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Teaching Truth: Grassroots Mobilization in the Face of Classroom Censorship Legislation in
Georgia

by

Emma Hugonnet

Under the Direction of Kathryn A. Kozaitis, Ph.D.

A Thesis Submitted in a Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Legislation known as “anti-CRT” bills swept across the United State in 2020 designed to eradicate principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and oftentimes history from school curriculums. This research employs an engaged anthropological framework to explore the reactions and resistance measures employed by grassroots groups in response to the Protect Students First Act in Georgia. Data analysis utilized over 10 hours of participant observation at events during 2022-2023 in the Atlanta Metropolitan area, in-depth interviews with grassroots leaders from Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. (GAEEJ) and Teach for Freedom Collective, and surveys provided by GAEEJ on the impacts of legislation on teachers and students, activists’ motivations for action, and their strategies of resistance. The study reveals that resistance to this legislation is grounded in participants’ demand for equity and advocacy in schools and takes the form of community making and capacity building for successful initiatives against classroom censorship laws.

INDEX WORDS: Engaged Anthropology, Critical Race Theory, Grassroots Activism, Educational Reform, Black Activism, Racial Equity, Georgia

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2023

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Georgia

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my former students and all students matriculating through the Georgia Public School systems. You deserve an education grounded in truth, equity, joy, and love. You are our future.

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I would like to acknowledge and thank the leadership teams and members of Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. and the Teach for Freedom Collective. Without your hard work, none of this would be possible. Thank you for welcoming me in, sharing invaluable data, and allowing me to take part in this journey with you all. I cannot wait to continue advocating for equitable education alongside all you wonderful people.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I met members of the Teach for Freedom Collective, the group was in its infancy. At the time, they were still going by the name “K-16 Teach Truth.” I walked into a meeting cold, with no connections and no expectations of what such a gathering would look like. Having only been briefly involved in organized, radical movements before, my only point of reference was the chaos and fear that the protestors felt during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in Washington, DC nearly two years earlier. On April 8, 2022, I entered Decatur Square in Downtown Decatur, Georgia along with approximately fifteen other individuals to discuss the looming consequences of what will happen if Governor Kemp signs House Bill 1084 into law. The group was comprised of teachers, teacher educators, professors from the University System of Georgia colleges, a journalist, abolitionists, and me – a lone anthropology student. Some folks sat on the outside edge of two adjacent picnic tables, while others perched on the edge of a blanket laid between the two tables on the grass. Activists spoke about fears, possibilities, strategies; but most of all, they spoke about students. They focused their conversations on who will need the most protection if this bill passes. Teachers, they assured one another, were ready to fight. However, it was the students who were at risk, and the integrity of public education and accuracy of American history were at stake. Teachers would not and should not have to shoulder this burden alone.

Since that meeting, the movement and organizations have evolved. Their programming has worked to extend its reach beyond park squares and extended into spaces beyond Metro-Atlanta. HB 1084 evolved as well. Now the “Protect Student’s First Act,” this legislation has impacted schools, students, and teachers. It has eradicated classes, increased surveillance of teachers, and sparked similar legislation across the nation. While the law was working to redistrict truthful education since April 2022, the grassroots movement born from that law has worked to counter

act that. This movement has taken the shape of asset building by providing teachers and community members with knowledge about the law and its potential consequences at Education Cafés. It has increased resource provision by providing teachers with insurance and semantic tools to discuss the law with colleagues and parents. Finally, community conversations have provided individuals with spaces of belonging in a landscape where teachers are faced with difficult choices in their classrooms. It has left Decatur Square and the streets of downtown Atlanta and expanded its reach to teachers and students statewide. A critical focus of this work is the context for these laws, and an understanding of the experiences, resistance measures, and beliefs that motivate and mobilize members of grassroots movements as individuals and as a collective.

Through an engaged ethnographic framework, I provide empirically based insights and conceptual understandings about what drives members of Teach for Freedom and Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. to get involved with activist work in Georgia. This research is framed by the following questions: (A) How have “CRT Bills” motivated and mobilized citizens’ reactions at the grassroots level in Georgia? (B) What impact do members of GAEEJ, and Teach for Freedom believe that the banning of “CRT” in classrooms will have on education? and (C) What methods for sustainable reforms have been implemented by these groups, and how can these approaches be applied to other communities that face similar legislation? I answer these questions by (1) exploring and identifying the network of grassroots organizations that have appeared in response to the "Protect Students First Act" in Georgia through ethnographic fieldwork, with a focus on participant observation, (2) amplifying the voices and concerns of community members involved in the work to provide students with equitable and truthful education, (3) constructing an understanding among grassroots members of what methods of protest and resistance work to combat these bills, and how uninhibited education can be accessed

by all children, regardless of legislation in their state. Ultimately, I hope that this research provides a starting point in the wider activist and intellectual communities to discuss long-term solutions to combat restrictive legislature pertaining to education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), education, and social movements have been linked in literature since the post-Civil Rights era. However, the resurgence in CRT rhetoric is best conceptualized through engaged, activist research which is both politically and socially committed to the change within the institution of education. This research utilizes Black Marxist, structural racialization, and critical race frameworks, as well as concepts of experiential or dialogic pedagogy, education, and resistance as avenues for conceptualizing grassroots activism in response to the Protect Students First Act in Georgia (Warry 1992; Ladson-Billings 1998; Richards and Lemelle 2005; Nico 2020; Wilson and Johnson 2015). This work is inherently concerned with race and racism related to public education; therefore, it examines strategies of action – including failures, successes, and barriers, citizen responses to unjust educational policy and social events, and future outlooks for educational reform movements through a structural racialization lens (Akom 2011: 114).

Structural racialization, according to Akom, “challenges researchers to extend our traditional understandings of racism in which one individual intentionally or unintentionally targets others for negative treatment because of their skin colour or other cultural characteristics” (Akom 2011: 114). In other words, it asks researchers to reframe racism as being perpetuated by institutions and cultural contexts rather than the individual. In grassroots education movements, my interlocutors and I focus on the larger systems which work to reinforce racist beliefs within American institutions, rather than placing the blame on the individuals who wrote the law themselves. This framework allows for a larger application beyond Georgia, and can glean insights

to other spaces, like Florida, that spearhead many of these larger legislative movements. Therefore, engaged Black activist anthropology is inherently political work and best serves the nature of grassroots protest in Georgia.

Education is an inherently conservative social institution. Teachers have abided by a long-standing convention of adhering to formal power structures within public schools. They have complied with the hierarchical system in which school boards are at the top, followed by administrators, teachers, and staff members. Public schools are, per the nature of the system, ultimately subject to changes made by federal policies and state law. Public school teachers in Georgia complied with what they were supposed to be doing under school rules, and legislation in place prior to the Protect Student's First Act. For example, after *Brown vs. Board of Education* passed in 1954, then Georgia governor Herman Talmadge pledged to abolish public school systems should they integrate (Equal Justice Initiative 2022). In 1954, Georgia voters passed an amendment to the state constitution that allowed public schools to be abolished. In 1956 voter gave that power to the governor to abolish public schools should integration be forced upon them. Ultimately, public schools in Georgia remained segregated until the fall of 1960 when Talmadge was elected to the United States Senate and was no longer Governor. This history highlights the levels of compliance that the public school system in Georgia must adhere to under legislation.

However, a major shift occurred between late 2019 to present day. COVID-19 exacerbated budget issues in Georgia public schools, school resources, and educational inequities. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 also contributed to a shift in the public perception of teachers. Teachers were no longer heroes fighting for their students' success during the pandemic. They were now considered radicals who attempt to spread "wokeness." The landscape of COVID-19 that exposed the disproportionately harmful effects on lower income and

racialized communities, and the racial upheaval that followed the murder of George Floyd by a white law enforcement officer during 2020 and beyond, serve as the backdrop and catalyst for the grassroots movement in Georgia resisting classroom censorship legislation. The Protect Student's First Act has positioned some teachers against others as potential reporters should they deem their colleagues as breaking the law. This new structure within which teachers act as agents of change is a departure from the traditional power structures within which they held subordinated status to their administrators and educational policy makers. At the time of this writing, many teachers take on the role of activist and resist new structures which have emerged as a result of anti-CRT legislation and the wider post-pandemic, post-2020 landscape.

This engaged ethnographic case study with members of Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Incorporated, and Teach for Freedom Collective, reveals that grassroots groups have been successful in providing needs-based resources for the teachers and students impacted by classroom censorship legislation. I argue that through the creation of community, holding flexibility and faith as pillars of organizing, and working to cultivate spaces of love and inclusion, these groups have worked to raise the voices of individuals impacted by the "Protect Student's First Act" within the State of Georgia. The ongoing nature of this movement dictates that these initiatives will only adapt and grow in response to the presence of the legislation. However, longevity of the movement can be achieved through sustainable programming and continued community involvement.

I argue that members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom Collective employ a dialogic, experiential pedagogy as a method of disseminating information about this legislation (Wheatley 2020: 196). This dialogic and shared experience among existing and new advocates reinforces a shared stake in the fight against classroom censorship. Analysis of the motivations and methods of resistance are based on the following sources of data: semi-structured interviews with two

organizational leaders, survey data provided by GAEEJ Inc. given to attendees of community conversations, and footage that I filmed at three distinct community events put on by Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc. These events included two Education Cafés held by Teach for Freedom, and one Black Affinity space in Clarke County, GA held by GAEEJ Inc. In this work, I acknowledge the on-going nature of this movement, and how the actions of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom may be developed and inform responses to other restrictive legislation that will likely be introduced in the future.

THEORIES OF GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

Social movements appeared by the thousands with the rise of globalization and technological modernity. Modernity is a complex term with a multitude of definitions. Here I refer to an era in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in which technology, politics, capitalism, and culture are becoming increasingly intertwined. The scope of social movements within modernity are emphasized and empowered through the rise of technology, social media, and global connections (Ervin 2014: 164). Social movements and collective action studies have two main forms: starting from the inside out, where actors mobilize because of their concerns, or the outside in where states and political alignments are examined before looking at the collective movements within them (Meyer et al. 2002; Ervin 2014). Social movements are often the result of pressures for democracy, representation, or the wish to eradicate perceived injustices. Perceived injustices and forces of inequity are crucial in developing a collective identity among members of an oppressed group (Messina 2020; Meyer et al. 2002). The experience among members who share an identity of being impacted unjustly by a policy, action, or system prompts organization. This “sameness,” as Lynn Stephen (2005) describes, is a strategic move by organizations; however, it is not a marker to explain how a movement operates, why it was formed, or what it hopes to accomplish. Further,

markers of identity and sameness can be potentially contradictory, even in grassroots movements pertaining to education as this research indicates (Stephen 2005; Meyer et al. 2002; Ervin 2014).

Black Activism and Dialogic Pedagogy within Grassroots Education Movements

Policies, economies, states, and institutions create and perpetuate systems of oppression. In turn, people who are oppressed conceptualize and create identities, coalitions, and practices that subvert these systems and engage in acts of political resistance (Stout 2010; Stephen 2005; Meyer et al. 2002). Disrupting these systems through collective action is political in that it liberates a group through the creation of community, new epistemologies, and new pedagogy (Nico 2020: 664). I use the term pedagogy here to refer to the modes of informal teaching and learning that occurs through collective action within grassroots movements. Action research can have the goal of policy change; however, the act of and dialogue proves to be political action beyond just legislative reform (Wheatley 2020; Meyer et al. 2002). Wheatley uses the concept of “experiential pedagogy” to discuss the ways in which political action, beyond traditional politics, and knowledge is gained through shared experiences and self-realization. In this examination of grassroots movements in education, I employ Wheatley’s “critical dialogue” and “experiential learning” – learning through shared experiences and discussion. Such “civic pedagogy” is conceptually crucial to gleaning an understanding of how knowledge is transferred, and action is organized (Wheatley 2020: 196). Wheatley argues that shared experience is crucial to community formation, exposing realities, reflection, and co-producing knowledge. Social movements, acts of resistance, and protest are all collaborative teaching and learning moments through an experiential, or dialogic, pedagogical framework (Wheatley 2020: 195).

The call for knowledge, critique, and action, what McGuire et. al (2005) refer to as praxis, constitutes grassroots change that has been a long-standing principle of Marxist theory (Ervin

2014; McGuire et al. 2005; Warry 1992). Praxis, in this way, refers to theory in action. In his eleventh thesis, Marx posits that theory is an elusive discourse for the masses, and that theory itself can only inform practice – it alone cannot demonstrate truth (Warry 1992: 156). According to Marxist theory, the point of philosophical thinking is to change the world, which is only made possible through praxis (Warry 1992; McGuire et al. 2005; Westbrook 2005). Using Marxism through a pragmatist lens can be prudent when shaping an anthropological understanding of collective action and social movements. People who engage in collective action and protest do not rely on formal theoretical frames or concepts drawn from systematic research for how and why they engage in this work. Rather, they participate in activities based on what the group believes works and creates change. For example, members of grassroots groups do not use “high theory” per se to conceptualize their action. Instead, they focus on the creation of community and cultivating feelings of love and belonging as a method of change – a conceptualization absent of formal theory. Arguably, this is a form of implicit, informal theorizing in which social actors engage when they participate in social movements (Meyer et al. 2002; Ervin 2014). Ervin argues that activists choose to engage in movements when they believe change is possible, regardless of policy in place. This belief in human agency and possibility is another key factor in creating a group identity (Meyer et al. 2002; Ervin 2014). The social movements that have risen in response to the CRT legislation in Georgia have a deeply racialized component attached to them. Black Marxism, or Marxism through a marginalized lens, adds a dimension in which individuals who have been exploited or oppressed can shift and disrupt their ascribed existence through resistance and collective creation (Nico 2020: 664). Activists who resist forms of state violence, including the police, the school to prison pipeline, and legislation tend to organize and create standardized modes of responses to proactively protect students and teachers (Nico 2020: 670). Similarly, in

Georgia, activists are aware of the added racial components that make coordinated, standardized responses necessary when they face multiple intersections of oppression, such as race and socioeconomic status.

Educational activism in Georgia is inherently linked to notions of race and history due to discourses of what “divisive concepts” are being banned within the “Protect Students First Act.” Social movements in education among Black activists are grounded in a history of radicalism and resistance (Richards and Lemelle 2005; Johnson and Wilson 2015; Nico 2020). Public education in the United States has a duty of educating youth into becoming competent citizens. However, Westbrook argues that public schools as institutions have failed in giving students a civic education (Westbrook 2005: 231). Lack of an accurate and comprehensive civic education in public schools has manifested itself in students belonging to marginalized groups ultimately viewing their ability to create change or advocate for themselves through a deficit frame. Deficit frames of students conceptualize cultural deficiencies as reasons for inequities, rather than acknowledging the structural inequities that impact their communities (Westbrook 2005; Lucko 2018).

This research is viewed through a “structural racialization” lens. Akom (2011) argues that structural racialization views racism as the product of the multiple interactions between institutions. He states that a structural racialization framework refers to the interactions of institutions in an ongoing process to create cumulative and consistent racialized outcomes (Akom 2011: 114). Within this framework, racism can be perpetuated without racist individuals being present. For example, racism in schools is intrinsically linked to racism within the policy sphere in that policies aim to alienate and separate students from a comprehensive understanding of their histories (Akom 2011; Lucko 2018). When looking at education activism specifically, I acknowledge and focus on the ways in which inequities in schools are also rooted in other

institutional milieus. Further, I argue that both GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom believe that it is institutions and systems which are responsible for perpetuating racism, rather than individuals. Therefore, the resistance of these groups happens on an institutional level, rather than combating directly against specific players within the conservative party or sphere of influence. However, it is important to note that institutions which perpetuate racism are oftentimes controlled by racist individuals. This cycle can potentially be remedied by shifting the hegemonic control that specific individuals have over institutions and placing them in the hands of people who are equity-minded.

Black educational activism has historically aimed to create sites of political resistance for communities who regard education as a tool for political liberation and socioeconomic advancement, despite systemic inequalities in the education system (Richards and Lemelle 2005; Wilson and Johnson 2015). Black radical traditions, according to Richards and Lemelle (2005) and Robinson (2000), have always viewed education as a political act and an avenue for liberation. Robinson argues that the obscuring of Black radical tradition has been a colonialist endeavor situated in the West's attempts to continually suppress African knowledge (Robinson 2000: 3). Social movements arose out of this oppression as prominent thinkers, including W.E.B. DuBois, recognized the interrelationship between education, politics, language, and consciousness (Robinson 2000; Richards and Lemelle 2005).

Education as liberation and activism is central to understanding the power of grassroots movements. According to Che Guevara, "The only pedagogy that is liberating is one that enables people to educate themselves through their revolutionary practice" (quoted in Richards and Lemelle 2005: 6). I employ Guevara's notion of pedagogy in this research. Like Wheatley's idea of experiential pedagogy, revolutionary practice as a means of learning is a lens through which to understand grassroots activism practices and interlocutors' motivation. Lived experience as a

motivator for activism and a marker of group identity are central to educational activist frames. Through her work among formal and informal education activists who mobilize and resist racist structures within education, Nico argues that disrupting the political economy was a form of activism that thrived and succeeded in countering oppressive physical and mental spaces and advancing instead the prospect for educational liberation. She found that people organized to actively disrupt and intercept state violence, such as the school to prison pipeline (Nico 2020: 670). Her participants believed that structural violence and inequities can be stopped through collective action both within, and outside of, school walls. Creating cohesive liberation efforts, such as curricula, can disrupt political economies and in turn improve student life and success (Nico 2020: 673). Her research exemplifies the ways in which social movement research and Black activist frameworks can be applied to education activism.

Critical Race Theory and the Classroom

The intersection between critical race theory (CRT) and K12 education in the United States has been examined pedagogically and anthropologically since the discourse on the subject has been both praised and condemned by journalists, educators, activists, and politicians over the past 25 years. Gloria Ladson-Billings addressed the presence of CRT in classrooms after some of the benefits of incorporating the theory into learning were being considered by academics. However, even she warned about the potential political and theoretical ramifications of incorporating CRT as a tool through which to view school inequities because “[educational activists] will have to take bold and sometimes unpopular opinions,” by exposing racism in schools and proposing radical solutions (Ladson-Billings 1998: 22). In Georgia, my interlocutors expressed that curriculum created through a CRT lens, has been deemed radical by parents, leadership, and other educational stakeholders such as community partners. Members described themselves as “radical people

pushing for not so radical things.” Action through a CRT lens is radical because it is activist resistance, but members of the group do not believe equity and truth in the classroom to be radical ideas.

Race plays a prominent role in society in the United States. America is a country heavily based on property rights, and traditionally only White men were afforded the right to own property, while Black people were seen as property. The buying and owning of property afforded White people capital which Black people were structurally unable to historically obtain. Instead, the legacy of Black people is one of property being transformed to citizen (Ladson-Billings 1998: 16). This history of property and capital is one example of how race plays a prominent role in society historically. Today it shows up in voting access, comprehensive education, and is often correlated with socioeconomic status. Despite this, race was not theorized for scholarly study until the 1990s in terms of the legal, education, and legislative systems (Tate 1997; Ladson-Billings 1995; Zamudio 2011). Initially, CRT in schools was not viewed as divisive by major media outlets. On the contrary, it was praised for its applied usage in the classroom (Ladson-Billings 1998; Knaus 2009; George 2021). At its core, CRT is a legal theory that has been used as a lens through which the United States justice system can be critiqued and analyzed. However, the applied usage of CRT in the classroom, workplace, and wider spaces, has caused CRT to come under sociopolitical scrutiny with the spread of misinformation and misconceptions spearheaded by conservative actors (Harrison 2021; Morgan 2022). In Georgia, grassroots leaders have described attending school board meetings where parents equate the presence of CRT in the classroom to potentially influencing their child’s sexual orientation. The extreme misconceptions are fueling fear-based reactions in the form of policy and backlash towards teachers and those advocating for truthful education in Georgia.

CRT emerged in the conservative sphere with Christopher F. Rufo, according to Time and The New Yorker Magazine. Rufo is a conservative journalist, documentarian, and activist who has mobilized conservatives in the fight against critical race theory. After being sent a recording of an anti-bias training recorded via Zoom, he mobilized to ban CRT and its discourse from professional, political, and academic settings (Wallace-Wells 2021). Rufo argued that CRT had radical roots, tracing back to the late 1960s with Angela Davis and Derrick Bell. He argued that CRTs lineage can be tracked through liberal spaces, like Civil Rights legislation and academia, and it is now pervaded through the United States government (Wallace-Wells 2021). The perceived weaponization of CRT, according to Rufo, skyrocketed with his appearance on “Tucker Carlson Tonight,” a highly popular conservative news hour, in September 2020. His stance on CRT became popular; Rufo has served as a consultant and advisor for ten anti-CRT bills to date, as well as on Trump’s 2020 executive order, later overturned by the Biden administration (Wallace-Wells 2021).

Rufo’s goal with the anti-CRT movement is to stop the unfair labeling of White people as inherently racist. He views anti-racism training as humiliating for White people and instilling a destructive sense of guilt in people. He also wants to remove discussions of racial and gender theory from classroom settings where he does not see why they are relevant. Rufo is hoping to “politicize bureaucracy,” or take some of the state agencies he sees as corrupted by liberal agendas and contest them through politics (Wallace-Wells 2021). This movement and understanding CRT as a source of White guilt and censorship is false and separate from the overall goals and founding tenets of critical race theory. One of the reasons grassroots leaders believe this legislation to be happening currently is due to these widespread fears in the conservative sphere. Working to increase membership, retention, and educate more individuals about the realities of CRT and

culturally responsive teaching has proven to be one of the main goals of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom.

From its inception, proponents of CRT had both academic and activist goals. It was a product of the events leading up to, during, and following the civil rights movement in the 1960s (Ladson-Billings 1998; Tate 1997). Critical race theory, argue Tate (1997) and Ladson-Billings (1995,1998), is a major paradigm shift in legal theory. CRT developed from critical legal studies (CLS). CLS was a leftist movement that challenged the idea that civil rights struggles represented linear social transformation, meaning that progress and equity moved in a straight line and was always constant (Crenshaw 1988; Ladson-Billings 1998). However, critics of the CLS movement (Crenshaw 1988), viewed CLS as an attack on civil rights and argued that the CLS perspective must be expanded to address the role of racism within the legal system and society at large, thus creating critical race theory (Crenshaw 1988: 1335). Social movements arise out of perceived injustices. CRT, as a political and activist theory which centers Black individuals, has similar goals and origins to the movement happening in Georgia and the fight against classroom censorship.

First, CRT argues that racism is normal, not deviant, within American society. Second, it employs storytelling as a method to dispel myths, presuppositions, and cultural racial paradigms which have historically placed Blacks and other racial minorities in positions of subordination. Third, CRT is fundamentally a critique of liberalism in that it argues that liberalism, as it currently stands, has no mechanism for creating social change capable of dispelling racism. Finally, CRT argues that civil rights legislation has primarily benefitted White people and perpetuated divides on racial lines by promoting the idea of a ‘color-blind’ society based on equality of opportunity, which fundamentally does not exist in the reality of Black Americans (Crenshaw 1988; Ladson-Billings 1998).

Critical race theory was formulated to combat the racism that has been woven into the fabric of American society prior to and following the civil rights movement of the 1960s and subsequent legislation emerging in the following decade. This theory has been and is understood to be, applied to a multitude of contexts that perpetuate racism and continue to silence the experience of racialized, and more recently, social minorities such as people of color and/or low socio-economic class, in the United States. CRT theorists rely on empirical evidence to support their claims of inequity and marginalization within the U.S. Traditionally, CRT has been applied to state issues and legislation to dissuade racist policies and help understand the broader impacts of policy through a racialized lens. CRT is being applied to school inequities and sparking perceived classroom and curriculum controversies (Ladson-Billings 1998: 12). Through the lens of public education, CRT can be applied to the current state of American schools which promote the false narrative of an American meritocracy. CRT theorists and educational anthropologists view this as myth which implies falsely a level playing field for all students in a society where education is an indicator of success (Lucko 2018; Zamudio et al. 2010). However, as members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom have expressed, Black students in Georgia are already hard working. They show grit and try their best to persevere. However, it is the current state of public schools in Georgia which is actively working against them. Schools are underfunded, overpoliced, and now are eradicating the experiences and histories of Black students within the classroom.

With respect to K-16 education, it is important to understand that certain aspects of CRT are used in schools. CRT has been used to combat ideas about an American meritocracy and how inequalities manifest through policy and history in schools. For example, CRT recognizes the lasting effects of slavery on present-day institutional structures. These ideas are examined in social studies classes that cover the Civil Rights and feminist movements (Ladson-Billings 1998; George

2021; Morgan 2022). However, the legal theory itself is not taught in K-12 classrooms. One common critique of CRT in classrooms is that young teachers have learned new pedagogy and theory, including CRT and culturally responsive teaching methods which are grounded in affirming lived experiences and cultural complexities. These teachers are being blamed for attempting to indoctrinate students or radicalize them (Morgan 2022: 36). Rather, teacher education is undergoing a paradigm shift in which culturally relevant materials and pedagogy are held in high esteem. In her ethnography at an urban school in California, Jennifer Lucko found that English-learner students showed higher levels of achievement and sense of civic identity when their communities and cultures were incorporated into their learning, rather than fundamentally separated (Lucko 2018: 248). Critical race theory is another vehicle through which to analyze and conceptualize problems in schools, and then implement culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy to combat them directly. Both GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom are working to identify and implement pedagogy and resist legislation that seeks to uphold inequities in schools.

Fear based rhetoric surrounding CRT in schools appeared in mass media after the death of George Floyd in May 2020. By September 2020, former President Trump signed an executive order which banned any training that insinuated that the United States was fundamentally racist (George 2021; Morgan 2022). Many members who identified with the political right in the United States argued that CRT frameworks, or the teachings of “divisive concepts,” as cited in the executive order, would make white children feel guilty. While the Biden Administration cancelled the order, over 300 diversity and inclusion trainings were cancelled during the executive order’s tenure. By then, parents were comparing critical race theory to the teachings of the Ku Klux Klan and Hitler, stating that children were learning to hate police in schools (Morgan 2022: 38). CRT frameworks are not, in fact, fueling divisive concepts. Rather, they are working to dismantle

systems of inequity and oppression in schools by centering the experiences of students in the classroom. A 2018 study of 200 teachers revealed that culturally relevant pedagogy, which integrated theory and research into curriculum writing, positively influenced classroom culture, fostered positive relationships, and worked to build trust between students and teachers (Samuels 2018: 25). Further, classroom spaces in which curriculums are informed by theory and research and strive to be culturally relevant and relative allow students to take risks, share ideas, and imagine new futures and possibilities in relation to learning and success (Samuels 2018; Lucko 2018). Members of both GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom have been responsible in writing a new ethnic studies course which has been implemented in Gwinnett County. This course is culturally relative in nature and aims to center the student and their experiences. Under the “Protect Student’s First Act” the course does still exist; however, Raymond, a leader with Teach for Freedom, argues that it might not have been implemented if it was proposed today. The potential longevity of the course is at risk under this legislation.

The outpouring of legislation subsequently banning CRT in classrooms has been described by members of the Teach for Freedom Collective as a “psychological genocide” in which the teaching of truths and holistic understandings of history is at stake (Harrison et al. 2021; Downey 2022; Morgan 2022). Anti-CRT legislation has the potential to ban learning about the Voting Rights Act and discussing the Founding Fathers as slave owners. These are undisputed facts that are being censored from the American curriculum based on a category of White people wanting to avoid feelings of discomfort or even shame in the face of history (Huq 2021). In response, teachers in the grassroots movement in Georgia have taken to writing op-eds and articles that describe how they feel undermined by this legislation and are forced to miseducate their students and censor themselves (Harrison et al. 2021; Downey 2022). Specifically, teachers in Georgia who are

spearheading this movement have worked to reframe and utilize histories as a method for social change. However, not only are teachers being restricted in the classroom, but wider community conversations and political involvement regarding structural inequities are also being restricted (Lopez 2021; Morgan 2022; Downey 2022). In Texas specifically, anti-CRT legislation has barred students from receiving credit for volunteering in political campaigns or interning for companies that might be lobbying (Lopez 2021). Further, trainings to reduce implicit biases are also being cancelled and restricted among teachers and other professionals (Morgan 2022: 39). Members of grassroots organizations in Georgia often look to Texas and Florida for policy trends and future outlooks. Understanding what is going on in other spaces of the country influences the planning sessions and action steps that Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc. take to combat and prevent future classroom censorship laws.

Critical race theory has been used successfully in the classroom as a lens through which to reach students of different backgrounds. Anthropologists, specifically, have examined the benefits of culturally appropriate, or culturally responsive teaching methods in depth. For example, incorporating authors of color, lesser shared historical narratives, and activities which center personal identity and experience rather than the status quo have shown to be beneficial for student engagement and achievement (Ladson-Billings 1995; Knaus 2009; Zamudio et al. 2010). CRT provides a lens for teachers to understand how racial differences, societal inequities, and educational inequities can be addressed and potentially remedied in the classroom. In learning about and acknowledging these inequities, teachers can teach students in a way that helps them feel empowered by their position, agency, and histories as citizens capable of instituting change in their society (Zamudio et al. 2010; Knaus 2009). CRT has been a tool to help decrease student disengagement, conceptualize meanings of success, and help to combat some of the structural

inequities that are reproduced in classrooms (Zamudio et al. 2010; Knaus 2009; Collins 2009). Teachers are now in a place fueled by legislation where they must circumvent and resist laws through social action. For example, one of the key initiatives by Teach for Freedom has been providing teachers with portable “cheat sheets” in the form of notecards. These notecards include language which can be utilized to talk to parents and colleagues about the law and ensure that they are protecting themselves and their students. Understanding histories and conceptualizing modes of resistance is crucial to how resisting CRT legislation can be anthropologically understood. Building a database of organizations and ensuring that power is centralized as a catalyst for change will be the best way to eventually ensure that CRT frameworks can be reintroduced to classrooms.

THE “PROTECT STUDENTS FIRST ACT” IN GEORGIA

During summer of 2021, House Bill 3979 was signed into Texas law by Governor Greg Abbott. HB 3979 was a restrictive law meant to keep Critical Race Theory (CRT) out of schools by preventing the teaching of topics conservatives deemed “controversial” on the history of the United States, including the subjugation of people of color and racism (Lopez 2021). On September 1, 2021, Senate Bill 3, a more comprehensively exclusionary piece of legislation, replaced HB 3979. Governor Abbott believed that not enough was being done to stop critical race theory in schools, and this new bill heavily restricted students’ access to an accurate and comprehensive education, and their ability to participate or volunteer in political events. Teachers were prohibited from teaching any topic that triggered wide debate or could be viewed through a political lens. With Texas in the lead, thirty-six other states, including Idaho, Iowa, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia followed suit.

Now sixteen states have a law that restricts content associated with perceptions of critical race theory in classrooms. Many of these laws ban teaching the historical fact that the United States

was built and heavily benefitted from enslaved labor practices perpetuated and upheld by the legal system. This legacy is ingrained into political and social institutions to this day (McLendon 2022). This legislation, now colloquially known as the “anti-CRT Bills,” has sparked activism among teachers, community leaders, and union members within the states they seek to impact. In January 2023, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida banned an Advanced Placement (AP) course in African American Studies on the basis that it is an example of “woke indoctrination,” and for including authors Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Kimberle Crenshaw in the curriculum (Fawcett and Hartocollis 2023). Based on the actions of my interlocutors and partner organizations who both center Black feminist frameworks and Black educational thought, I argue that opponents of these authors, and the proponents of banning “CRT” in the classroom, have mobilized teachers, students, educational activists, and community members to come together in a new grassroots movement in the fight for truthful, diverse, and equitable education.

In Georgia, House Bill 1084 was proposed by Will Wade, the republican representative for district 9. His bill was backed by representatives Jan Jones, Matt Dubnik, Steven Meeks, Brad Thomas, and Bruce Williamson, all affiliated with the republican party. Governor Brian Kemp signed the bill into law on April 28, 2022, after just three revisions. HB 1084 bans the teaching of nine concepts that these republicans consider divisive in public education institutions. Using the language of the bill, a divisive concept is any of the following, and any view that would adhere to such concepts: (A) One race is inherently superior to another race; (B) The United States of America is fundamentally racist; (C) An individual, by virtue of his or her race, is inherently or consciously racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races; (D) An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race; (E) An individual's moral character is inherently determined by his or her race; (F) An individual,

solely by virtue of his or her race, bears individual responsibility for actions committed in the past by other individuals of the same race; (G) An individual, solely by virtue of his or her race, should feel anguish, guilt, or any other form of psychological distress; (H) Performance-based advancement or the recognition and appreciation of character traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or have been advocated for by individuals of a particular race to oppress individuals of another race; or (I) Any other form of race scapegoating or race stereotyping (LegiScan 2022).

The usage of “race” in these principles is purposefully vague. Since the 1960s anthropologists and other scientists agree that race is a social construct, meaning there is no reliable measure of genetic variation among populations of different “races” (Ifekwunigwe et. al 2017: 2). Within anthropology, race is understood as a culturally and socially defined construct. Race can be subject to change depending on the space and place. The North American usage of race can be traced back to the historical and geopolitical climate during the slave trade. Race, then, became a prominent construct during the subjugation of enslaved peoples from the African continent (Ifekwunigwe et. al 2017: 4). Anthropologists argue that racism is then an ideology which rationalized this subjugation and has prevailed into operational and institutional inequalities based on unfounded prejudices. The vague usage of “race” in HB 1084 and its divisive concepts depicts race as a biological determinant in the value of people. Specifically, “an individual, solely by virtue of his or her race, bears individual responsibility for actions committed in the past by other individuals of the same race” (principle F) implies sameness on the basis of race. Similarly, other principles, for example principle A, are contradictory in that the law also tries to dismantle some of these beliefs. However, this is only further complicated by principle B that states that the United States is not fundamentally racist. Racism is an ideology which was present, persistent, and

perpetuated throughout the United States' founding and history. Therefore, the United States is a fundamentally racist space.

The "Protect Students First Act" aims to prevent students from feeling alienated in the classroom, and provides an avenue for of-age students, teachers, parents, and other school staff to complain should they witness potential injustices occurring in the classroom. Proponents believe this law protects education by removing topics that are sensitive, divisive, or drive debates. However, people who champion the law and others like it argue it prevents teachers from presumably "indoctrinating" a student into their own "woke" beliefs (Downey 2022; Morgan 2022). This language of "indoctrination" has prompted injustices towards Georgia educators, such as unfounded firings or instances of doxing among people in the resistance movement. For example, in an interview a participant reported his place of work being doxed online after he spoke publicly about his involvement in the grassroots movement to resist these laws. The Protect Students First Act disproportionately affects Black students and Black teachers by silencing the teaching of concepts, including the afterlife of slavery, segregation, integration, and re-segregation, as well as other potentially culturally relevant histories that have shaped the wider social space in which Black students live.

Recently, an anthropology of policy has focused more on the broad ideological fields in which policy is inscribed, such as notions of race, racism, and white supremacy as avenues for governance and social action (Tate 2020: 86). Tate (2020) argues that an anthropology of policy addresses a multitude of ideas including the ways in which policy generates and regenerates cultural production through shaping values, norms, identities, and practices (Tate 2020: 85). Prior to the 1990s, studying policy was principally the work of political scientists; however, anthropologists acknowledge the value of studying policy through interpretative, ethnographic

methods. Anthropology of policy utilizes a human-focused lens on policy to examine the ways in which the process of governance influences power and social change which, in turn, shape the world (Wedel and Feldman 2005; Shore et al. 2011; Tate 2020). An anthropological view of policy does not confine policy to the external or the textual. Instead, these dimensions are embedded within and influence social and cultural worlds and create domains of meaning. “Policy worlds” are constructed, contested, and performative in that they provide a window into the machinery of governance and the organic process of recognition and meaning making and knowledge production (Shore et al. 2011; Pajo and Powers 2017).

Shore et al. (2011) and Tate (2020) point to neoliberalism as the main avenue for governance which is shaping policy across the spectrum. Policies following September 11, 2001, were created through an anti-terrorist, high policing, and security lens which prompted outsourcing to private sectors and attempts to control populations (Shore et al. 2011; Tate 2020). Neoliberal regimes tend to hide behind ideas or messaging about a free-market and individual agency; however, when policy intentions are not clear, they have been easier to impose on the average person. Shore et al. argue that anthropological studies of policy and power help to reveal the mechanisms at play (2011).

Public policies originate in different spaces and have become central to the organization of contemporary societies in the way they create power and disseminate resources. Within anthropology, studying policy urges us, as engaged anthropologists, to rethink how policy making and implementation connects actors, organizations, and institutions despite a lack of face-to-face contact (Wedel and Feldman 2005; Shore et al. 2011). Acknowledging the importance of studying policy through an anthropological lens allows for this work to challenge the current political discourse surrounding education and truth in Georgia. While anthropologists may still question

how they fit into the policy making process itself, producing ethnographies in which an anthropology of policy is present, and I argue in which praxis models are present, supports the potential of policy recommendations and direct interventions for social justice (Shore et al. 2011; Tate 2020).

I concur with Tate who argues that an anthropology of policy should emerge to engage in a dialogue and relationship with the impacted communities and make critiques based on their experiences (Tate 2020: 92). Anthropological research has the potential to be political in and of itself when it works with and on behalf of a partner community to advance social reforms. Indeed, critical ethnographic research on policy increases the ability of anthropologists to decolonize policy practices by proposing humane forms of policy intervention such as grassroots methods of resistance and protest in Georgia.

Understanding the “Protect Student’s First Act” as a policy which has perpetuated systems of inequity and oppression in schools provides a lens through which I understand my interlocutors need to mobilize and create community through advocacy and organizing. Creating support networks through this activist movement provides insight to the impacts that the “Protect Student’s First Act” has on affected communities such as teachers, students, and educational stakeholders. Our cultural and social worlds are increasingly influenced by the political. Centering both Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc. in politically engaged ethnography is crucial when it comes to conceptualizing modes and motivations of resistance among these groups.

Grassroots Groups in Georgia

Grassroots leaders, primarily teachers, teacher educators, public defense lawyers, and other civil servants mobilized from the moment the first draft of the bill was made public. By February 2021, two distinct organizations, Teach for Freedom Collective, formerly K-16 Teach Truth, and

Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. (GAEEJ), now a grant funded 501c3, began holding monthly workshops and conversations to bring people into the fight to ensure that teachers have the freedom to “teach the truth.” The ethnographic unit of analysis for this research is localized to Georgia with an emphasis on the Greater Atlanta area. Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ were both formed in, and currently operate out of, the Atlanta metropolitan area. I chose to focus on these two distinct organizations because of their unique position and relationship to each other. GAEEJ was birthed out of Gwinnett Educators for Equity and Justice, a grassroots group started by two second year teachers, Raymond and Deidre who served as interview participants, in May 2020. This group was short lived but was extremely successful in its initiatives to replace the superintendent due to his inequitable practices in creating district councils for Gwinnett County schools. Raymond and Deidre, who spearheaded Gwinnett Educators, now both sit on the leadership board of GAEEJ, and Raymond also serves as co-chair of Teach for Freedom. Deidre, a Black woman in her early 30s, is a former educator from Georgia. She matriculated through the same cluster of schools she used to teach at. She speaks in a calm yet powerful demeanor which makes those around her feel safe and heard. She currently serves as the CEO of GAEEJ Inc. Raymond, a Black man in his late 20s, is also a former educator and current diversity coordinator for a school cluster in Georgia. He grew up and currently resides in Gwinnett County, Georgia. He is tall with short braided hair and brings a lightness, joy, and positivity to spaces which can often feel heavy with concern. Further, I chose to focus on these two organizations because one centers the student, while the other centers the educator. These two separate approaches to the impact of the legislation allows for a better understanding of how teachers and students are affected and working to protect truthful teaching and learning.

Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. (GAEEJ) is a formerly structured non-profit organization comprised of a five-person leadership team: President/CEO, Vice President, Executive Director, Secretary, and Treasure. This board implements and makes key decisions for the group. According to their website, the policies, rules, and regulations for the group are governed by the groups Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation (GAEEJ.org 2023). In their own words, GAEEJ exists “to solve the lack of representation of Black educators at all educational levels in order to create an equitable public education system that assists with closing the opportunity gap and school to prison pipeline” (GAEEJ.org 2023). The mission statement on the website is as follows: “to confront the educational inequities that prevent the belonging and liberation of Black educators and students. Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. will model liberatory education and advocacy that center Black educators and students, therefore dismantling inequitable systems of teaching and learning” (GAEEJ.org 2023). The group achieved full funding and 501c3 status in early 2023, and now operates consistent events. They are currently recruiting members and working towards some of the initiatives that will begin to dismantle inequitable systems of education. Some of their previous and on-going events include their “Let’s Raise Black Voices: Townhall Series” which creates a Black affinity space for educators to talk about their experiences, sip and paints for educators, and a “Melanated and Educated” series which provides monthly spaces for joy, fun, and information about GAEEJ to attendees.

The Teach for Freedom Collective, on the other hand, is an informal radical grassroots group which is currently unfunded. The group does have a governing board comprised of Co-Chairs of Administration, Communication, Action Research, social media, and Coalition Building/Programming. The structure of the organization is highly collaborative with two members co-chairing each of these roles and forming a board leadership structure. Teach for

Freedom informally partners closely with the IDRA to track legislation which might target education as a whole. While GAEEJ aims to center educators in their work, Teach for Freedom is working to incorporate educators, parents, students, and other community stakeholders into their work. As of March 2023, Teach for Freedom does not have a formal website, but they describe their motivation for movement as the following: “Attacks on the K-12 curriculum and K-12 educators share fundamental commonalities with the attacks on critical approaches to oppression by educators at the university-level. Both serve to attack education as a public good and to remove essential perspectives from common spaces. These attacks are intentionally designed to defend and promote a patriarchal, white supremacist narrative that has always served the interests of the powerful in this county” (Teach for Freedom Collective 2023). Furthermore, they argue, “Educators and allies must come together across the whole state to form defense, support, and resilience networks. Those most affected by these attacks and restrictions, those with direct experience of anti-Blackness, must be centered in this work. We push for the continued expansion of the right to discuss the truth of our history, and the present, with our students” (Teach for Freedom Collective 2023). Teach for Freedom has held community conversation and resistance spaces, two protest marches in response to legislation, and a book club on Jarvis R. Gibson’s *Fugitive Pedagogy*. After undergoing a restructuring and renaming at the end of 2022, the group has been centering infrastructure in the beginning portion of 2023 and preparing for the impacts of future legislative sessions. I currently serve as the co-chair of communication with Teach for Freedom. Attending any of their events can look like sitting around eating bowls of homemade chili in a group leader’s home or hopping on a Zoom call from your car to make a strategic plan for the upcoming session. Teach for Freedom takes an informal, yet graceful, approach to planning and organizing to meet their goals.

The “Protect Students First Act” poses a serious risk to culturally responsive teaching techniques and continues to fuel anti-CRT rhetoric by inflating falsified understandings of the term and current school curriculum. Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to center the student by recognizing and incorporating students’ diverse cultural backgrounds into all aspects of learning (Samuels 2018: 23). This approach to teaching and learning promotes enrichment, engagement, and achievement by nurturing cultural strengths and incorporating them into lessons. Under this law, many of the culturally relevant and responsive curriculum would be at risk. I argue that this research has inherent political consequences considering the successful initiatives undertaken by grassroots groups to combat this legislation, such as creating community and cross-organization networks, the renaming of Beacon Hill Middle School in Decatur, GA to honor the legacy of formerly enslaved individuals settling in the neighborhood post-slavery, and the incorporation of a new ethnic studies program in Gwinnett County.

The timing of these proposed and passed laws is not coincidental. Rather I, and members of the activist movement, see these laws as a fear-based response to Black agency arising from the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the killing of George Floyd in May of 2020. Addressing laws that impact civil liberties and teaching historical truths in the classroom is salient in this current political climate, as other forms of civil liberty, public spaces, and bodily autonomy are coming under attack by the same groups responsible for anti-CRT legislature. The overturning of *Roe vs. Wade* in June 2022 is a heavy indicator that systemically disenfranchised bodies and groups – women included – are under attack. Education, which has been widely regarded as a means of social mobility in the United States, is at risk under this law which continues to deplete equity measures in the classroom, such as culturally responsive teaching methods. Examining this issue from an engaged anthropological perspective provides key actors with the

space to theorize, communicate, and contribute to a body of knowledge pertaining to social movements, education rights and accessibility, and grassroots systems of social reforms in general, and educational reforms in particular. In this research I center the members and experiences of grassroots groups who work to resist this particular legislation and its impact on Georgia schools.

METHODS OF GRASSROOTS EDUCATIONAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

Engaged, Activist Ethnography among Grassroots Movements

Ethnography understands and aims to look at how people construct knowledge and make meanings within their world. Ethnographers understand that knowledge and meaning are locally specific and culturally informed, and their methodological toolkit reflects this understanding. Ethnographic research is focused on understanding what people do and why before interpretation (LeCompte and Schensul 2010: 2). Furthermore, ethnography – specifically engaged ethnography – involves a political and cyclical process in which researchers and interlocutors engage in joint investigations, conversations, and interpretations. Engaged ethnography highlights the importance of continuing to engage in conversation with participants and revisit field sites (Rappaport 1993; Biehl 2013). In my experience working alongside grassroots groups resisting HB 1084, strategic organization and dialogic pedagogy, an engaged ethnographic approach, has allowed me to constantly communicate, revisit, re-interpret, and re-conceptualize my findings with input from interlocutors should they deem it necessary. Ultimately, they were pleased with their statements and the research design.

This research is grounded in a humanistic approach which aims to understand both individual and collective conceptualizations of resistance to the Protect Students First Act (HB 1084). I conducted exploratory research which tends to be inductive, in that conclusions and theoretical approaches arise out of the findings and data gathered during the research process (Bernard 2006: 18). Due to the limited qualitative ethnographic research conducted on this new

wave of anti-CRT bills and the arising nature of the issue, exploratory research best serves the purpose of examining resistance and meaning among grassroots groups. Ethnographic research methods, with emphasis on participant and unobtrusive observation, were utilized to explore multiple variables that impact the meanings and perceptions that grassroots groups and group members apply to both the legislation and their activist work.

Examination of protests and collective movements shed light on resistance and collective agency (Ervin 2014; Messina 2020). Ethnographic attention to legislation that affects education and the experiences of students encompassing social minorities including gender, sexuality, race, and socioeconomic class, advances our understanding of what this legislation means to the people it impacts. It also contributes to a more holistic understanding of what methods of resistance prove to be successful among grassroots organizations combating restrictive legislation pertaining to education. Engaged anthropology takes place amidst the action and attempts to make anthropological research applicable to larger situations of structural violence and social justice (Kirsch 2018: 3). By examining grassroots education resistance methods through the lens of engaged anthropology, this research sheds light on and provides tangible resources for the social movement forming to resist the CRT legislation.

This research utilizes methodologies which characterize collaborative and emancipatory research processes, and theoretically informed interventions to improve conditions, meet human needs, or solve social problems (Warry 1992; Kozaitis 2008; Akom 2011). Engaged anthropology advocates for a focus on investigating the root causes of social disorders and provides solutions through analysis of locally derived ethnographic data (Rappaport 1993; Kozaitis 2008). Engaged anthropologists are civically involved in that they contribute to, and acknowledge, the histories and lives of the people with whom they work. Their methodologies and approaches call for a shift

in focusing more on the local community, interlocutors' lived experiences, and social context as to decipher particularities to inform social change, political action, and community engagement (Little 2007; McGuire 2008). Collaboration with the partner communities, in this case members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom, is central to engaged anthropology.

Engaged anthropological perspectives and community-based participatory action research methods, emphasize the co-production of knowledge with interlocutors as the avenue for social reforms in the best interests of partner communities. Engaged anthropology is inherently concerned with ethics and a researcher's positionality in the field. Having a stake in this research and caring about its implications for an accurate and just public education reflects the duty that I have to my interlocutors and the organization, Teach for Freedom, with which I am affiliated. My intellectual, ethical, and political commitments to this work align with an engaged, anti-racist, anthropological framework (Akom 2011; Kirsch 2018). Further, engaged research can allow for bridges to be built between academic institutions, non-profits, and grassroots organizations explicitly as an avenue for radical love and healing within and among communities that have been historically oppressed, and that continue to suffer from structural negligence and neocolonial violence (Akom 2008: 127). I chose to incorporate an engaged framework in conducting this research due to the high stakes, and the politically involved nature of this specific piece of education legislation. In working as an ethnographer/activist alongside GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom, I identify and discuss what and how ideas of belonging and identity contribute to action among group members. Understanding how people come together to conceptualize and institute social change is central to a politically engaged anthropology, which I implement in this research (Stephen 2005; Smith 1999).

Engaged anthropology relies heavily on the researcher's positionality. Fryer (2020) describes positionality as a result of how people are situated within the world and customary social relationships. Because this research utilizes an engaged framework, it is important to acknowledge my place as a former educator, a former title I school employee, mixed race woman, co-chair of communication for Teach for Freedom, and a graduate student. These identities frame my place in this research and contribute to how issues of collective action and education are discussed with my interlocutors. Fryer argues that positionality as a feminist perspective can be understood as standpoint theory, meaning that "people who are subject to oppression and structural violence may have privileged access to different knowledge or may know some things better than people who do not live under these systems of oppression" (Fryer 2020: 28). In other words, my unique position as a member of the Black community, and a woman might provide me with unique perspectives regarding the experiences that other Black women face in the grassroots education movement. Further, my interlocutor's intersectionality, or the multiple identities a person occupies in spaces of oppression, allows them to have certain bases of knowledge and insights because of their marginality, rather than in spite of it. Through engaging with my field sites, and critical race and activist theories, I acknowledge my support for the movement in the interpretation and presentation of these data.

I chose to adopt aspects of the Black Emancipatory Action Research (BEAR) model with a focus on structural racialization and healing. The BEAR framework aims to challenge the dominant paradigms in qualitative research, focuses on experiential knowledge, uses asset building and community engagement as a means of social change, and uses an interdisciplinary approach to better understand the Black experience (Akom 2011: 121). BEAR is a form of participatory research, action research, and Afro-centric research in the creation of strategies for liberation.

Consistent with ethnographic praxis, Akom argues that BEAR aims to democratize the research process by involving and engaging community members in the process from start to finish. As this research is so closely tied to race and racialized experiences and histories, I find it crucial that methodological understandings reflect that.

I employ concepts of activist research which aligns heavily with the goals of praxis and engaged anthropology. Activist research is considered “activist” in that it employs theory as an avenue for problem solving (Hale 2001: 14). Activist research methods generate primarily empirical data and are not usually formalized; rather they unfold within the research process itself. However, activist research still employs the use of collaborate dialogue and ethics at the center of its approach (Hale 2001: 14). The outcome of activist research and the methods it employs should identify and produce validated conclusions by both the researcher and the community that may inform implementations for social change. For the purposes of this research, the communities I worked with were the leaders and members of grassroots organizations.

I define grassroots organizations as ordinary members of society who are responsible for the inception of the group and make up the primary membership of the group. Grassroots organizations can be funded or unfunded; however, I chose to focus entirely on organizations in whose only chapter resides in Georgia, regardless of funding status. Other organizations, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have a stake in this fight, but due to their wide sphere of influence across the southeast United States, their specific efforts are not the focus of this research. Alongside the SPLC and ACLU, grassroots work can potentially inform policy recommendations by highlighting theories, perspectives, and understandings of people fighting on the ground level, including in classrooms, universities, and

school board meetings. These perspectives are invaluable in the creation of defensive policy which will seek to protect what rights students and teachers still have in public education.

Questions of Black achievement and student experience in schools have been explored by educational anthropologists and activists such as John Ogbu and Signathia Fordham since the 1980s. As understandings of social reproduction in classrooms and the current state of American schools has been examined on a more granular level, the issues that concern students, specifically students of color and/or low socio-economic status, are being framed from an institutional injustice approach (Collins 2009; Ogbu 2003; Fordham 1988). In order to study how injustices, show up in the classroom through current legislation, the influence of histories – personal and collective – must be understood. For that reason, this research is situated in literature which explains how culturally responsive curriculums have been implemented successfully as tools of resistance. I also examine how CRT shows up in schools, when it is present, and the impact that it potentially has. Finally, I engage with literature that focuses on the reproduction of history within the classroom and the wider social world which shows that this legislation is not happening in a vacuum.

Change can create community, remedy generational trauma, and provide new affinity spaces for individuals impacted by this legislation without centering the political itself. Activism engages in knowledge production through a dialogic among members of any organization. These members are ordinary people who conceptualize their experiences and the surrounding histories, as a catalyst to engage in social change (Smith 1999; McGuire et al. 2006). Tate (2020) views policy as a generative realm of cultural production which is shaped by values, norms, identities, and practices. Through this view, I argue that the current legislation reflects the larger zeitgeist in Georgia that depicts a fear of Black student and teacher empowerment, and public education that is grounded in historical truths. This legislation, as my interlocutors have expressed, is a fear-based

response to current social movements such as the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, or the push for mandatory bias and diversity trainings. I view grassroots resistance as producing a dialogic pedagogy in which knowledge and new conceptualizations about how education should be taught and reformed are born from interactions between community members who are involved in the grassroots education movement.

Field Sites and Participants

This research utilizes a purposive sampling method to identify potential grassroots organizations with a focus on two main coalitions: Teach for Freedom Collective and Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. Purposive sampling involves selecting populations based on the purpose they serve, in this case grassroots organizations which are actively resisting CRT legislation (Bernard 2006: 190). Because I conducted an intensive case study of grassroots movements in Georgia, purposive sampling has allowed for groups to be identified and accessed for research and movement purposes. Additionally, respondent driven, or snowball sampling has been utilized to identify interview participants. Through a pilot study conducted during February through April of 2022, I learned that respondent driven sampling would be the best method due to the sensitive nature of the impact that legislation has had both professionally and personally on interlocutors.

Furthermore, people are not always comfortable talking about the actions they are taking as restrictive legislation and resistance measures continue to both persist, and long-term consequences and outcomes of heavy resistance have not been identified (Bernard 2006: 146). Deidre and Raymond, my interviewees, shared the trauma and potential dangers of this work. Adult activists and student protestors have been harassed by members of the alt-right, chastised by parents, and faced the risk of termination or licensure loss. Therefore, choosing to participate in

this research was a voluntary process where interlocutors participated in ways, they deem suitable; purposive and respondent-driven methods of sampling reflect that in this work. Two individuals were interviewed in depth. Deidre is a member of GAEEJ's leadership team, while Raymond is on the leadership team of Teach for Freedom. Both names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of these individuals. All other participants offered information at public community conversation events which I filmed as a member of Teach for Freedom, and an affiliate of GAEEJ.

Research was conducted from April 2022 to February 2023 in Georgia, with a focus on the Atlanta metropolitan area including Gwinnett, Cobb, Fulton, and Dekalb counties. I attended one Town Hall in Athens-Clarke County, the poorest county in the state of Georgia, where I filmed on behalf of GAEEJ Inc. Four events which were attended during the course of research will be discussed. Two education cafés held on the Georgia State University campus in which members of both the Teach for Freedom Collective and GAEEJ were present, and one Town Hall/Black affinity space held by GAEEJ as a part of their "Let's Raise Black Voices" series at Ebenezer Baptist Church West in Clarke County. I also attended numerous planning meetings, including retreats for Teach for Freedom, strategic planning sessions with GAEEJ, work spaces with Teach for Freedom, and community conversations in public spaces. These were held virtually and participants discussed event planning, such as the march commemorating the name change of Beacon Hill Middle School, the restructuring of Teach for Freedom, budgeting and legislation tracking were also discussed. These events are described as one entity when it comes to planning and implementation in a semi-fictionalized ethnographic narrative (Humphreys and Watson 2009: 43).

Participant Observation, Survey Data, and Interviews

Participant observation has been integral in this field research. Most of the work that Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ have done in Georgia has been holding open events, workshops, marches, and conversation spaces to encourage involvement, conversation, and education about the legislation and its impacts on teachers, students, and the public school system as a whole. Reliability in participant observation data is ensured through intensive time in the field and diligent, as well as quickly recorded, field notes of experiences to limit memory bias. In this case, over 20 hours of participant observation was conducted with over 6 of those hours captured on film. I understand that accounts collected from participant observation are affected by positionality and potential biases.

Furthermore, aligning with an engaged approach, I incorporated reciprocity in my research. Reciprocity ensures that as a researcher, I am assisting in the work that my interlocutors and I deem as important (Kozaitis 2008: 60). All the events I attended, and at which I conduct participant observation, I have also photographed and filmed for the group's social media accounts. I have worked to edit, compile, and hand-off visual media for dissemination for the groups. My involvement behind the camera has allowed group leaders to be more immersed in their work and engage with their fellow comrades. I have also been able to play back the over 6 hours of recorded footage for my own research purposes. Having recorded accounts of conversations allows for better recollection and analysis on the part of the researcher. It allowed me to be more immersed during the events and allows for concrete participant observation data collection and the use of direct quotes when it came to presentation and analysis (Bernard 2006: 344).

Survey data is another source that strengthens my analysis of resistance measures, community creation, and group identity and beliefs among members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom. Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Inc. distributed three separate surveys at

two distinct events: a community education café held jointly with Teach for Freedom, and a town hall in Clarke County. At the jointly held event, a pre-session and post-session survey was distributed, while only a pre-session survey was given in Clarke County. Surveys distributed during the jointly held event received 54 pre-survey responses and 24 post-survey responses. The survey distributed in Clarke County received 12 responses; however, the event was much smaller given the relative population, and more people joined the space throughout the conversation. Pre-survey questions contained demographic and contact information including participant pronouns, home county, and teaching position if they worked in schools. More importantly to this ethnography, the surveys asked participants about their organizing experience, the need for equity-centric grassroots organizers, their fears about the state of education currently, their attitudes and awareness about the Protect Students First Act, and attitudes about culturally responsive education. The post-survey questions asked participants to ordinally rate the success of the community conversation and their willingness to get involved further in the movement. All surveys were written, distributed, and analyzed by the leadership team at GAEEJ. They were kind enough to share their data with me for the purposes of using it in this ethnography to complement interview and participant observation data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the heads of Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ respectively. Interview questions were formulated specifically to allow participants to express their understandings and expertise surrounding protest and resistance in the face of the Protect Students First Act in Georgia. Interviews were broken up into three different categories: demographic and meta data, questions about their respective grassroots organization, and questions about the Protect Students First Act and critical race theory specifically. Demographic questions aimed to gain a better understanding of how political views do or do not influence how these

organizations are formed. Further, their hometown and current living situation was discussed to understand how that fed into their decision to create and upkeep a grassroots group.

Questions about their grassroots group focused on how it was formed, what membership looked like and totaled, as well as discussing more in-depth how they gauge success and failure when it comes to initiatives. Specific action items and initiatives were also inquired about. Understanding the ultimate, or immediate goals, of these grassroots groups allowed them to conceptualize how far or close they are to achieving them. GAEEJ had just achieved full funding when I talked to their CEO but Teach for Freedom was still working to solidify their mission statement and leadership team. Having two organizations at two different stages of the grassroots process provided valuable insights about the grassroots experience and steps for successful resistance.

Questions specifically relating to the Protect Students First Act and CRT allowed for personal understandings and concerns relating to the current political climate to be discussed. Discussing why these bills are happening now, who is being impacted by them, and what can be done was integral to understanding grassroots resistance in education. Further, it was important that people define CRT themselves due to the heavy misconceptions of what critical race theory actually is. I wanted to give my interlocutors a chance to advocate for and explain the theory in their own words and in the context of education before we delved into a deeper discussion about their actions in this specific movement. This approach ensured that I stayed aligned with my engaged methodology and action research approaches.

Viewing informants as experts allows for researchers to understand the implicit meanings individuals have about their lived experiences (Bernard 2006: 300). Further, it allows interlocutors to glean their own understanding and engage in interpretation alongside the researcher through a

dialogic perspective (Warry 1992: 156). While participant observation aims to understand behaviors and practices in the community, interviews will take a more direct approach to gathering qualitative data. I used methodologies that are not alienating to participants and sought to paint an accurate picture of the individuals who are pushing the movement forward through strategic planning and engagement with their communities. The goal of healing through research is central to Akom's (2011) BEAR model of engaged research. Consistent with the BEAR model, I democratized the research process by asking for and providing space for conversation, feedback, and interpretation during interviews.

Interview and video data were analyzed and coded for themes using NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis software. Data analysis includes indigenous categories, analyst-constructed typologies, patterns or repetition, and other potential typologies from the raw data (Ryan and Bernard 2003: 89) Because this research is rooted in grounded theory, this in vivo coding process was used to develop theoretical framework of dialogic pedagogy and propose suggestions for a more concrete resistance plan in the face of restrictive legislation.

BELIEFS AND STRATEGIES OF ACTION AMONG GRASSROOTS GROUPS IN GEORGIA

Grassroots resistance in the face of the "Protect Students First Act" in Georgia is an ongoing battle nearly two years in the making. I found that HB 1084 motivated and mobilized citizens to organize through community creation following the events of 2020 at the grassroots level in Georgia. Further I wanted to understand how specific groups, namely GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom, believe this legislation will impact the state of education. Finally, what methods of sustainable reforms have been implemented – that is to say – what has worked? To understand and gain the answers to all of these questions, it was important to be aware that successes, failures, and barriers to resistance are dynamic states. They have the potential to change as the movement

evolves. People who did not want to get involved initially, have entered the movement. Others who were spearheading protests, marches, and community meetings are experiencing fatigue.

On August 26, 2022, Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ jointly held a community café for educators at Georgia State University. The “Protect Students First Act” had been in place since August 1st when school districts were instructed to create a contingency plan for upholding the new piece of legislation and reporting potential violators. However, by the meeting on August 26, most school boards had not developed a plan, and the City of Clarkston schools had outright denied accepting the law in their school district. The purpose of the community café was to arm educators with knowledge about the law and develop a plan should the law ever be used about them.

Before the café commenced in Downtown Atlanta, GAEEJ distributed a survey for participants to fill out. Of the 30 responders to the question, “What do you know or think [about] the Protect Students First Act aka HB 1084?” over one third of educators had no idea about this law’s existence in the first weeks of the 2022-2023 school year. However, just one month later, when GAEEJ held a similar event in Athens-Clarke County, a rural low-income county in middle Georgia, 75 percent of respondents did not have knowledge of the bill or needed more information on what it was actually pertaining to. The survey data show that educators across the state of Georgia were not aware of the threat facing the state of education, or their professions, at the beginning of the school year. It is this lack in knowledge that motivated the need to organize in this manner during August and September when the fight against the Protect Students First Act was finally entering the arena – the classroom.

The language of war has been consistently used when discussing this particular piece of legislation. GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom described their roles as being “on the forefront of the fight against classroom censorship.” Both organizations paint a picture of a battlefield. Educators

stand on one side, while legislation – an invisible entity with murky faces of key proponent’s swirl in its midst – stands on the other. GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom coming together at this education café in Atlanta in August were working to “arm” teachers with knowledge and tools to “combat” legislation and engage in this “fight.” Participants use this language at events in quick succession of discussions about community, peace, and love.

Structural racialization understands racism to be perpetuated by systems, structures, and institutions. Therefore, this fight or battle against this legislation is not just waged against one group or groups of people. It is working to dismantle systems of oppression within schools against students and teachers. The need to organize is based off of this idea at its core; however; the citizens' responses to unjust policies are rooted in beliefs on who is impacted, perceived inequities and the need for advocacy, civil unrest after the events of 2020 – including the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, in addition to critical race theory and the implications that banning it would have.

Citizen Responses to Unjust Education Policy: Impacts on Teachers and Students

In early April of 2022, when I first became acquainted with Teach for Freedom as a grassroots group, I attended a gathering in Decatur Square. I was introduced to about 10 actors in the movement, many of whom are still highly active in the group over a year later. One of the activities we participated in was a silent thought rotation. Laid out on different surfaces – the ground, picnic tables, a blanket someone had brought along – were five different pieces of poster paper. Each had a different prompt on them, all pertaining to the fears, risks, resistance measures, and impacts that HB 1084 would potentially have if passed as a law during that legislative session. After everyone had a chance to respond to these on sticky notes and add them to the poster board,

we all sat down for a reflection circle. The one which engaged the group the most during our reflection session was labeled, “Who will be worst impacted?”

At that time, people believed that teachers would be impacted because they are “silenced or surveilled.” Others believed rural students, Black students, or students whose lived experiences are removed from the collective consciousness will be worst impacted. Finally, there was an understanding among the group that “anyone who does not benefit from the current economic and political structure” will be worst impacted under the “Protect Student’s First Act.” This meeting occurred twenty-six days before the bill was officially passed, but there was still a collective fear of students and teachers being silenced, erased, and delegitimized in the classroom.

Nearly a year after the passing of the “Protect Student’s First Act,” there has been space given for people to further conceptualize who is being impacted and how. Generally, the consensus has been that students and teachers are the ones being impacted; however, there is a stigma attached to teachers being impacted. For example, as Deidre, who occupies a leadership role at GAEEJ, stated, “I’m picking an unpopular stance at [the] moment to protect the educator as well, you know, because there's no if there's no protection of the educator, there is no sound education for the students.” Ladson-Billings argues that within the CRT movement, players will have to take unpopular stances (Ladson-Billings 1998: 22). This particular unpopular stance that Deidre and GAEEJ Inc. take refers to the tendency for conversations about equity to solely focus on the student rather than the dual perspective which incorporates teachers and students. Teachers are seen as pillars of strength in the school community meaning that they are believed to be unflappable and unwavering in their professions. However, the state of education in Georgia poses challenges for teachers who are increasingly alienated from their coworkers, teaching low performing cohorts, and are now censored in their teaching under the “Protect Students First Act.” Deidre went on to

add that “[our mission at GAEEJ] wasn't solely about the students because a popular decision within education is for teachers to be martyrs and to give everything that they have for these students to continue their success, but they don't think about the educator.” There is a balance that needs to be found in grassroots organizations. This legislation and other forms of institutional oppression that create barriers to learning and upward mobility impact both teachers and students. However, teachers are often erased from the conversation, or shoe-horned in as a second thought when it comes to school-based resistance and advocacy.

While GAEEJ, Teach for Freedom, and their members know about the risks that the “Protect Student’s First Act” poses to teachers and the state of education, there is still the fear that “not enough people know about the laws and the harm they pose to educators.” According to the survey given out before the event in Clarke County, people fear that there is not a robust community in their county that people can tap into and access resources, information, and support to help combat these laws. Specifically in Clarke County, which is one of the lowest performing school districts, there is a need for teacher resources such as internal support, training, and education about the legislation and its potential trends. Students will only continue to be low performing under these laws because they are unjust towards students who are already impacted by socioeconomic and racialized barriers within the institution of public education.

During the community conversation in Clarke County, teachers described the conditions and state of teaching in areas of the school district. One former long-term substitute teacher described working in a school that was heavily underfunded, children were overpoliced, and the quality of the school was so draining and unstable that teachers were leaving during the day. She shared this story describing the desperation regarding leadership at schools: “One day I had left my lunch in my car. So, during my break I was walkin’ out to my car to get my lunch and the

principal was running up behind me sayin' 'Hey! Where are you going? Is everything okay?' I told him I was just going to get my lunch, but that's how bad it was. Teachers were leaving, sometimes during the middle of the day. And that was two or three principals ago, they were leaving too." There were soft gasps from others in the crowd, but there were also small echoes of affirmation and understanding. Those present offered "mmhm's" of agreement, others crossed their arms and exchanged meaningful looks of disappointment or surprise. The substitute teacher's experience shocked and resonated with her colleagues. GAEEJ Inc. specifically aims to provide teachers with insurance that would protect them and provide support within school districts that are struggling. At this specific town hall, GAEEJ Inc. was working to identify areas in which they could support teachers and work alongside them to produce solutions. This specific instance highlighted the need for support resources, or alternative schooling spaces such as a Freedom School or Escuelitas – guerilla classrooms which operate as alternative spaces of learning.

Teacher's working in underfunded school districts were getting so fed up with the state of schools, they were leaving. At community conversations in Downtown Atlanta and during coalition planning meetings, most teachers were from Cobb, Fulton, Dekalb, Gwinnett, and Coweta Counties. At these events, teachers described having to break up fights, navigating students making threats to the school online, and at times being pressured by leadership for not taking on more duties and responsibilities, despite being at their emotional capacity. Teachers are being impacted heavily by the current state of schools and are now up against legislation which is aiming to censor and survey them in their place of work. Raymond, a leader at Teach for Freedom, sums up the need for teachers to fight for themselves and their peers with these words:

I mean, just you go into work and teaching from 8-3 or, whatever your hours are. That in and of itself is exhausting, but it's also impactful and [teaching is] the

primary job. We need teachers to focus on the fact that we have to stand up and resist against those that employ us and those that make policies that impact our system. And its bullshit, teachers shouldn't have to do that. We should be able to go teach and educate and serve. But because of the system of oppression, we're under, we have to [resist], we have a duty to.”

Helping teachers tap into this sense of duty that Raymond describes here – despite the role strain felt between the classroom and organizing – is a motivator for action among teachers being impacted by the “Protect Student’s First Act.

The perceived impact on students from this legislation is compounded by an already broken school system. Educators who attended GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom’s events understood this legislation as “centering whiteness” or “erasing the experiences of our Black and Brown kids.” Black students and other students of color are disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies in public schools. According to the ACLU, zero-tolerance policies punish, push out, and isolate students instead of dealing with minor infractions in the school. The presence of police in public schools only strengthens this pipeline and introduces students to the juvenile and prison system at a young age, instead of being disciplined appropriately by school employees (ACLU.org 2023). Oftentimes, students are placed into disciplinary alternative schools which are inferior, privately funded schools which exist to profit off of students who have been unjustly removed from traditional school settings. Students who are pushed out are often low performing, only increasing the likelihood they will be alternatively placed, expelled, or suspended (ACLU.org 2023). One speaker in Clarke County who used to teach at an alternative school described her experience as getting cursed at all day every day because by the time students get to that school “they’ve been so mistreated. So mistreated that they don’t trust.” Students who are pushed out of school systems are understandably frustrated and distrustful. Under the “Protect Students First Act” students in vulnerable positions, especially students in alternative schools, are further at risk

with the absence of truthful teaching. The members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom are cultivating spaces of love and inclusion in order to find a way to center these students and help alleviate the circumstances that fuel their distrust and prevent other students from facing similar circumstances.

The school-to-prison pipeline alienates students of color from their school environment and pushes them into the streets where they are vulnerable to be victims of crime or perpetuate crime should they come from a history of poverty and violence. In Georgia specifically, Black students are three and a half times more likely to receive out of school suspension than White students (Georgia Council on Developmental Disabilities 2016). Black students are already physically removed from schools, but the “Protect Student’s First Act” impacts them by symbolically and ideologically removing them from schools via curriculum and lack of culturally responsive teaching methods. Raymond, who also works alongside Gwinnett SToPP, a coalition to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, described to me the student experience in many Georgia schools:

Once you get off the bus, you have this binary, you gotta choose your gender [just] in order to enter the building. You then go through a metal detector, which can take a while because of the number of students that we have coming into the building at the same time. So, we have all these kids coming in. They're getting searched, they're getting patted down. We're taking away their snacks and not just weapons, [just] bags of hot Cheeto puffs – I don't know when that was an immediate threat to a classroom, but we're confiscating their snacks and other personal belongings. We then give them a bullshit amount of breakfast. But we say it's good because it's free. Then we hurry them through the day with no breaks. Last year [2021-2022] they ate lunch in the classrooms. And not to mention the standards testing we're giving them, not to mention the lack of mental health and behavioral support we're giving them. We're doing a piss poor job around social emotional learning. We're doing piss poor around multi-tiered systems of support. All of that throughout the day for 180 days a year. We are really damaging the students when we're supposed to be setting them up for success.

Raymond is not alone in these sentiments. Teachers, activists, and university workers have expressed the amount of strain that our current system is placing on students at community conversations and planning meetings across the state. Now, students have stressed out and overworked teachers trying to navigate a policy which erases student experiences from the classroom.

Many educators, specifically in Clarke County, discussed not having any tools or protocol for how to combat and include their students' experiences in their lessons under this new legislation. One teacher raised her hand at the first education café held at Georgia State University in late August. The purpose of the event was to educate teachers about the law, as it had become apparent to group leaders that teachers in the Atlanta Metropolitan area weren't entirely aware of its stipulations and potential consequences. This teacher in question stated that "I don't even really feel okay talking to parents anymore, what was, what am I supposed to say about any questions about curriculums?" Teachers in this movement want to incorporate diverse experiences, but under this legislation the path forward felt unclear without adequate resources. In that way these grassroots groups are needs-based and working to combat this murky avenue of communication through the creation of community spaces. Raymond and other members of the Teach for Freedom Collective have argued that this legislation is a loss for Black students because they continually do not see themselves outside of Crispus Attucks, Harriett Tubman, Frederick Douglass, or Sojourner Truth. Many of these figures have a history rooted in hardship and oppression. Raymond and Deidre agreed that all students should leave the classroom feeling cared for and engaged rather than oppressed or believing that we live in a post-racial society. Fighting to make sure schools are a place of love, care, and inclusion is part of the motivation for resistance against HB 1084 and similar pieces of legislation.

These injustices in our current education system are actively setting students up for failure according to key players in the grassroots movement. Raymond argues that the way public schools are currently operating in Georgia is “not just physically preparing them for the school to prison pipeline. We are mentally and psychologically doing so.” This preparation is attributed to the harsh stipulations on student behavior, including students being pushed out of the classroom into alternative schools, to the curriculum that emphasize White historical experiences, and the pictures displayed on classroom walls, such as those of former slave owners or individuals that are not reflective of the experience of Black and Brown students. Most of these images erase the presence or experiences of Black people. Culturally relevant pedagogy could begin to eradicate these misguided practices; however, the “Protect Student’s First Act” prevents that from happening. Members of the movement have argued that these laws create barriers to and prevent culturally responsive teaching, while powerful people in Georgia benefit on some level from the structural and systemic racism woven into the fabric of a country built on White Supremacy. Even when it comes to school curriculums, members of the movement view these laws as the tool that a segment of Georgia’s population employs to maintain their political power and socioeconomic privilege.

Because public schools are so ingrained in antiquated systemic racism, members of the Black community still struggle to find their footing in, not only in society, but also in the classroom. Deidre argues that even when the Black community found their footing, or tried to, they were ultimately canceled out due to racism and prejudice. She cites the Tulsa riots, and the burning of Black Wall Street as instances where Black people tried to create generational wealth, to thrive as citizens, and to build capacity for themselves, against systemic racism ingrained into the dominant white mainstream of American society. During community conversations, specifically in the Black affinity space in Clarke County, interlocutors reported that these laws are

being passed because people with privilege are uncomfortable with how discussion of privilege are becoming more prevalent in public education sectors. To those benefitting from these systems, ignorance, even intentional avoidance of the facts, is bliss. However, in Deidre's worldview, "Education should be, at its most [basic] point, able to at least get the truth. And the truth is, this country is racist as hell, and it is what it is." I agree. Racism continues to be perpetuated through the pointed and purposeful exclusion of Black narratives and realities via the "Protect Students First Act." As Akom argues with his structural racialization framework, institutional interactions perpetuate racism. Therefore, the dichotomy created between the political and education institutions have worked together in a way to push out students and suppress emotionally drained teachers. In this way, Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc. are working to combat these educational and political forms of oppression by working to understand the experiences of teachers and students by providing them a voice in community spaces, and working to build out a network of support, new, and existing resources.

Citizen Responses to Unjust Education Policy: 2020, CRT, Inequities, and Advocacy

Students and teachers are affected directly by the current state of schools and the restrictive policies of the "Protect Students First Act." Knowing whom this policy impacts is essential in understanding the motivations of activists in grassroots organizations; however, knowing more specifically how this legislation affects students and teachers is critical in resisting it.

Schools in Georgia have inadequate funding. Since 2003, the public-school budget has been cut by 10 billion dollars. This budget cut has made new methods of instruction and access to supplies difficult to secure for the past twenty years (Owens 2022: 2). According to a 2022 report published by the Georgia Policy and Budget Institute, the attempts by the General Assembly to balance the budget via school cuts has left public schools in Georgia with severe support staff and

transportation staff shortages. This lack of resources contributes to the emotional fatigue that teachers described feeling at the Town Hall in Clarke County.

Students were attending schools where transportation was difficult after the budget cuts, and the school itself was understaffed. Employees and school districts were affected with insurance and fueling budget cuts despite gaining 250,000 new students in the 20 years since the budget was slashed (Owens 2022: 3). Many of these budget constraints became apparent during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. Georgia's Black Belt, the span of counties ranging from the southwest to central eastern coast of the state, were disproportionately affected by these budget cuts. These spaces, where school districts are majority Black, also trend towards being more rural. Rural spaces do not have ease of access to the internet that suburban or urban spaces do. In the Black belt, homes are twice as likely to lack high speed internet than other spaces in Georgia. Further, students here tend to be poorer per capita (Owens 2022: 1). Therefore, students' intersectionality between rural spaces and Black spaces was exacerbated by the pandemic because students did not have the privilege of completing schoolwork from their homes. Both Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc. are working to eradicate hardships facing students in school through the creation of potential alternative learning spaces. Identifying and understanding the underlying causes of budget shortages is integral to a holistic approach to grassroots education movements.

I include these counties here despite not being able to conduct research in these spaces because this legislation affects populations to different degrees depending on where they are in the state. Further, many of the patterns seen in the Georgia Black Belt have also been observed by GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom, despite being based out of more affluent counties, such as Gwinnett. Deidre described her experience of watching it all unfold:

We started to see the inequities within Gwinnett County public schools, and we would talk about it for hours. We were seeing that students are not being provided

the necessary materials that they deserve. I was working in a title one student's school, so my students didn't have access to adequate Wi-Fi, nor did they have access to laptops. So, all of the school districts, metro Atlanta school districts, except for Gwinnett County had a 1 to 1 school district. So, all students matriculating through those particular school districts had access to a device. So, they were really ready for the pandemic whereas we were not.

Even affluent counties in the state were ill prepared for the pandemic. The pandemic only exacerbated inequalities in our schools. Twenty-twenty did not only impose COVID to a distressed educational landscape, but it also saw the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement prompted by the killing of George Floyd by Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis Police Officer convicted on three separate charges. The intensity of the events in early 2020 sparked major involvement in grassroots and activist communities. The BLM protests spread across the entire United States, and other grassroots movements began to emerge with an anti-racist lens, and a focus on centering the Black experience.

Deidre and Raymond began their grassroots journey together back in 2020 when they were both teachers in Gwinnett County. They met in graduate school and connected on multiple levels. Both had activist goals and an undergraduate education in policy and history respectively. During 2020, they decided it was time to act. Deidre described the major cultural and educational shifts that were occurring as one of the main catalysts:

I guess [it was] May 2020 when we started to see a lot of racialization due to Black Lives Matter, due to the inequities that Black people were facing throughout the United States. And [Raymond] came to me and was like, 'Hey, I think that this is our time to start a grassroots movement within Gwinnett County public schools.' We were starting to see the energy shift.

This energy prompted the formation of their first grassroots group, Gwinnett Educators for Equity and Justice. Ervin argues that grassroots movements are sparked when people see change, they can contribute to. As two teachers, it made sense to both Deidre and Raymond that they could make a positive change within their school district because of their position. It was short-lived but highly

successful within the pocket of Gwinnett County. Despite its success, members of Gwinnett Educators were targeted by both leadership at the school, and external community members on the internet who disagreed with their platforms. Raymond described his time in this early group: “It was a radical group pushing for not so radical things. I mean racial equity and justice I guess that was radical at the time (2018). And at the end of it, I had [taught for] three years and we had the group for about two years. By the end of the third year my contract was not renewed. The superintendent targeted me and let me go.” The targeting of teachers by the administration is one of the main catalysts Deidre described for starting GAEEJ on the level where it advocates for teachers explicitly. She acknowledged that advocacy is just one tier of the GAEEJ model of support, but it is an important one because of the way Raymond was treated.

Participants at education cafés and town halls also discussed a call to action because of the sharp downswing in teacher support during 2020. In early 2020 during the pandemic, teachers were described as “heroes” in the collective zeitgeist for all their hard work and energy put into finishing the school year. When I was working in schools at the time, leadership was supporting teachers, sending them gifts, and applauding all the hard work they were doing. That was in Washington, D.C., but members of GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom expressed similar sentiments being spread in Georgia as well. Members of society were grasping how difficult it was to teach and to pivot to online learning so quickly. However, by July 2020, teachers, as expressed by Raymond, were “all are Marxist communists who are teaching critical race theory and you're lazy and selfish because you don't want to go into the classroom because you might die and that's your job. And so, nationally, being a teacher was not popular at the time.” Obviously, there is animosity felt by Raymond when he recalled his experiences in 2020 as a teacher. This came alongside the differing sentiments about COVID-19 which were highly politicized during summer

2020. These conditions were compounded by people wanting their children to return to schools, teachers wanting to remain home for safety reasons, and the first wave of anti-CRT bills being proposed in state assemblies and nationally with in compliance with former President Donald Trump's aforementioned executive order. Many survey respondents saw teaching as a political act during the pandemic and continue to see it as such in our post-pandemic world. To the question, "What do you think about being an education activist," thirty-seven percent of the respondents utilized the terms anti-racism, political act, and equity, out of fifty-two total responses. Politically charged ideologies and phrases are being utilized by both sides of the aisle when it comes to anti-CRT legislation. Oftentimes, the conservative right is discussed as utilizing language to push agendas. However, in this instance liberals, self-proclaimed Marxists, and communists alike utilize high-impact language in order to highlight the importance of their agenda. During periods of cultural turbulence, like the BLM protests and the COVID-19 Pandemic, using impactful language has helped grassroots groups in building and retaining members.

The pandemic and the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020 exacerbated existing disparities in public education, and catalyzed educators' grassroots mobilizations against the first wave of anti-CRT legislation. At one virtual planning session, one member of the leadership team at Teach for Freedom described attending a school board meeting in 2020 to try to get a better grasp of what was happening in the collective community as follows: "[There was] an incredible outpouring of hatred. Ideas that some people had about teaching anything about oppression or teaching anything about social and emotional learning. I remember one woman saying that mentioning pronouns in the classroom would 'make little Bobby gay'." This sentiment she shared shifted the whole atmosphere of the meeting. People sat in silence, unsure of what to say. Naturally people felt angry, but there were also suppressed smiles among the group at the perceived stupidity

of the belief that proper pronoun usage could influence sexual orientation. Combating the views held by parents who are uninformed about what CRT or culturally responsive teaching means in the classroom was another catalyst that was brought to light during 2020.

Anti-pronoun sentiments, like the one overheard in at a school board meeting by a member of Teach for Freedom, directly align with the fears that attendees at community conversations echoed for reasons they attended meetings and decided to organize. Responders who knew about legislation, or had personal negative experiences had a lot of fears around CRT laws and inequities in schools. Two respondents indicated feeling called to action based on “fascism and an apartheid pedagogy being inserted into the classrooms,” or believing “nothing has changed since the pandemic, and we are not providing teachers and students with tools they need to move forward.” Two teachers also responded to surveys expressing they are afraid that these laws are “being proposed by people who are unfamiliar with the processes or purposes themselves,” and that “the push to keep critical race theory out of schools [is causing a] lack of preparedness of students in the public education system.” Students are being ill-educated, which is further exacerbating the inequities in the school system. People in the movement use such “trigger words” as “fascism” and “apartheid” to further highlight how antagonizing anti-CRT legislation is in the larger context of the movement.

However, activists reported that they understood that these bills passed because they were well-timed and targeted. They were targeted teachers who were promoting ideas of equity and diversity in schools and working to dismantle systems of oppression that have been longstanding in educational institutions in the form of curriculums. During a time of political upheaval following Trump’s loss, the BLM resurgence, and COVID-19 sanctions, this group viewed White people as being angry. This legislation was understood to be a direct attack born out of that anger. Raymond

argued that “It was brilliant how [White people] would use the messaging around [BLM, CRT, COVID] to get you. Every time you think about this one thing, you tied to critical race theory and vice versa.” I believe that grassroots groups in Georgia are in the position to do something similar. Aligning concepts of resistance, activism, and equity with critical race theory could begin to shift it in the collective consciousness. Otherwise, it might continue to be a negative buzzword co-opted by the conservative right. Right now, many of their efforts are centered on programming, membership enrollment and retention, and community building. However, as the movement becomes more sustainable, strategic use of language, which Raymond acknowledges is a powerful tool, might be a successful strategy for Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ Inc.

Our discussions with grassroots leaders concerning motivation for action against the anti-CRT bills with grassroots leaders, and among other participants at community conversations, became racially polarized. White individuals participate in both grassroots organizations, but there are more White activists in Teach for Freedom than in GAEEJ, which has an entirely Black leadership team and centers Black educators first and foremost. Yet, White people were described as a monolith at times within GAEEJ Inc. spaces. The term “White folks” or “White people” was used by members in a way that depicted whiteness as a static defined state, rather than encompassing the nuanced ways in which race shows up in this particular movement.

Black activist educators described fatigue from the BLM movements of 2020, COVID-19, and anti-CRT legislation. Raymond experienced fatigue in Fall of 2021 specifically when he returned to teaching in person. As he put it, “It was exhausting going back to the classroom in August or July having white folks come up to me – my colleagues – and openly say [Raymond], I think I'm a racist or [Raymond] are there resources you can give me on race. Yes, this was my work, but I'm also their colleague, I'm not their teacher.” Black people in this movement have

expressed shouldering the burden of informing and recruiting others. This has led to mistrust from Black activists towards White people, fatigue, and frustrations. In order to create longevity in this movement, White people need to work to help alleviate some of the strain that Black activists feel. The co-chair of Teach for Freedom, a White non-binary individual, understands that their role is important because they do not face as much societal strain as their colleagues. While White activists are working towards the same goals as Black activists, a structural racialization and Black Marxists framework would understand that they have less institutional push-back facing them than their Black counterparts.

Deidre also critiqued any with involvement in BLM and activism after this heavily charged period. Popular perceptions of White people as a monolith and Black people as universally liberal contract demographic reality of Americans. In reality, Blackness does not dictate political affiliation; therefore, not all Black people will be involved in the Black Lives Matter movement because of it is affiliated with the Left. Deidre states:

I find it to be really just a thought clash within the Black community. I find it to be the catalyst to really Black lives Matter, to really having voices on stages of marginalized people is because it woke us up, but I also think that you have a lot of White elites that had their hand in creating these spaces for the Black community and other marginalized communities to get on stage, because it was perpetuating the agenda for their for their own agenda, if that makes sense.

Large organizations like Black Lives Matter are polarizing because they have a bureaucratic structure, hidden alternative leadership, and funding which comes from a wide range of sources. There were conversations about how Black Lives Matter has been co-opted to push a Leftist agenda, rather than to specifically advocate for Black Civil Rights. It is plausible that the BLM movement represents authentic collective agency for Black social justice, while also serving as a means for some to advance other items in a political agenda.

It is important to highlight that during community conversations, my interlocutors acknowledged and praised the role and contributions of many non-Black, and white educators to the movement. They need to come together, and engage in the work together, to dismantle this binary thinking that separates White and Black activism, in order to create a successful movement. Raymond said it best: “There's so many folks that are really, really down and that are still actively working on their biases and their gaps but would do anything to give up their privilege and use their privilege to the benefit of humanity. I think that [other] White folks are not going to realize that number one, we're continuing to talk about White and Black people in silos instead of in the coalitions that we've built historically.” In order to bridge the unfortunate racial gap, both Black and White activists have to stop thinking of one another as separate entities. Rather, they need to remember that collective grassroots movements have thrived with the involvement of multiple lived-experiences, races, and viewpoints. I argue that a successful movement will be strengthened by delegation of tasks, and collective movement among people of diverse backgrounds.

Grassroots groups were created and emerged out of a turbulent landscape from 2019-2023. GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom were created to meet the needs of teachers, activists, and students after the infrastructure was frazzled from BLM, COVID-19, and decades-long inequities in schools that were exacerbated before hitting a breaking point. Grassroots groups in Georgia can be considered need-based, and not born out of one concrete issue, like anti-CRT bills. Organizers hope that these movements will be longstanding and that techniques can continue to be applied beyond classroom censorship. Grassroots groups, in order to maintain longevity and motivation, need to focus on the creation of a group identity that will allow them to maintain their needs-based motivation as we move further into a post-pandemic, post-2020 world. In order to maintain these motivations, they need to create a collective identity that withstands time, when many of these

motivations are wrapped up in recent events. Activists who behave as border-crossers, or those who transcend ideological and social barriers to implement change, are better suited to contribute to sustainable political and professional change (Wilson and Johnson 2015: 105). Members of grassroots groups in Georgia do cross ideological borders, but it's important they do so as a collective, rather than continue to be potentially strained on racial lines.

Strategies of Action: Successes, Community, Flexibility, and Faith

Members of the grassroots movement to resist classroom censorship in Georgia have been actively working to organize since mid-2020. Grassroots movements oftentimes struggle to find their footing or being accepted as legitimate organizations. However, challenges do not prevent grassroots organizations from succeeding in their attempts to create positive social change and mobilize individuals to action. My interlocutors discussed the initiatives GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom implemented that they deemed successful. Success, when it comes to grassroots initiatives, depends on the mission, and goals it sought to accomplish. In other words, there is a lot of hope that members and leaders of grassroots groups express when they assess the success of an initiative. This has been integral to maintaining stamina that carries individuals through a movement. This sentiment has shown up among players in Georgia as well.

According to members of both Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ, the concept of moving as a collective is essential to determining levels of success. In April 2022, when the movement was in its infancy, I spoke with another leader of what is now the Teach for Freedom Collective. At the time, when the movement was developing, she spoke to the importance of “a coordinated rebellions and refusal. If it is coordinated, it can be successful and keep the participants safe. If it is not coordinated, that is no guarantee.” Participants consider coordination and moving as a collective essential to achieving sustainable change in a movement. GAEEJ and Teach for

Freedom have been working closely together since their inception consistent with their commitment to coordination. Deidre and Raymond realized that two organizations had the ability to move the needle more on some issues, such as working to implement teacher education about the law and implicit bias trainings, together than if they acted alone. Further, Teach for Freedom has worked in conjunction with United Campus Workers of Georgia (UCWG) and Organization of DeKalb Educators (ODE) – two union organizations which advocate for teacher equity and rights.

Participants expressed the need for collaboration and collective movements at a planning meeting among GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom. During the *opening circle*, where people were asked to introduce themselves and share how they came involved in this work, one educator stated that “this work is, for the lack of a better term, dangerous. Dangerous in so many aspects. So, I am so honored to be moving as a collective and come together in these spaces with such great minds where we can collaborate and do this kind of thing together.” Strength in numbers provides protection from potential firings, greater assets, more resources, and a wider access to other networks that will keep the movement alive and moving in a successful direction. In their study of Black activism in Detroit, Wilson and Johnson (2015) echoed similar sentiments. Collective empowerment has historically helped motivate and protect key players in educational activist movements (Wilson and Johnson 2015: 111).

Collectivity as a key to success allows for a broader abolitionist, resistance, grassroots network to be built out in Georgia. Back in late June and early July at planning meetings, core members expressed frustration that “action and organizations were still operating in silos.” In other words, the need for coordination had not totally been realized. It was not until community conversation spaces were opened and Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ began to hold Black affinity

spaces and education cafes that face-to-face networking and organization collaboration began to be realized within the movement. Members of Teach for Freedom are also embedded in other organizations like the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Intercultural Development and Research Association (IDRA), the Abolitionist Teaching Network, and American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The collaboration and intercommunication between these entities has been conceptualized as a success within the larger grassroots movement to resist classroom censorship in the past year. Ervin (2014) argues that an essential aspect to any movement is to persuade outside groups that an issue is worthy of coverage. Framing, a term utilized by social psychologist Irving Goffman, states that groups derive a message that focus on shared meanings and grievances within the larger collective (Ervin 2014: 173). The intercommunication between these entities ensure that the issue is framed for a wider audience, and that the message is cohesive and coordinated across groups.

Deidre argued that this collective has been especially important in finding sustainable footing in the movement. She expressed that collaboration needs to happen among all group members, not just within leadership structures. She explained:

There is a strength in collective bargaining in general, you know, and so I [love to] see more Black educators, Black students, Black parents become involved in the actual process of advocacy. So now that we're showing up at the capitol and there's 20, 30, 40, 100 of us showing up rather than just three or four having their little cameo on the Gwinnett Daily Post or Atlanta Journal Constitution. It needs to be the collective.

Members of GAEEJ emphasize their ability to create a space for liberation and belonging in the Black community. Therefore, success encompasses their ability to recruit, empower, and retain Black members to move in the collective. At its core, this movement has centered teachers and students, but the Black community remains a focal point because of the disproportionate threats of legislation on its integrity.

Feedback from people who attended community conversations, education cafés, and/or the Black affinity spaces arranged by Teach for Freedom and GAEEJ has also been a way that organizations gauge their success. Data analysis of the post-café surveys indicates that people are learning about legislation and the movement and gaining an interest in organizing and protest. Raymond really believes that success can be measured by how people conceptualize and feel leaving these sessions. In his words,

I look at some of the feedback from our workshops, I'm always really proud to hear people talk about a community or they didn't know, something that now they know. Or that they didn't know someone that now they know. Again, the work of teaching in itself can be lonely. I mean, we have teachers all the time talking about how they go to work, they close the doors and that's it. That means that they're not, eating lunch with colleagues or they're not interacting with each other outside of their students. And so mental health and community building is really important to me, and that's something that [this movement] is making inroads on. Just the fact that we can influence the public discourse, that we can write up, says we can speak at hearings, that we know are pushing the needle. Maybe not changing the minds and hearts of the politicians and that's fine.

To Raymond, creating community and connections is at the center of this work. People need to feel connected to one another in order to know that they are safe and that the inherent risks that organizing has are not being taken on in vain. Rather, organizers have a community behind them. In their schools, in their neighborhoods, in their network, GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom are successful in that they are bringing people together and giving them knowledge, safety, and support alongside collective action. As one survey respondent stated, “I just can’t tell you enough how happy I am that I attended this workshop. I almost missed it because I wasn’t feeling great today, but I’m so grateful for all the scenarios that you all addressed. Thank you [Raymond] for addressing Zoom questions directly, thank you for having the role play and script, and thank you for all the resources that everyone shared. I feel so empowered to continue this work! Thank you!”

Cultivating a culture of love, in both the shared meaning created by the group and love as Akom views it, has been integral to ensuring that people feel like they belong and are welcomed in the collective spaces and community that the movement is striving to achieve.

At planning meetings and open workspaces, leaders are always grateful that people show up to work and resist. Such statements as, “Thank you for being here,” “I love each and every one of you here today,” and “I am excited to hear everyone’s ideas and experiences,” are frequently expressed by leaders in both GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom in all spaces at which they cultivate the movement. Deidre equated the need for love as directly correlated to a hierarchy of needs. She felt that in order to feel like people can belong, they need to feel loved and genuinely cared about, especially within a movement that is fighting against the silencing and exclusion of Black experiences in classroom spaces. GAEEJ has recently rolled out their “Melanated and Educated” series in which educators can pay \$10 for an all-inclusive experience. They have held brunches, sip and paints, and other spaces of relaxation where the goal is to create community and trust between members and the organization, rather than to actively resist in that moment. These spaces have been incredibly successful in the eyes of leadership because of the turnout and return rate of people who have attended more than one event.

Another way that participants measure their success is in concrete action items, and the ability to move the needle in one way or another. For example, Gwinnett Educators, the grassroots group that eventually became GAEEJ, was successful in getting a new superintendent instated in Gwinnett County Public Schools. Raymond and his constituents were successful in implementing an Ethnic Studies course which was piloted in eleven high schools during the 2021-2022 school year. Further, members of Teach for Freedom worked to get Beacon Hill Middle School renamed in the summer of 2022. Members of multiple organizations, including Teach for Freedom, the

IDRA, and the Abolitionist Teaching Network co-authored an op-ed for the Atlanta Journal Constitution regarding their efforts to resist HB 1084, and restore truthful education to schools. While all of these initiatives show up in the public discourse, and are important to the longevity of the movement, measures like this can be risky and promote burnout. People are not always as ready to delve into work that is polarizing in the public sphere. For example, of the people that completed the post-café survey, only eighteen percent of them expressed interest in writing another op-ed. Only twenty-seven percent were interested in drafting counter legislation, and forty-one percent were interested in continuing this conversation. While the majority of people answered “Maybe,” when asked if they wanted to continue to conversation, the answer does highlight the uncertainty that people have when choosing to move deeper into the movement.

Flexibility on the part of leadership within grassroots organizations is essential because of the uncertainty of potential members in the movement. The effects of legislation and level of involvement by members is ongoing and dynamic. Therefore, when I asked Raymond and Deidre to define success, they each expressed that it is not something that can be concretely defined. Instead, there has to be room for flexibility, grace, and faith that the movement will be successful. Raymond discussed in depth how this work causes friction and is inherently uncomfortable, “but the fact that we have so many teachers taking our last workshop is one piece of evidence for how over the past year, many teachers we've had contact with have shifted their mindset.” Having faith that what this movement is fighting for and advocates for teachers to join them is crucial to staying optimistic and maintaining the stamina to continue creating spaces of inclusion that might be uncomfortable at moments. During community conversations, there were long periods of silence where the floor was open for people to share their thoughts on the current state of education, or their experiences in school. Those long silences, for me and I am sure for others, were

uncomfortable. However, more often than not, people did speak up and did share their truths and create networks and communities that were not there previously.

In one of the more powerful moments at the Black affinity space in Clarke County, a member of the school board was in attendance. The room was silent as we all waited for someone to share their perceived “grows and glows” of Athens-Clarke County schools. The school board member pulled out a small piece of paper and began reading the proficiency rates of students performing on grade-level for math in grades 3-5 versus those who were not performing on grade-level. The highest percentage of students performing on grade level for math among fourteen Clarke County elementary schools was 37.3 percent. The lowest rate in one school was only 6.9 percent of students performing on grade level for grades 3-5 in Clarke County. When the room fell silent again, she ended that “there should be a silence right now. We should all be in mourning. These numbers have not changed.” Holding hope in the face of obstacles, like underperforming school districts where culturally responsive education is being prevented and students are continually being pushed out, is essential to having a successful movement. To be able to hear, in facts and figures, the dire state of education and maintain faith that this movement will improve this public institution, is part of having a successful movement.

Deidre, who was present in this moment with the rest of us, told me later that it is hard to really say what the end goal of her organization and movement is. She believes that public schools are failing, and pumping more money into these will not change anything because of how ingrained racism and systems of oppression are into public schooling. She knows that GAEEJ wants to eventually open a Freedom School. Freedom Schools are spaces of education, transformation, and liberation where cultural and experiential differences are embraced in the classroom, rather than erased. Joy Village is a freedom school in Athens, GA which operates privately and centers Black

students and their experiences to promote their achievement and growth. To Deidre, a freedom school is a step in the right direction. However, she understands that flexibility is needed. She stated that,

Our plan changes every time a new development happens. And one thing about this business: you have to be very limber and realizing where we're going to go. So, a lot of this stuff has been very, for the lack of better terms, spiritual. We have done what has felt good to our spirit, we have stayed very true to our heart when it comes to this organization. I think that even within Black culture and Black literature, the heart is very much focused and centric when it comes to our faith in general.

Spirituality and faith are pillars of Black socio-political thought and resistance. W.E.B DuBois was one of the first scholars to point to the connection of spirituality and love as an avenue to healing from White supremacist structures (Akom 2011: 124). Deidre is utilizing the same framework in her approach to navigating barriers in this movement. Centering the spirit and love has worked for GAEEJ Inc. and Teach for Freedom in that it allows them to remain steadfast in their mission for equitable, truthful education.

Holding faith and being flexible as legislation, schools, and initiatives change and develop is essential to the sustainability of the movement. Raymond and other members of Teach for Freedom agree: “This work, sometimes it's not about moving mountains, although we were opportunistic enough to know when we have to do that. This work is also about planting seeds.” Planting seeds among different people in different places is what creates collective action and allows this movement to grow. Centering love, safety, belonging, and flexibility, is what allows the movement to sustain itself. Rather than constantly trying to push the needle and accomplish large-scale legislative goals, grassroots groups in Georgia are strategically adapting to shifting public perceptions of the movement and various rates of involvement from members. Measuring success in their ability to continue the work, and empower the students, teachers, and communities that the restrictive legislation and classroom censorship impact most directly and profoundly.

Strategies of Action: Barriers and Failures

Despite successfully growing the movement and gaining recognition in the public discourse, grassroots movements also face numerous barriers and some failures in their battle against restrictive legislation and classroom censorship. Many of the barriers are due to the popular perspectives on Critical Race Theory and misconceptions about its negative impacts on students and education. Other barriers include differing beliefs within organizations on how to remedy underperforming public schools and how to eradicate the censorship on culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. For example, some members of the groups still champion public education, while others are striving to move to alternative spaces of learning such as Freedom Schools, Escuelitas, and guerilla classrooms. Failures, in this movement, tend to take the form of people not wanting to get involved further, and knowing when to let certain initiatives go and focus on others instead.

In July of 2021, when Raymond and his colleagues were finalizing their curriculum for the Ethnic Studies course, an assistant superintendent warned that they have to be careful about implementing a course like this because the school district in Gwinnett County was already starting to get calls from parents about Critical Race Theory, and their concerns with it being taught to their children. CRT was not in their curriculum. However, it was a lens they utilized when constructing the course. However, because the class was public, there was initial scrutiny from some parents. It did eventually get implemented. Anything public facing in the movement has the potential to meet barriers.

Both Deidre and Raymond were interviewed by CNN when they started their activist journeys. They were going to board meetings and speaking to the media, which led them to be invited to be interviewed. What should have been a chance for them to share their activist goals and disseminate more information about the movement and HB 1084, was instead met with an

outpouring of hate and racism from viewers. Raymond was criticized for his weight, his Blackness, and talked about openly by strangers as if they knew him intimately. People would use his name at board meetings to cite their concerns with teachers “indoctrinating” or “grooming” their children to become activists. Being called an activist groomer was “sickening” to Raymond. However, in order to overcome barriers, such as being disliked by members of the public, activists and members of grassroots organizations have to just let these instances come and go with the news cycle and people’s opinions.

Members of the movement have described to me some of the barriers they have faced in their work at planning meetings and informal networking spaces. People have witnessed students being heckled at marches, school boards resisting their measures to eradicate racism in the landscape, and strained interactions between teachers and the wider communities in which they work. All of these tensions have created barriers. Barriers for these organizations are not always hopeless. Because leaders center flexibility and faith, barriers also serve as avenues for potential action. For example, GAEEJ Inc. and the IDRA recently co-published a report which discussed their “Let’s Raise Black Voices” Town Hall series and the potential areas which they may expand in more depth. At the meeting in Clarke County, GAEEJ Inc. leadership identified the need to focus on recruitment of more culturally responsive educators in the movement, as well as repair the relations between the community and Clarke County educators. The barrier of recruitment and community ties can potentially be remedied by positioning themselves as a movement deeper in the community. That could mean attending community events that are important to the wider social network, or meeting people that are not already plugged into the action at their school.

The final barrier that has been identified is the need for money. While GAEEJ Inc. recently became a recognized non-profit 501c3 organization, there is still the need for funding when it

comes to achieving their goals, specifically that of the Freedom School. Deidre is very staunch on her position that public schools, and some of their teachers, perpetuate systems of White supremacy. When making the decision to decide what type of school to become, a public school was, and remains as of Spring 2023, a possibility. Deidre described that she had received feedback from her leadership team who believed that becoming a public school would pull money away from a struggling public school system. However, as Deidre noted,

It's very difficult for us, you know, to really side with people that only say that public schools and pumping money into public schools is the way to get these public schools to become equitable because it's not [just] money. It's money, but it's a whole bunch of other stuff. It's the less work on our implicit bias, or explicit bias, or prejudice, or racism that we have against these students, and that we have been socialized to believe is the status quo. If you're not taught these things as an educator, you can perpetuate that abuse.

Public schools, without the proper anti-bias and DEI trainings and initiatives, are not being fixed by increases in funding. Therefore, choosing to accept public money remains a difficult decision and barrier for GAEEJ Inc.

One of the greater failures that GAEEJ Inc. encountered was not being able to implement implicit bias training in Gwinnett County. Deidre believed that the Board rejected this initiative because there is a culture of people-pleasing when it comes to education. In her opinion, there is a large group of educational stakeholders who do not want to make anybody upset by implying that we all have biases towards other people. However, this initiative is still being fought for among GAEEJ Inc. and members of the Teach for Freedom Collective. It is viewed as a step forward in understanding how classroom censorship laws affect students and teachers in ways that individuals might not be fully aware of.

Activism naturally presents barriers and comes along with failures. Raymond described it as a “go alone journey at times.” Raymond confided these feelings in me during our interview. At

an education café held in October, there were not enough people in attendance to proceed with the planned programming for the evening. Leadership was able to shift and focus on planning among the core team present, but these instances of disappointment are present in the movement. This journey can feel isolating in moments of discomfort, before anyone speaks up at a community conversation, or otherwise when leaders are sitting in the empty conference room double checking RSVP lists to ensure that members agreed to attend. Barriers and failures, when faced by individuals, can be more impactful in stopping momentum, than if there is a larger organization behind it. Thus far, despite the monetary, interpersonal, and societal barriers that these two grassroots groups face, they continue to focus on member retention, longevity, and asset building to assist the people most impacted by the “Protect Student’s First Act.”

CONCLUSION

The “Protect Student’s First Act” in Georgia has posed a significant threat to teachers, students, and the state of public education at large. In Georgia, members of grassroots organizations are concerned that students are currently matriculating through a public school system that treats them like prisoners. Further, it is believed by these groups that school curriculums are committing psychological warfare by censoring the information that students learn and attempting to eradicate culturally responsive education. This Act was just one piece of legislation that was passed amidst a wave of classroom censorship legislation introduced from 2021 to 2022. Opponents of these laws argue that these are a fear-based reaction born out of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, and the push for comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within larger corporations. Through my experiences in the field, I concur that the culmination of all of these events resulted in a fear-based reaction. Specifically with the resurgence of BLM, non-White individuals experienced a moment a

renaissance and opportunity. This resulted in a systematic attempt from hegemonic systems of power to suppress this moment which could have been a catalyst towards equity. As a result, conservatives have co-opted the term “Critical Race Theory” and apply it erroneously to any program or principle that supports cultural relativism, diversity, equity, or social justice in public life.

The particular climate in which this movement emerged was heavily dictated by the socioeconomic and historical context which preceded the Act. For example, the budget cuts by the state legislators to the Georgia Education system were exacerbated and made clear with school closures in light of the pandemic. Further, the high racial and political tensions that the killing of George Floyd and other unarmed Black individuals by the police sparked, launched a wave of global activism. Finally, the aggressive legislation aimed to target activist teachers and students in the executive act banning “CRT” principles is important context to understand when it comes to this particular social movement.

Social movements have arisen much more often as politics, capitalism, and technology become more closely intertwined. Policies, wealth, and innovations are increasingly controlled by a smaller number of people in power. Therefore, those individuals have the ability to manipulate and influence socio-political agendas (Ervin 2014: 163). In this case, members of grassroots organization mobilized from an inside-out model, where the catalyst for action was the legislation that passed. Further, this particular social movement is highly racialized, meaning that there are very real consequences for people of color affected by this legislation. Correspondingly, I employ Akom’s “structural racialization framework” to acknowledge and emphasize that grassroots organizers identify institutions rather than individuals as responsible for perpetuating structural inequities and racist policies and practices. Activists in Georgia work to combat the racism

ingrained in the education system and the political-economic sector. While they focused their critique and resistance against systems and institutions, Georgia's activists also expressed the fact that individuals, such as Will Wade, Ron DeSantis, Brian Kemp, and even Joe Biden, are key actors who perpetuate inequities, or otherwise benefit off the work that Black activists have done in this movement and previous ones. Therefore, while I agree with Akom and members of this movement that institutions ought to be targeted as sources of racism, it is crucial to remember that institutions cannot function without the individuals within them. These racist individuals ought to be called out and removed from positions of power in order to shift institutional power into the hands of individuals who promote equity and opportunity for all.

This research is unique in that I aimed to study activist perspectives while I engaged in the activism as a participant and as an observer. I argue that engaged activist ethnography is the most productive method through which to gain a comprehensive understanding of activists' experiences, feelings, and expectations within grassroots movements. My political engagement, as described by Ervin (2014), was able to provide a cross-section of grassroots movements about education within Georgia. However, these methodologies can be applied grassroots and social movement research in other spaces and causes. Similar to Wheatley and Akom, I worked to engage with and participate alongside my interlocutors to glean insights about the meanings and feelings which accompany collective action (Akom 2011; Wheatley 2020).

This research contributes to a theoretical understanding of Black activist movements by demonstrating that activists of a specific cause share specialized knowledge based on their professional and personal lived experience, that they are multi-faceted and armed with a variety of skills, and that they must play many roles in order to uphold the success of a movement. Wilson and Johnson (2015) agree that studies of education activism which highlight the epistemologies of

grassroots groups can greatly inform educational improvement efforts. This study also reveals that participation in a grassroots movement transcends members' individual or collective identity. For example, individuals across ethnic or racialized social categories, including Blacks, can be centered in a movement that is not considered exclusively a Black movement.

While this movement centers the experiences of Black people, it is not considered by members to be a "Black movement." However, activists believe that Black people are disproportionately affected by classroom censorship laws. Storytelling and connection through lived experiences has cultivated a collective identity which aims to rally around Black people and resist the structural injustices facing the Black community. Political action as racial justice through storytelling allows for connection to be made by taking experience and transforming it into a more comprehensive form (Tate 1997: 211). In turn, that narrative possesses, what Tate calls, communicative power. It is able to persuade and transform the disempowered through connection and community. In this movement, the stories people tell create community ties and sense of connection. The more members feel connected to one another, the more the movement is conceptualized by leaders like Raymond and Deidre as successful.

People deeply ingrained in educational movements have distinct knowledge about the nature of teaching, and the vision they have for the future of public education. Their knowledge emerges in the expression of multiple roles and is transmitted through creativity and collaboration across spaces of inclusion and community. They are parents, teachers, learners, healers, and diplomats. They work to build bridges between communities and individuals by creating spaces of love and belonging in the form of community town halls and education cafés. They work to learn, unlearn, and educate others about the impacts of classroom censorship legislation, and potential solutions through resource provision and collaborations with other stakeholders. Wheatley points

to community in social movements as the catalyst for action (Wheatley 2020: 193). When people understand the extent to which injustices occur, they form deep bonds through experience, community, and critical realizations made within that community.

Georgia Educators for Equity and Justice Incorporated and the Teach for Freedom Collective have successfully implemented sustainable methods of resistance against the “Protect Student’s First Act.” They have centered community, flexibility, faith, teachers, and students in their fight against classroom censorship. By creating and implementing community events in the forms of protests, Black affinity spaces, and community conversations/education cafes, these two organizations promote love and belonging as core values and practices among members and leaders. Their primary forms of resistance come from promoting understanding and providing teachers with tools to communicate with people who have concerns, as well as protect themselves and their jobs.

Ethnographic data analysis reveals that in order to disseminate information to advance social justice, grassroots leaders and members employ an experiential or a dialogic pedagogy as a method of teaching and learning focused on the creation of shared experiences and related discussions. I argue that placing a focus on community-based mobilizations and collaboration among activists allows for the movement to become sustainable, because organizers work to limit burn-out and fatigue while they aim to succeed through mutual reciprocity and support. While leaders described activism as being lonely at times, this movement has placed an emphasis on recruitment and retention in order to help alleviate feelings of isolation and to foster instead strategies of integration in the interest of a shared cause.

Future Outlook

Critical Race Theory Legislation has passed and remains law in thirty-six states. However, the fight against classroom censorship laws is not over. One of the important aspects of grassroots work against legislation is understanding and accepting spaces of non-closure where the issue which prompted the meeting may remain unresolved. Not every meeting, planning session, or event provides a tangible step forward. Instead, acknowledging that these issues evolve and continue, is essential to longevity within grassroots movements and the fight for truthful education. Furthermore, these groups are multifaceted. They are cognizant and committed to fighting against any piece of legislation that poses risks to civil liberties.

During the 2023 Georgia Legislative Session, the assembly has continued to introduce legislation which poses serious threats to marginalized groups. There are anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in thirty-eight states as of March 2023. These pieces of legislation are of high-priority to these groups alongside other pieces of legislation in Georgia, including HB 140 which bans gender-affirming surgery for minors, HB 338 which heavily monitors student technology use in an attempt to further censor truthful education, HB 147 which promotes anti-gang and police training for teachers, and SB 154 which targets school librarians for the distribution of divisive materials or harmful concepts.

Legislation in Georgia, and across the country, continues to censor the experiences of historically underrepresented and currently marginalized groups by removing their access to the basic human rights of education and healthcare. Furthermore, looking towards other states, including Florida, for an indication of potential future legislation, HB 999 has proposed a full ban of any research or the teaching of concepts which promote diversity, equity, or inclusion or utilize related theoretical content (Steinbaugh 2023). Professors who teach or publish this content are at

risk of losing their tenure and will be removed from their universities. As Florida's governor Ron DeSantis plans to run in the 2024 presidential race, this legislation posits serious risk for the state of education in the United States.

Grassroots groups in Georgia, and nationwide, ought to continue to utilize their methods and prepare for potential protests and resistance on the federal level. I argue that the methods utilized by GAEEJ and Teach for Freedom to recruit and retain members through community creation, shared experience and dialogue, and centering love and belonging will be essential to continued mobilizations on a national scale. It is understood that students and teachers within public schools are most at risk by restrictive legislation. Therefore, sustaining grassroots social movements is of the utmost importance because individuals involved know when to move mountains, and when to focus internally. Education is considered by many to be "The Great Equalizer." Students, regardless of their racial or socioeconomic background, should be able to access an education that is rooted in truth and grounded in joy. Teachers should be able to teach their students using methods which resonate to lived experiences and help them realize their civic importance. These liberties are being stripped from the landscape of public schools. The fight against restrictive legislation continues in Georgia and should be examined in other spaces nationwide. This work demonstrates the need for and effects of collaboration among groups, and the creation of a larger network that serves to strengthen this movement and continue to unite those in the fight against classroom censorship and restrictive legislation.

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