña (2009), multiple rounds of coding were conducted, and analytic memos were created as an iterative process. I developed a code book in the first cycle of coding, using deductive codes from my conceptual framework and descriptive codes derived from the interview protocol. Deductive codes were developed from my conceptual framework. These codes helped me to investigate the risks and contradictions of seeking freedom within an antiblack context. I used this framework to develop codes that described antiblackness in schools, structures/systems, or other relevant SDE contexts. The framework was used to create codes for identifying examples of Black Freedom. Codes included how participants described pursuing freedom in/through SDE, how freedom was practiced in SDE, and how freedom was experienced through SDE. Codes were generated for the rewards and risks of pursuing Black Freedom in SDE. These included joys, struggles, and the tensions that arise from practicing SDE

while Black. Using this framework, I produced codes to capture the healing properties of SDE, including instances where participants described changing from one mindset to another, practices they adopted that helped their children to be freer, and ways that SDE transformed previous negative school experiences into positive self-directed experiences. Second cycle coding focused on recurring inductive codes not captured by the first round and that were beyond my conceptual framework.

When analyzing my data, I organized themes across findings from interviews, artifacts, and documents using inductive and deductive coding. Using these inductive and deductive coding strategies allowed me to explore and identify overarching categories that became themes describing Black SDE joys, struggles, principles, and practices. I found similarities across data sources that pointed to the unique phenomenon of creating an SDE community that prioritizes Black learners and perspectives. The joys and struggles of the BLC were triangulated by the multiple sources used to answer my research questions. Additional validity measures included member checking and opportunities for key participants to review draft case study reports (Yin, 2014). The findings will expand and generalize theories (Yin, 2014) about Black Freedom, SDE and unschooling, and Black alternative education.

Findings

The findings for this study are organized as a narrative blend of storytelling using reflections from participants and digital artifacts from the BLC network website. The first section details a typical day at the BLC, responding to RQ2: How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? While immersing the findings in stories of BLC practices, I also highlight the SDE principles, which are the underlying values upon which practices are enacted. The second and third sections are organized in response to

RQ1: What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? These two sections address the joys and struggles experienced by participants in three different categories. These categories are the joys and struggles: 1) in the daily operations of the BLC, 2) at home and in the community outside the BLC, and 3) in the overall experience of establishing and sustaining the BLC for the year it was operating. The discussion section follows and explores larger themes found across findings for both research questions.

SDE Principles & Practices at the BLC

A typical day at the BLC is rooted in the principles of noncompulsory learning (unschooling), supporting children's autonomy (adults as facilitators, not teachers), trusting children to create their own curriculum (self-direction), and decentralizing academic knowledge as a main priority (deschooling). These principles are enacted through the practices that shape learners' time and engagement at the BLC.

The day begins with a morning "spawn point" or community meeting where adults and children gather to set the course for the day. The children decided that snacks were necessary for this first touch point of the day, so everyone had something to eat as discussions about the day were happening. The adult facilitators (Brandy and Janelle) would begin the meeting by asking the learners, "Who do you want to be today"? If learners needed encouragement with a response, the facilitators would tell them, "Think about what you want to have by the end of the day, who you have to be, and what you have to do in order to get what you want to have".

Figure 2: Sample Weekly Schedule, Digital Artifact

What a week could look like					
Set-The Week					
	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
9-10 am	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point
10-11 am (Marketplace Available)	Creative Writing Corp (Marketplace Available)	Art Corp	Coding Corp.	Book Club	Japanese Corp.
11-12 am (Marketplace Available)	Minecraft Corp Roblox Corp	Minecraft Corp Roblox Corp	Minecraft Corp Roblox Corp	Minecraft Corp Roblox Corp	Minecraft Corp Roblox Corp
12-1 pm (Marketplace Available)	Math Corp.	5 Pillar Invitation	Math Corp	Mandatory Community Meeting	Social Justice Corp.
1-2 pm (Marketplace Available)	Science Corp	YouTube Corp	Science Corp	Cooking Corp.	Movie/Show Corp
2-3 pm	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point	Spawn Point

After responses, the facilitators would ask which corporations the learners wanted to participate in for the day. Corporations are interest-led groups created by the learners, a practice informed by self-direction and children's autonomy. Corporations at the BLC included groups for: Cooking, Filmmaking, Minecraft, Roblox, Dance, Among Us/Bootcamp (games played outside), and Baby Corporation (helping to care for Brandy's 4-month-old son). Corporations suggested by learners were written on a schedule by the hour in the dining room so everyone could see what activities were offered for the day (Figure 2). When it was time for a certain corporation, an announcement for the time and location was made to everyone. Learners freely picked which corporations they wanted to join (if any) for the day. Depending on the desired activity, some corporations were planned in advance so that materials and supplies could be purchased, whereas others were spontaneously suggested during the morning meeting. For example, the cooking corporation was offered every Wednesday, and learners knew what they would be cooking. Children sometimes led corporations by themselves, and other times they

asked adults for support or participation. Learners were not required to attend corporations even if they had previously expressed interest.

Outside of scheduled corporations, BLC learners were encouraged to “be in flow”, follow their interests, and create “good experiences” for themselves. Most of the learners spent their time playing Minecraft or Roblox individually or with each other. Both games have options for crafting worlds, competitive community play, and socializing. Although both Brandy and Janelle initially had reservations about how much time their children spent playing these games, as they trusted the self-directed process (and learned more about the games themselves), they were surprised to find out how much complex thinking, reading, and communication skills the games included. Janelle reflects on her daughter and other learners’ Minecraft experiences, noting that she saw them as valuable.

But I did start to see, with all the kids, how they were learning from the game. [Hailey’s] spelling and typing skills were faster because they were chatting online. Then in Minecraft, there’s architecture, math, geometry, even chemistry! So that was encouraging. I would look at Anwar’s Minecraft, he would show me. ‘Look! I created my house in Minecraft, and I’m like... why does it look like your actual house?? He was making it realistic. Or look at this ship I made. It’s a cruise ship! I didn’t even know this was possible. So, the people who are making YouTube videos and making something, he’s doing that level stuff. But Anwar was also the one that reading is really hard for. But when you look at that boy’s Minecraft arsenal, it’s just the most elaborate thing, and to make his actual house like down to the color, the front porch, the lights, and things. His brain’s doing things! It don’t want to read right now, but he wants to do this, and there’s so much value there. (Janelle)

The day would close with an end-of-day “spawn point” meeting where learners would be asked, “Who did you get to be today”? Brandy and Janelle note that this was one of the most “inspiring” parts of the daily activities, when learners would respond with things like, “I got to be a champion, I got to be a good friend, I got to be myself, I got to be a gamer. I got to be an entrepreneur.” In addition to these being “celebratory moments”, this daily reflection practice highlighted the SDE principle of deschooling, whereby learners were not measured by what they did, but by who they were for the day. For Janelle, this shift in defining success or measuring achievement was something that she says was critical in her deschooling practice as a parent and facilitator. She says, “I had to completely get out of that mindset. Even the definition of success is so different in this [SDE] environment. I can’t even go there”.

Figure 3: Definition of Unschooling, Digital Artifact

DeCentralized Learning is UNschooling, Self Directed Learning.

It's non compulsory, non forced learning rooted in DeColonized Parenting & DeSchooling; the process of making the learning expectations of others mean NOTHING. UNschooling or DeCentralized Learning is built on a belief that humans will acquire knowledge as a result of curiosity, LOVE or when they see the relevance of such knowledge. The Self guides the when, what and how of this acquisition, thus making the child the curriculum.

This peek into a day at the BLC highlights how this Black learning community embodies SDE principles through its daily activities. Adults and children engage in practices infused with concepts that center children’s voices, eliminate compulsory curriculum, and give children room to explore their curiosities. Figure 3 from the BLC network home page triangulates participants’ interviews and descriptions of the daily experiences at the BLC.

Joys of Establishing & Sustaining the BLC

In the year that the BLC was operating, Brandy, Janelle, and their children were together three days a week in Brandy's home and their local community. Both women were deeply committed to the success of the PG County BLC, with ongoing support from Amina, the BLN founder. While their time at the BLC was not without struggle, joy fueled their passion to see the community established and sustained for their children and others.

Daily Joys

One source of joy was the day-to-day moments spent with their children and supporting their self-direction at the BLC. Having spent time in classrooms as full-time teachers or long-term substitutes, Brandy and Janelle reflected on the joy of how different the BLC was from traditional schools and homeschooling, not only for their children, but for them as the adults in the room. Janelle recalls that she felt freedom and ease with the children because she wasn't stressing about lesson plans or making the children do things they didn't want to. She describes how this allowed her to experience the children and the learning environment differently.

It was liberating to be in a room with kids and not feel compelled to keep them under 'control'. We're just here in this room, and they're doing what they do. It's not disrupting anything. I'm not having to tell them to be quiet. They were just having fun. So I think that was definitely a joy for me. You just get to observe them and get to know them. And there's not this anxiety in the room to control them, to get them to do this or that. Getting to know the kids on a pure level. You're not judging anything in particular. You're just watching them, and you really are getting to know them. (Janelle)

Another aspect of daily joy that Brandy and Janelle shared was witnessing how their children would self-direct by coming up with creative ideas and problem-solving. When navigating conflicts between each other, the BLC learners identified different ways to resolve

their own issues without adult intervention. One example shared by both mothers was about a lollipop rule that the children implemented when there was discord within the community.

During their end-of-day meeting, they had lollipops as snacks, and the learners decided, “if you have a conflict with somebody and you haven't resolved it, you shouldn't get the lollipop”.

Brandy expressed pride in seeing this because it was “kid designed.” Similarly, the learners came up with the idea of having a community market to make their own money. They planned, created goods, made flyers, and accomplished their goals. Brandy was impressed with their vision and follow-through.

It was in front of our house. The kids figured out for themselves what they wanted to sell.

They thought about what they were good at. Some had a lot of older toys and figured out which ones to sell. Some sold cotton candy. Some made things out of Legos and sold those. They tapped into their own creativity, their own genius, and saw the fruits of it.

And they made actual money because we had people stop by and purchase things. That was a really great success. It was beautiful to see it go from an idea to actualization.

(Brandy)

Joys at Home and in the Community

Beyond the joyful experiences at the BLC, parents also noticed how other areas of their lives were impacted by choosing the path of SDE. Janelle notices that her home life is more joyful because the BLC isn't a place where her daughter has to force herself to conform all day. She recalls that when her daughter Hailey was still in a small private co-op, she would be “angry and irritable” when Janelle picked her up, “because she's been holding it together,” to avoid getting in trouble for not doing her work at school. But because the BLC is a place where she can

just be herself, Janelle says, “the joy is just that it makes for a more peaceful life for us. To not just be in a constant battle”.

Brandy’s personal transformation from directing the BLC was a significant experience of joy. As the BLC closed, Brandy transitioned to a Curriculum and Instruction Director position at the private school where she previously taught. Noting that she initially felt like a “supreme imposter”, Brandy was eventually able to harness confidence from her time at the BLC to overcome her self-doubt and infuse SDE principles into her work in a traditional setting. She says the BLC helped her become “more bold and self-assured,” where she used to be “very nervous and fearful”. Not only did it increase her confidence in her ability to share about unschooling with other families, but the BLC experience reassured her about the choice to practice SDE with her children. Brandy had a “breakthrough moment” during a professional development training in her new job, where she realized she could be an influence in a mainstream school.

I am here to be an influence. To help people see teaching and learning differently. It can't be done how we've done it for centuries. It has to be done differently. We have a different generation of kids. Right now, my first way of doing it differently is to be a spreader of joy, just in my being. At the beginning of the day, I set intentions for who I want to be.

Intentions like I'm going to be fun. I want to be joy. And so that is what I am doing in this first year being back. I never wanted to be an administrator. But I'm now looking at it like

I could do it differently. (Brandy)

Joys of the BLC Experience

In synthesizing the overall joys of starting and sustaining the BLC for a year, I noticed participants highlighted a few areas more than others. As the BLC network founder and PG

County BLC Director, Amina and Brandy (respectively) both onboarded prospective parents through the “Brilliant Conversation” (pseudonym). Coined and created by Amina, this conversation is the entry point for anyone who wants to learn more about the BLC network or local learning communities. Brandy was trained to lead this conversation with parents, and I participated in a Brilliant Conversation led by Amina. This powerful two-hour session helps adults and children identify “what's not working” in traditional schools and “who do you never get to be in school,” and supports them as they dream up possibilities for a new approach to education and learning. Amina and Brandy identified this as the most fulfilling part of starting a BLC.

The most fulfilling thing was watching parents go through the Brilliant Conversation. And tap into what was missing for them in their previous approach. Whether it was a school space or homeschool. Helping to create a dream and walk toward it, to start expressing it in their homes, and be free. (Brandy)

Another source of joy was Brandy, Janelle, and Amina’s pride in raising awareness about SDE and unschooling within the Black community. Although the BLC is not an exclusively Black community, it has a Black founder and had Black leaders at the PG County location, which increased visibility and appeal for other Black families looking for alternative options. Janelle believes these racial factors were a strength of the PG County BLC and contributed to “safety and cultural understanding” among Black homeschoolers and traditional schoolers. Recalling that all the prospective families in the spring of 2024 were Black, Janelle says, “I think us being Black also made that feel like a safe space for them [other Black families]. I think it gave us credibility amongst other Black homeschoolers.”

Struggles of Establishing & Sustaining the BLC

Despite the considerable efforts to sustain the BLC, it closed after one year. Brandy, Janelle, and Amina experienced many struggles during the year that did not overshadow their joys, but did lead to uncertainty, financial strains, discouragement, and ultimately the closure of a learning community they had come to love.

Daily Struggles

A struggle in the daily operations of the BLC was resolving conflicts. With the small enrollment numbers, conflict between learners was more impactful on the entire community. There was a significant ongoing struggle between Brandy's son, Anwar, and Janelle's daughter, Hailey. According to Janelle, the two learners were "beefing" from day one at the BLC. Because they were consistently in close proximity, Anwar and Hailey's ongoing battles were the source of kid-designed creative solutions and catalysts for adult intervention. From verbal spars to physical altercations with soccer balls, their relationship was stressful to their mothers, the other learners, and it seemed irreconcilable. Knowing her daughter, Janelle recalls how difficult it was to navigate Hailey's hurtful behaviors in ways that still honored her autonomy and personhood.

I remember one time, I felt so bad. Anwar came to me and said, "Can you control your daughter, please? Can you spank her or something? Get her to do what she's supposed to do?" He was pleading with me like, can you change her because she is just ruining my life with her words! He was dead serious. I was like, Oh, my God! My heart broke for him because he was desperate, like, why can't you control her? She hadn't touched him or anything. It's not a physical thing, it's her words. Like the Bible says, 'reckless words pierce like a sword'. He just can't take it. He's like, get her! (Janelle)

Finally, the low enrollment at the BLC was a struggle that was unfortunately never overcome and ultimately led to its closure. In addition to the financial strain it caused, it also

impacted other dynamics of the BLC. Brandy noticed that the low numbers impacted her capacity to appreciate and celebrate daily wins and growth at the BLC because “it was always like how are we going to sustain? How are we going to keep this up? Can we keep this up? That was always in the back of my mind”. After the Christmas holidays, the only tuition-paying learner did not return, which was hard for the community. Janelle saw the social impacts on the children and the excitement that she and Brandy had ignited when they initially started the BLC.

You're just listening to the different things they're wrestling with. You're wrestling. I think there was a bit of disappointment about the number of students. Why is nobody [joining]? Because we had hyped [the BLC] up for them like it's gonna be a space for friends and da da da. So now they're looking around...and it's just my siblings and y'all. Love y'all, but I'm tired of seeing y'all. So I could sense that. I think that could have influenced them wanting to try another school because there weren't enough social opportunities to really make it what we sold it to them as, which I totally understand. So I think that was a big struggle, too. It's just the numbers not being what we'd hoped worked against us. (Janelle)

Struggles at Home and in the Community

The most significant struggle outside the daily BLC activities was the financial strain on Brandy and her family. Brandy started the BLC with the intention to recruit up to 20 families who would pay tuition and generate a salary for herself and other adult facilitators. Before the BLC officially opened, around 20 families signed up, but as time got closer to starting, they did not enroll. Although the BLC started with 10 learners and paid for a rental space, a few months in, they were only breaking even. Rather than take salaries, Brandy and Janelle decided to offset costs by not paying tuition for their four children and using tuition paid by other families to pay

for materials, activities, and other items for the learners. Within the first semester, they were down to one tuition-paying student and decided to move the BLC to Brandy's home. By January, the BLC was just Brandy and Janelle's children, with no income for materials or trips. Brandy and her husband, Allen, both discussed how this put a strain on their marriage. Allen was the only adult bringing income to their previously two-income home, and he said the experience "had a negative impact on our relationship". Brandy agreed that while she was excited and hopeful about the BLC, "it wasn't bringing me or my family any money. So the amount of time that I spent trying to build it. It just was a give and take." The BLC closed because the Brandy needed to go back to work to support her family.

Janelle described how choosing to parent and educate her children from a nontraditional perspective led to incompatibility in other areas of her life, particularly with other adults who disagreed with her parenting approach or disapproved of her children's behavior. Amina corroborated this sentiment with her experience as an unschooler and through working with many BLC network families. Amina noted that holidays are a particularly challenging time for BLC families because there is a divide that leads to "being misunderstood" to the point that they sometimes revert to traditional approaches. Amina described how holiday gatherings with extended family led to arguments, stress, or frustration because of their children's proximity to adults who do not support children having so much autonomy. Amina discussed that some families found it easier to go back to old parenting approaches than to deal with the criticism of these family members. Both women pointed out that living between two worlds (schoolish and unschooled, traditional and alternative) is a struggle. Janelle said that even though this approach is healthier for her daughter, other parents and adults question her choices, saying:

Oh, that's how your daughter talks to you? Or if she's questioning things, or just not behaving as people are used to. I'm starting to see how it's not necessarily always compatible with the rest of the world to take this journey. It really is like we are outside the matrix, and then trying to insert her back into it is a little rocky. (Janelle)

Struggles of the BLC Experience

One of the biggest struggles of the BLC experience was struggling to recruit prospective families. This pain point also sheds light on a broader issue of identifying the ideal target audience for communal SDE spaces. Brandy and Janelle discussed these insights, highlighting the various nuances of the wider homeschool community. The two factors that contributed to this recruiting struggle were values and finances. As a former homeschooling mom, Janelle points out that many homeschoolers desire to be close to their children, so a drop-off model like the BLC may not appeal to them for more than a couple of days a week. Janelle believes the values of proximity and influence over their children's education may have been a deterrent preventing homeschooling families from joining the BLC.

Relatedly, finances were connected to the values of potential BLC families' choices. Brandy and Janelle pointed out that many families came out to check out the BLC, joined field trips, had Brilliant Conversations, or wanted to participate in activities. These prospective families valued community and some aspects of SDE (like following their child's interests), but they did not see value in paying tuition for a self-directed approach. To Janelle's previous observation, she noted that homeschoolers are often already one income households, so if parents are going to pay for educational activities outside their homes, it would not be for self-directed education, which they could do at home for free. In alignment with Janelle's thoughts, Brandy concluded that the BLC was likely best suited for families that are already unschooling and who

wanted to do so in community. Janelle also considered that “I think honestly the people that probably would help an SDE space be sustainable would be those [already unschooling] and where both parents are working full time”.

The final struggle I examine in the BLC experience is the impact of its closure. While these families are okay, Amina continued to carry the emotional weight of not being able to better support the PG County BLC and other locations that also closed. In reflecting on the experience, Amina shares the challenge of carrying and sharing such a big vision without having enough resources and foundation to sustain it. She “put the cart before the horse” and is “doing this with integrity” by now focusing on developing funding for one location in Atlanta, Georgia where she lives. In a final reflection, Amina shares her struggles as the leader of the BLN:

It is painful to hear families who so badly want this. I felt like I let down so many people. I know when people come to the Brilliant Conversation they walk away with a lot of hope. I had families there in Maryland. Some of them didn't have any other options. So they want to be free. But they want to be free together in community. And there's things that you have to put in place to have that community, and the biggest one is funding. So one of my struggles was to realize what's not working, and I'm not going to hold another set of families to this dream without that missing piece. (Amina)

Discussion

In this study, I explored: 1) *What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community?* and 2) *How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices?* Through my research, I aimed to understand the intersections of Blackness and Self-Directed Education. As an advocate for the exploration and pursuit of Black freedom through alternative education spaces and

practices, I wanted to know more about unschooling with Black children and families. By understanding how they practice SDE in community, their triumphs, barriers, and hardships, I will be better positioned to support and resource families already on this path and those who never knew it was an option. The synthesis of my findings led me to identify three critical themes relevant to establishing and sustaining Black SDE communities and practicing SDE with Black families in mind. These themes are 1) the weight and dimensions of Black Freedom, 2) the tensions of Black cultural disconnection, and 3) the possibilities of Black healing. I discuss themes below, which are labeled as short participant quotes that reflect the essence of each theme.

The Weight and Dimensions of Black Freedom: “Who do you never get to be in school?”

This powerful question, who do you never get to be in school, is the opener for the Brilliant Conversation, developed by Amina. This question tugs at the weight and dimensions of Black Freedom because it is the beginning of an unraveling about what we believe about education. Once asked, the question lingers and demands to be felt on a deep level. It invites discomfort and brings a gentle confrontation to the places “where people are being inauthentic” (Amina). The ache for Black Freedom is bound up in this question, as it simultaneously asks: Why can’t you be who you want to be in school? Who or what is stopping you? Who decides who you can or can’t be in school? Who are you being forced to be instead? What is the impact of never being who you want to be in school? For Black learners and their families, the answers to this question carry the weight of intergenerational antiblackness and unfreedom.

Amina’s question illuminates why Black Freedom is the center of my research. Her question reveals the truth that Black children never get to be free in schools. They never get to be human. They never get to be themselves. As previously noted by Hartman (2008), the afterlife of

slavery has not only prevented today's Black children from being free, but this unfreedom has marked every generation of Black people since enslavement. This means that the pursuit of Black Freedom is not just limited to the BLC learners but also the pursuit of their parents, their grandparents, and ancestors. This means that Black Freedom in SDE is not merely an academic choice but a set of tools, practices, and beliefs that have the power to radically liberate generations of Black families. When Amina asks, who do you never get to be in school, she is beginning a conversation that has the potential to support Black families on a path that is what our ancestors dreamed about.

The intergenerational nature of Black Freedom is also what makes the path of SDE a difficult one for many Black families to consider. Despite Black Freedom having very little to do with traditional academic values, schooling and its byproducts still shape Black thought about emancipation. Black people are still deeply influenced by white standards promoted by schools, which limit our capacity to dream of new possibilities. To quote bell hooks (1992), "We've not just been colonized in our minds, we've been colonized in our imaginations." Because our definitions and measures of success are rooted in white supremacy, we still see school (traditional academics) as the primary way out of bondage, rather than as chains that keep us compliant. Black children, in particular, are pressured to become the actors through which previous generations achieve white mainstream freedom in the form of academic achievement, college admissions, jobs in traditional high-paying careers, and other white standards.

But Black unschoolers and Black SDE spaces like the BLC redefine Black Freedom on their own terms. They work to decolonize their beliefs about freedom, what Black children deserve, and how we get there. By eliminating schoolish notions of achievement, the BLC expanded Black learners and families' capacity to be free in ways that prior generations could

not access. BLC participants also expanded my understanding of the dimensions of Black Freedom beyond autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination. Through their stories, they redefined freedom as: being fully expressed, being yourself, having uninterrupted time for your passions, and determining success on your terms. These reframings of Black Freedom give power back to Black children, allowing them to resist and defy external standards and measures of success.

Black Freedom is heavily steeped in experiences, memories, and the traumas of slavery. Even though it is arguably a desire for all Black people, pursuing it, obtaining it, and sustaining it is not easy. The complex nature of Black Freedom contributes to the joys and struggles experienced at the BLC. The mothers chose to found, establish, or join the BLC because of the freedom it would offer their children. Prospective families were intrigued by the BLC for the same reason. In the day-to-day operations of the BLC, parents experienced joy in witnessing their children being fully expressed and free. Simultaneously, there were always questions and doubts about the implications of this freedom on children's future abilities to thrive in a mainstream schoolish society. These doubts and the radical approach to pursuing Black Freedom through SDE were also reasons why more people did not join the BLC. While Black families were ready to allow more autonomy for their children, they were not ready to allow their children to fully self-direct as a pathway to Black Freedom.

Tensions of Black Cultural Disconnection: “Unschooling...that’s not what Black people do.”

Amina, Brandy, and Janelle all initially dismissed unschooling and SDE as something only white people do. Their misconceptions of “letting children run wild and talking to adults any kind of way”, having no formal curriculum, or potentially no rules clashed dramatically with

their cultural values as Black women. They considered it “unparenting”, irresponsible, and something they would never do. Eventually, they changed their minds due to life circumstances, their children’s needs, or exposure to Black unschoolers. As they continued down the SDE path for themselves, they also became advocates and ambassadors for increasing awareness and visibility for this promising alternative option. They also experienced the tensions of cultural disconnection between Blackness and SDE. While navigating these tensions in their own lives, they also encountered them with prospective BLC families.

Within the context of this study, two primary areas of Black Cultural Disconnection were discussed: the Black Church and Black parenting. Often intertwined, these two aspects of Black culture illuminate deep divides between the principles and practices of SDE and Blackness. Even though Brandy and Janelle expressed how their Christian faith affirmed their decision to unschool their children, they described how aspects of popular Biblical teachings did not align with their parenting philosophies or educational choices. Both women (and Brandy’s husband, Allen) referenced the Bible verses about “train up a child in the way they should go” and “spare the rod, spoil the child,” which are related to disciplining and spanking children. Because SDE is rooted in children’s consent and bodily autonomy, it does not use corporal punishment, yelling, physical intimidation, or forms of shaming to coerce children into “good” behavior. In contrast, participants shared how the Black Church or their children’s Sunday school teachers employ these tactics in their faith-based practices. These Biblical teachings trickle down to Black parenting practices through ideas like ‘children should be seen and not heard’, ‘stay in a child’s place’, or ‘no talking back’. While culturally accepted and celebrated for generations of Black childrearing, SDE pushes back on the notion that children shouldn’t speak their minds or question adults’ authority. When children are asserting their agency in Black spaces where these

traditional beliefs are upheld, often it is not only the child who is called out, but also their parents. This form of criticizing and shaming can lead to Black parents practicing SDE to feel isolated, misunderstood, and ostracized. As pointed out by Amina, it can feel severe enough that newer SDE families revert to old parenting practices, or curious families never fully commit to the path. Veteran Black unschoolers like Amina still feel the sting of the cultural disconnect, but they have had practice building confidence and advocacy for their chosen beliefs.

Although different styles of parenting, like attachment parenting and gentle parenting, have been adopted by Black families, it is critical to acknowledge that more fear-based and violent forms of parenting in the Black community are primarily a protective response to raising Black children in an antiblack world. No form of child abuse should be tolerated, but generations of Black parents had to do whatever they could to keep their children safe from the terrors of slave masters, lynching mobs, police, and ordinary racist citizens. Training a Black child to be quietly obedient at home helped ensure they would not face death at the hands of a white stranger. The risk of a Black child being too free still results in death today. Antiblackness is to blame for the antiquated approaches to raising and educating Black children. Participants in this study especially identified grandparents and elders as being sources of the cultural divide between Blackness and SDE. Because Black elders experienced less freedom and autonomy than the generations that came after them, they often do not understand the significance or value of supporting children being free to be themselves, especially in the presence of adults. Rather than allowing adults to remain as gatekeepers to Black children's freedom, Amina implemented decolonized parenting workshops and forums at the BLC. As advised by Akilah S. Richards, Amina recognized that Black parents, grandparents, and elders needed training to unlearn traditionally held beliefs and practices to support and sustain Black children's freedom.

Possibilities for Black Healing: “I’m not willing to do that to my child.”

The final theme captured in this study is the possibility of Black healing through SDE and decolonized parenting. Given the intergenerational nature of Black Freedom, I assert that if Black children experience freedom through SDE, then they are also helping the generations before them get free. This unraveling of intergenerational pain tied to slavery is healing to the bodies, souls, and psyches of Black people. By embracing the autonomy, sovereignty, freedom, and self-expression found through unschooling, SDE, and decolonized parenting, Black people have an opportunity to heal the oppression, subjugation, domination, and captivity that have haunted us for generations. I ponder the fullness of the healing and freedom available to us through choosing an alternative pathway that declines schoolish standards and incentives. Rather than exerting our energy trying to fix schools or battling antiblackness through ‘Black excellence’, what if we channeled our efforts into protecting innocence, play, and fun for Black children? I wonder how their healing might also heal us and expand what’s possible for who we get to be?

A significant quote from Janelle encapsulates the deep Black healing work I see as possible through SDE:

I realized early on that I cannot tame my daughter. I’m thankful for her personality. I think if she were a compliant child, I would not have ended up on this journey. But she just doesn’t change who she is for people. Not even me. Sure, I could force her into stuff, but I would have to be a colonizer. I would have to really be cruel and oppressive. I’d have to scare her or intimidate her, or break her spirit, which I just am not willing to do. I think growing up in an abusive home where you didn’t have a voice, you weren’t allowed to think for yourself. You weren’t allowed to ‘talk back’. Or just have something to say

[as a child]. I know how that made me feel, and I'm not willing to do that to my child. So the decolonized parenting really resonated with me. (Janelle)

These words reveal the heart of this theme. Amina, Brandy, and Janelle all spoke about how their children were different from others. They pointed out how their children's inability to 'fit' in mainstream school environments put them on the path to unschooling and SDE. In one way or another, they identified that this generation of children seeks and needs something different from what we've been doing. If Black adults are willing to listen and try something new, we may find that children are already pointing us towards the healing needed for many generations.

Janelle's words also highlight the healing capacity of SDE for parents' childhood and school wounds. All the participants discussed how they didn't have a real voice growing up, and it's part of why they chose this pathway for their children. Simultaneously, that choice heals the parents (and sometimes the grandparents) by giving their children access to something they never had at home and in school. By eradicating harmful parenting practices, Janelle's quote speaks to a larger reality that traditional parenting didn't feel good to her. It didn't align with who she was or how she wanted to raise her children. SDE and decolonized parenting can heal Black parents from engaging in practices that are detrimental to their children and themselves.

The research questions explored in this study were: 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community? 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices? My research confirms that the BLC was engaged in spiritual liberation work. When Black families engage in unschooling and decolonized parenting, I view it as a spiritual practice. It is the healing work of removing our chains and reclaiming our sovereignty. It is transformative for relationships

between Black children and adults because fear, shame, and subservience are replaced with experiences of being celebrated, seen, and in partnership.

Conclusion

By centering a Black SDE community, this study aimed to examine how alternative education practices prioritize Black freedom and disrupt the antiblack violence of traditional schooling in the U.S. The purpose of this study was to document how a Black learning community engaged in SDE practices, along with the joys and struggles of their efforts. In contrast to reform-based solutions to education, this study expands the conversation by illuminating what it means to educate Black children outside the logic and reach of state systems. It offers empirical insights into the daily realities of creating liberatory education spaces for Black children, and it contributes to a limited body of work imagining education beyond school. This study provides a critical perspective, practical knowledge, and cultural affirmation for Black families and communities seeking educational sovereignty.

The PG County Brilliant Learning Community (BLC) was open for one school year before it closed, and in that time, the community experienced many triumphs and challenges. The findings of this study revealed key themes about the intergenerational nature of Black Freedom, tensions between Black culture and SDE, and the healing power of SDE for Black parents and children. This work affirms the need for spaces beyond schools that tend to Black children's autonomy, agency, and self-determination. Because antiblackness is rooted in the structural foundations of schools, there will always be a need for Black children to seek humanity and joy outside of the school system. The joys and challenges shared by participants underscore that while the path of SDE is not always easy, it is rewarding, especially when pursued in community with other Black folks. Participants demonstrate that holding space for

Black freedom within an SDE model means grappling with the discomfort of being misunderstood, the uncertainty of future outcomes, and the misalignment between SDE and traditional schooling and parenting approaches. Amidst the struggle to fund and sustain the BLC, participants shared moments of deep joy, growth, and the celebration of Black children being free to be themselves. Future research might explore the experiences of older Black youth who were unschooled, sustainable funding models for SDE spaces, or the impacts of decolonized parenting training in the Black community. As more Black families seek liberatory education practices, it is crucial to change the conversation about what's possible beyond schools and to raise the visibility of Black families taking alternative education pathways. Communities like the BLC remind us what is possible in a world not built for Black freedom.

Appendix D

Interview Protocol- Paper 3

Interview 1: Director & Facilitator

Introductory/Background

1. Tell me one thing that made you laugh this week at the BLC.
2. What's something that made you feel proud this week at the BLC?
3. Tell me 2-3 words that describe your experiences of starting this learning community.
 - a. Why did you choose those words?
4. What motivated you to start this learning community?

Joys & Struggles

5. Tell me about the process of starting this learning community.
 - a. What did you have to do? How long did it take? Who else was involved?
6. What does it take to maintain operations of the BLC on an ongoing basis?
7. What's going well and what's been difficult about starting and sustaining this learning community?
 - a. What's been easy or difficult about operating the BLC with your own children?
8. What have been your personal strengths in operating the BLC and what new skills have you developed?
9. What have been your personal limitations in operating the BLC and how have you navigated them?
10. How have you all navigated challenges and conflict as a learning community? Give examples.
11. How have you all celebrated growth and success as a learning community? Give examples.
12. How has running the BLC impacted you positively and negatively? Give examples.

Race

13. Does being Black present any barriers or strengths at the BLC or in your SDE/unschooling experiences or practices?
 - a. Probe: w/in BLC and beyond in wider SDE, homeschooling, PG county community
 - b. Probe: specific examples of ease or difficulty of practicing SDE or unschooling with Black children

Closing

14. What would it take to sustain the BLC for the long-term future?
 - a. What barriers or possibilities do you see to long term sustainability?
15. What do you find most fulfilling about this experience so far?

Appendix E

Interview Protocol- Paper 3

Interview 2: Director & Facilitator

Introductory/Background

1. What did you know about unschooling or SDE before starting the BLC?
2. What SDE ideas or practices have you been most drawn to or inspired by?
 - a. Has anything surprised you about what you've learned since starting the BLC?
3. How do you describe the difference between the BLC and school (and homeschool)?

SDE Influences

4. Tell me about the resources that influence your beliefs about SDE or unschooling (books, courses, people, social media, other media, etc.)
 - a. Probe: cultural and historical influences
5. Do these resources influence your practices at the BLC? If yes, give examples.

SDE Principles & Practices

6. What happens on a daily basis at the BLC?
7. Which SDE or unschooling principles do you practice at the BLC?
 - a. Describe them and give examples.
8. Are there any SDE or unschooling principles that are not practiced at the BLC?
 - a. Describe which and explain why.
9. Describe decision-making practices at the BLC. Give examples
 - a. Probe: collaboration, hierarchies, children's role, consensus vs voting
 - b. Probe: setting limits, conflict resolution processes, repeated offenses
10. Describe the community-building practices that take place at the BLC. Give examples
11. Describe any principles or practices that encourage children's autonomy at the BLC. Give examples
12. How are newcomers and visitors (adults or children) introduced to the SDE principles practiced at the BLC?

Goals & Success

13. How do you measure success at the BLC?
 - a. What outcomes matters most to you in practicing SDE?
14. Why are you operating/running the BLC?
 - a. Probe: Is this a choice in response to something specific?

Race

15. Are there any aspects of Black culture or history that influence the SDE practices of the BLC? Give examples
16. Are there any aspects of Black identity/culture/history present in the BLC's physical space?
 - a. Probe: explicit/implicit, intentional/unintentional, how are they engaged/centered
17. Have the children ever brought up any issues of race, if so, how?

Appendix F

Interview Protocol- Paper 3

Interview 1: BLC Network Founder

Background

1. What motivated you to start this learning network?
2. How would you describe the mission and vision of the organization?
 - a. What are it's short term and long term goals?
3. Describe your current role and responsibilities at the BLN

Unique Attributes

4. What experiences and knowledge most influenced your decision to create this model and network in the ways that you did? (This could include personal, professional, educational, parenting, etc.)
5. How do you describe the difference between the BLN and other forms of SDE or school (including alternative education)?
6. What makes the Genius School model unique and why did you choose to implement these particular ideas/practices/systems?
 - a. Probe: Genius conversation, hybrid models, fractional ownership/crypto, app, pillars, corporations, parent meetings
7. How do the unique characteristics you described create strengths or challenges for the organization?
8. Are there any features of the network/model that have changed over the years? If yes, what and why?

Operations

9. Tell me about how the network/model operates.
 - a. What happens regularly and how does it engage with families/in-person groups?
10. Tell me about the process of starting this learning network. (inc. timeline)
 - a. What did you have to do? How long did it take? Who else was involved?
11. What does it take to maintain operations of the BLN on an ongoing basis?
 - a. Probe: resources, support, legal knowledge, internal/communal support
12. Describe the financial and legal structures of the BLN.
 - a. Probe: who else is involved, how they make money, how local schools operate legally and financially
13. What would it take to sustain the BLN long-term?
 - a. What barriers or possibilities do you see to long-term sustainability?

Joys & Struggles

14. What's going well and what's been difficult about starting and sustaining this learning network?
 - a. Probe: recruitment, support, scaling, operations
 - b. Tell me about the strengths and challenges of the PG county location specifically.
15. What aspects of the BLN have been joyful or healing for you? What aspects have been a struggle or painful? (provide examples)

16. What have been your strengths and limitations in operating the BLN?
 - a. How did you develop the strengths and navigate the limitations?
17. What has been most fulfilling about this experience so far?

Wrapping Up

18. Is there anything else should I know about the joys and struggles of starting and sustaining a Self-Directed Education community with Black children in mind?
19. Do you have any questions for me or anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix G

Interview Protocol- Paper 3

Interview 2: BLC Network Founder

1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community?

2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices?

Joys & Struggles Follow up

1. What have been the joys and struggles of choosing the path of SDE beyond the Genii DAO? (Personally or professionally, as a parent, as a Black woman, etc. whichever ways it shows up beyond the Genii Dao organization)
2. Has anything surprised you about choosing this path or what you've learned since becoming an unschooler or starting the BLN?

Introductory/Background

1. How would you describe the mission and vision of the organization?
 - a. What are its short-term and long-term goals?

SDE Influences

2. What SDE ideas or practices have you been most drawn to or inspired by?
3. Tell me about the resources influencing your beliefs about SDE or unschooling (books, courses, people, social media, other media, etc.)
 - a. Probe: cultural and historical influences
4. How have these resources influenced practices at the BLN? Please give examples.

SDE Principles & Practices

5. How do you define decolonized parenting and why is it a central focus of the BLN?
6. Are there specific SDE or unschooling principles that guided the creation of the BLN?
 - a. Describe them and give examples.
7. Are there any SDE or unschooling principles that are not practiced through the BLN?
 - a. Describe which and explain why.
8. Describe decision-making practices at the BLN. Give examples
 - a. Probe: collaboration, hierarchies, children's role, consensus vs voting
 - b. Probe: parents, community members, legal structures, board members, governance
9. Describe the community-building practices that take place at the BLN. Give examples
10. Describe any principles or practices that encourage children's autonomy at the BLN.

Give examples

 - a. Probe: conception of 5 pillar model and corporations
 - b. Why was this important to you in creating the model

11. How are newcomers and visitors (adults or children) introduced to the SDE principles practiced through the BLN?

Race

12. Are there any aspects of Black culture or history that influence the SDE practices of the BLN? Give examples
13. What are your beliefs and practices around navigating topics of racism or antiblackness in SDE spaces broadly and in the BLN specifically?
 - a. Probe: if learners do not bring these topics to the space, are they ever engaged (if so, how)
14. Have the network members or learners ever brought up any issues of race, if so, how?
 - a. How are these concerns/issues discussed or addressed?
15. How can SDE be practiced with Black children in mind? How does the BLN do this?
16. Does being Black present any barriers or strengths in running the BLN or in your SDE/unschooling experiences or practices?
 - a. Probe: w/in BLN and beyond in wider SDE, homeschooling communities
 - b. Probe: specific examples of ease or difficulty of creating an SDE or unschooling network with Black children in mind

Goals & Success

17. In the absence of traditional school or performance-based outcomes, how do you define and measure success at the BLN?
 - a. What outcomes matter most to you in practicing SDE?
 - b. How do you “know when it’s working”? How do learners? Parents?

Wrapping Up

20. Is there anyone else you think I should talk to?
21. Are there any Genii DAO documents or artifacts that would be relevant for me to review in light of my research questions?
22. Is there anything else should I know about how Black learning communities implement SDE principles and practices?
23. Do you have any questions for me or anything else you’d like to add?

Appendix H

Interview Protocol- Paper 3

Interview: Parents

Introductory/Background

1. Tell me about yourself and who is in your family.
2. What was your child(ren) doing before the BLC?
3. What motivated you to join this learning community?

Joys & Struggles

4. What's going well and what's been difficult about being a part of this learning community?
 - a. What's been easy or difficult personally or for your child(ren)?
5. What have seen as strengths of the co-directors in operating the BLC?
 - a. What about the strengths of the founder and network?
6. What have seen as limitations of the co-directors in operating the BLC?
 - a. What about the limitations of the founder and network?
7. How have you seen the learning community navigate challenges and conflict? Give examples.
8. How have you seen the learning community celebrate growth and success? Give examples.
9. How has joining the BLC impacted you and your child(ren) positively and negatively? Give examples.

SDE Influences

10. Tell me about the resources that influence your beliefs about SDE or unschooling (books, courses, people, social media, other media, etc.)
 - a. Probe: cultural and historical influences
11. Did these resources influence your choice to join the BLC? If yes, give examples.

SDE Principles & Practices

12. Which SDE or unschooling principles do you see practiced at the BLC?
 - a. Describe them and give examples.
13. Are there any SDE or unschooling principles that you notice are not practiced at the BLC?
 - a. Describe which and explain why.
14. Describe decision-making practices at the BLC. Give examples
 - a. Probe: collaboration, hierarchies, children's role, consensus vs voting
 - b. Probe: setting limits, conflict resolution processes, repeated offenses
15. Describe the community-building practices that take place at the BLC. Give examples
16. Describe any principles or practices that encourage children's autonomy at the BLC. Give examples
17. How were you introduced to the SDE principles practiced at the BLC?
18. How would you describe decolonized parenting and why do you think it is a central focus of the BLN?
 - a. Probe: What has been the impact to you or your child(ren)

Goals & Success

18. How do you measure your child(ren)'s success at the BLC?
 - a. What outcomes matters most to you in practicing SDE?

Race

19. Does being Black present any barriers or strengths at the BLC or in your SDE/unschooling experiences or practices?
 - a. Probe: w/in BLC and beyond in wider SDE, homeschooling, PG county communities
 - b. Probe: specific examples of ease or difficulty of practicing SDE or unschooling with Black children

Closing

20. What barriers or possibilities do you see to the long term sustainability of the BLC or BLN?

Appendix J

Black SDE Study Codebook

RQ 1) What are the joys and struggles of establishing and sustaining a Black self-directed learning community?

RQ 2) How does a Black learning community implement Self-Directed Education principles and practices?

Deductive Codes (from Theoretical Framework, RQs, Interview Protocols)

RQ1 Codes

Antiblackness

- Experiences of antiblackness in schools & SDE spaces
- How is choosing SDE/unschooling/BLC responding to different forms of antiblackness

The U.S. School System

- How the traditional U.S. school system has played a role in choosing, establishing, or sustaining Black SDE spaces
- Parents' and Children's experiences of traditional schools that led to SDE path
- How state and local school systems impact SDE spaces
 - Laws, governance, oversight
 - How they create opportunities or barriers

Joys/Pleasure/Rewards

- Positive experiences, aspects, and outcomes of SDE
- Positive experiences that lead Black adults to pursue or continue SDE path despite challenges

Joys in establishing Black SDE learning community

- Positive experiences, aspects, and outcomes of starting a Black SDE learning community

Joys in sustaining Black SDE learning community

- Positive experiences, aspects, and outcomes of sustaining a Black SDE learning community

Struggles/Pain/Risks

- Negative experiences, aspects, and outcomes of SDE

- Negative experiences that lead Black adults to stop pursuing SDE or question if it's the right choice

Struggles in establishing Black SDE learning community

- Negative experiences, aspects, and outcomes of starting a Black SDE learning community

Struggles in sustaining Black SDE learning community

- Negative experiences, aspects, and outcomes of sustaining a Black SDE learning community

Tensions

- Stress, strain, worries about raising/supporting Black children's freedom through SDE in an antiblack world (external)
- Stress, strain, worries about raising/supporting Black children's freedom through SDE within Black families or Black culture (internal)

Healing

- Descriptions of transformation and change in parents, children, and grandparents as a result of pursuing SDE and Black Freedom
- Changes in behaviors, skills, outcomes, self-expression, autonomy, voice, etc. that are different from what was experienced in traditional education and parenting
- How Black parents are healing their own childhood/parenting experiences through choosing SDE and/or seeing their children have more freedom than they did

Freedom

- Instances where the word freedom or being free is used to describe SDE
- How Different aspects of freedom that are discussed or implied

Intergenerational Aspects of Black SDE

- Descriptions of positive and negative interactions/experiences across generations when choosing SDE (especially grandparents and extended family or references to enslavement)

RQ2 Codes

SDE Principles

- Core ideas, beliefs, values, and tenets of SDE that inform and influence Black SDE

SDE Practices

- Key practices of SDE that are used/important in Black SDE spaces/The BLC

SDE Influences

- Resources, materials, people, and SDE communities that inform and influence Black SDE & Black SDE spaces

Black Culture & SDE

- Compatibility and conflicts with SDE and Black culture; how do they interact with each other

Preliminary Inductive Codes (from the data)

Decolonized Parenting

- Explicit or implied work on intentionally parenting with liberation in mind

Race/Racism

- How/when issues of race are present in SDE spaces or the BLC

Motivations

- Discussions of what motivated adults to pursue SDE with their children

Black Unschooling Dads

- Discussions with or about Black fathers in SDE

Trust

- How trust is discussed as an essential aspect of SDE and how/why Black families may struggle with this more than others

Wider SDE Community differences

- Unique characteristics of the BLC in the wider community of school choice options, including homeschooling, traditional schooling, and other SDE spaces

Legal Aspects of BLC

- How the BLC is governed as a network and local community

Future sustainability of SDE/BLC

- Unique aspects of the the way the BLC is trying combat issues of sustainability for all of SDE

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