Learning Racial Justice: Teachers' Collaborative Learning as Theory and Praxis

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Abstract
Activist teachers are increasingly organizing within and beyond their unions to respond to political trends toward austerity and the privatization of public education (Hursh, 2004; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Ravitch, 2010, 2013). Teacher-led grassroots groups often strive to partner in meaningful ways with parents and communities (Weiner, 2012), but simultaneously overlook how deeply embedded community histories shape the community and policy context (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gadsden, 1994), and teachers’ organizing and professional practices (Maton, 2016). The enhanced recent visibility of race-inflected social activism (#BlackLivesMatter, 2016) raises significant questions about how politically active teachers understand and engage with issues of racial justice.

This dissertation asks: When politically active teachers come together in an inquiry group to discuss structural racism, how do they engage in individual and collective learning processes? And, how do they perceive the shape, form and effect of their learning? Methodologically, the study draws from participatory (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; McIntyre, 2008) and race feminist (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Smith, 1987) qualitative research traditions. The study examines the work of an inquiry group composed of nine racially and gender diverse participant who are active members of a change-seeking union caucus. Data sources include inquiry group meetings, interviews, field notes and written texts.

The dissertation builds a new theory for understanding the nature, form and function of teachers’ collaborative learning about racial justice. This study defines collaborative learning as the collective and social search for knowledge and transformation, and shows that it is composed of four interconnected and mutually reliant components: learning, pedagogy, relationships, and diffusion. Furthermore, the study finds that inquiry-based collaboration among politically active teachers, on projects where the goal is to build a common mission, vision and project, and where there is diversity in race, gender and a range of experiences with prejudice and discrimination, holds great potential for triggering teacher learning and addressing social justice issues within and beyond activist organizations and schools.

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LEARNING RACIAL JUSTICE: TEACHERS’ COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS THEORY AND PRAXIS

Rhiannon M. Maton

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ABSTRACT

LEARNING RACIAL JUSTICE: TEACHERS’ COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS THEORY AND PRAXIS

Rhiannon M. Maton
Vivian L. Gadsden

Activist teachers are increasingly organizing within and beyond their unions to respond to political trends toward austerity and the privatization of public education (Hurst, 2004; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Ravitch, 2010, 2013). Teacher-led grassroots groups often strive to partner in meaningful ways with parents and communities (Weiner, 2012), but simultaneously overlook how deeply embedded community histories shape the community and policy context (Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Gadsden, 1994), and teachers’ organizing and professional practices (Maton, 2016). The enhanced recent visibility of race-inflected social activism (#BlackLivesMatter, 2016) raises significant questions about how politically active teachers understand and engage with issues of racial justice.

This dissertation asks: When politically active teachers come together in an inquiry group to discuss structural racism, how do they engage in individual and collective learning processes? And, how do they perceive the shape, form and effect of their learning? Methodologically, the study draws from participatory (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; McIntyre, 2008) and race feminist (Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Smith, 1987) qualitative research traditions. The study examines the work of an inquiry group composed of nine racially and gender diverse participant who are active members of a change-seeking union caucus. Data sources include inquiry group meetings, interviews, field notes and written texts.

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PREFACE

In February 2014 I joined an educator-led book club sponsored by a grassroots organization called Teacher Action Group (TAG) in Philadelphia. The book club was mostly attended by teachers and centered on thinking about the power and potential of teachers’ unions for protecting the strength and longevity of American public education. Before each bi-weekly meeting, facilitators asked us to read chapters of Weiner’s (2012) *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* and to bring our own critical comments and questions about the premises and work of social justice unions.

Book club participants, who were mostly local teachers, engaged passionately and critically with the text, and brought their own experiences to bear on their collective sense-making process. Some participants spoke with sorrow and frustration about the ongoing privatization of the Philadelphia school district and the resulting difficulties in organizing a union within their charter school. Others reflected vividly upon their experiences as union organizers and representatives. And still other participants spoke emphatically about how to begin creating stronger communication pathways with their students’ parents and the communities surrounding their schools. I was deeply moved by the strong commitment these local activist teachers held to fighting for the rights of their students and local families and to supporting the existence of a strong, stable and equitable local education system. I left each meeting feeling inspired and with a rejuvenated commitment to educational justice and to forming new links of solidarity with local teachers and activists.

Over my time in the book club, it became increasingly apparent that intellectual labor shaped not just members’ passion for their cause; it also created the opportunity for people from disparate identities and professional experiences to come together to develop a new common notion of the problem and to begin constructing possible solutions to the problems
facing education today. The book club felt simultaneously like a “magic space” and a living and breathing example of a “literacy event,” one where people could come together to make common meaning, critique dominant paradigms, and dialogue about possible solutions. It felt like a space in which teachers came together to learn with their hearts and minds intimately bound up in a common struggle.

I later learned that the topic of the book club had not come about by chance, but rather had been carefully crafted to support an emerging local social justice unionist caucus seeking change in their teachers’ union. The sponsoring organization of the book club, Philadelphia’s Teacher Action Group (TAG), had been partnering thoughtfully and strategically with local and national organizations for years in fighting to protect the public education system from privatization and standardization, and had mainly taken an educative approach to its organizing work with teachers. In early 2014, some of TAG’s members branched off to form a new organization called the Caucus of Working Educators (WE or the Caucus), which seeks radical transformation in the local teachers’ union. The learning through book clubs and other intellectual sense-making spaces were seen to support the growth of this broader organization, which officially became the Caucus in early March 2014. I heard whispers of this emerging organization through my involvement in the TAG book club, and joined the Caucus at my first opportunity.

By August of 2014, I had volunteered to serve on the Caucus Outreach Committee; organized and run a WE-sponsored book club about McAlevey’s (2012) book, Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement; and partnered with two other Caucus members to start a campaign educating local college students who were pre-service teachers about the functions and potential of unions. I found myself regularly conversing about strategy and goals with key leaders in the organization, and that I was continually returning to several driving questions: What makes learning spaces like the book
club feel so powerful for teacher activists? And, what role does learning play in the work of the broader organization and the movement for educational change? In order to grapple with these questions more deeply, starting in the summer of 2014 I ran a pilot study in the Caucus where I interviewed both core and peripheral Caucus members about how learning figures into their personal development as activists and the Caucus’ organizing work.

Meanwhile, in the late summer of 2014 there was a burst of activist energy across the nation, as the #BlackLivesMatter movement strengthened its grassroots protests nation-wide, following the tragic deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City at the hands of the police. Some Caucus members were deeply attuned to the growth in this movement, and took seriously the concerns expressed by the movement for the lives, safety, and rights of young African Americans. In my interviews for the pilot study and in Caucus meetings over the late summer and early fall of 2014, I observed numerous Caucus members struggling to make sense of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in light of their own movement for educational justice in schools and systems nationwide. They expressed concerns for the wellbeing of their students and students’ families, many of whom were African American and Latino, and the communities surrounding the schools where they work. And, they were outraged at the ways in which the state was replicating systemic violence through chronically defunding education to districts like Philadelphia with high percentages of racialized students and families (Jones, 2016; Khalek, 2013; Socolar, 2013; White, 2015).

I noticed that people were struggling to make sense of their work in a primarily white organization that claimed to represent the interests of a racially diverse set of teachers. They looked around at their teacher colleagues in the Caucus and were bewildered at how to recruit more teachers of color into their movement, despite the fact that they saw the Caucus as representing the interests of these same teachers who were keeping their distance. People were also struggling to reconcile the ideals raised by Weiner (2012) and McAlevey (2012) about
unions partnering with local communities to increase mobilizing power and create broad-based change, with the Caucus’ challenges in forming connections with Philadelphia’s students, families, and communities of color.

In meetings, I noticed that Caucus members would occasionally raise ideas and questions about how race and racism figures into the Caucus’ work, but that there was a quick sidelining of deep philosophical questions about how systemic racism shapes the organizing practice of WE. People were not comfortable speaking directly or publicly about racial identity and the impact of structural racism on education and the Caucus. Ideas and questions about race were relegated to private conversations and behind-the-scenes talk, despite both the oft-acknowledged and debated challenge of trying to recruit teachers of color into the organization, and the Caucus’ platform, which explicitly states a commitment to working for racial justice in the interest of local families.

Straddling my roles as both a researcher and an activist, I saw a disconnect between the organization’s explicit commitment to framing race as a systemic issue and its simultaneous silence and avoidance of public discussions on race. I wondered: how could the Caucus as an organization make sense of racism as a pervasive phenomenon infusing all aspects of social institutions, structures, and systems (#BlackLivesMatter, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; powell, 2014), while simultaneously avoiding “going public” about the impact of racism on educational context and WE’s education organizing work? I pondered the question and spent time speaking with a number of Caucus members holding racialized and white identities about this perceived fundamental tension and disconnect within the organization. As a result of these conversations, and the support I received from several key members of Caucus leadership, I decided to place structural racism as the front and center topic for inquiry in my dissertation research on teachers’ collaborative learning.
I placed questions of race and structural racism at the center of my research on teacher learning for three primary reasons: first, to support the work of educators of color in the organization; second, to support the development of the Caucus as an organization and the work of its members in placing race at the center of the analysis and conversation; and third, to begin to address the notable dearth in scholarship on multiracial collaborative learning about racism and structural racism. I recruited nine participants from the organization for the study, five people of color and four white. We engaged deeply with two key questions: (1) What is structural racism? (2) How does structural racism shape our organizing work in the Caucus of Working Educators?

This dissertation examines how a multiracial group of educators came together to think and learn about racism and to apply this sense-making to their organizing practice. It looks at what factors enabled collaborative learning to take place as participants engaged in thinking about the intense, discomforting, and often personally painful topic of structural racism. Taken as a whole, the dissertation constructs a new theoretical framework for understanding the nature of collaborative learning about social justice concerns.
CHAPTER 1: Introduction

To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination (hooks, 2003, p. 36).

Social movements are sites of profound learning – sites where knowledge itself is contested and constructed, where identities and subjectivities (both individual and collective) are defined and redefined, where citizens are formed and where oppression is named. These activities, so integral to social movements, are clearly political learning processes (Chovanec, 2009, p. 64).

Many American teachers are becoming increasingly politicized and uneasy about the influence of market-based approaches on public school institutions and systems. They observe the current direction in education institutions and policy toward privatization of public schooling and standardization of curriculum and assessment (Hursh, 2004; Ravitch, 2010, 2013), and increasingly believe that these elicit damaging and harmful results for school systems and children (Maton, 2016; McWilliams, 2016; Stern, Brown & Hussain, 2016). This growing awareness among teachers parallels recent conversations in national media about how market-based measures undermine public and common good; promote the inequitable distribution of educational resources; and establish ideologies which perpetuate systems of domination that are profoundly discriminatory toward racialized1 and poor communities (Fang, 2014; Herbert, 2014; Nevradakis, 2014; Tierney, 2013). Activist teachers2 in the U.S.A. are increasingly organizing within and beyond their unions to respond to this trend—what they see as the dismantling of American public education (Quinn & Carl, 2015; Weiner, 2012).

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1 Building on the work of Omi & Winant (1994) and powell (2014), I use the term “racialization” in this dissertation to refer to the process in which dominator groups apply racialized terms, identities and logics to dominated groups for the purpose of continued socio-political and economic hegemony and power.

2 According to the literature, activist teachers are those who take stands and engage in action with the intention of supporting and working toward social justice (Marshall & Anderson, 2009; Picower, 2012).
Teacher-led grassroots groups take varied forms, including activist groups with a curricular and pedagogical focus and social justice union caucuses striving to effect change within their broader teachers’ union. Within, across and beyond these varied formations, many teachers across the U.S.A. are expressing dissent, resistance and protest in response to the increasingly atomistic public education system. They seek to support the development and maintenance of a high quality education system that is publicly funded and delivered, locally controlled, and flexibly responsive to the needs of communities and students (Maton, 2016; Peterson, 2014). They also seek equitable access to quality education for children and families facing social marginalization (see Gadsden & Fuhrman, 2007); to influence education policy (see Bascia, 2009); to resist the increasing tendency toward standardization; and counter the increasing trend toward precariousness and contingency in school funding and employment for students and teachers (see Grossman, 2010; Hursh, 2004).

Teacher-led change efforts take up varied approaches and strategies while seeking to realize their ideals and trigger political change, with much of this focus geared toward enhancing the learning and educative capacity of prospective and existing movement members (see Maton, 2016). Social movement learning scholars assert that social movements are themselves pedagogical efforts (Choudry, 2012; Foley, 1999; Freire, 1970/2004; Hall, 2012), and in this vein many organizations and networks sponsor book clubs, inquiry groups, and

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3 Teacher activist groups with a curricular and pedagogic focus may be understood as those that strive to support leftist social justice efforts through networked and collectivized effort in producing and supporting social justice curriculum and pedagogy for application in teachers’ classrooms and schools. Examples include Teacher Activist Groups-National (TAG-National), Teacher Action Group, Philadelphia (TAG-Philadelphia), New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE).

4 Social justice unionism (SJU), also known as social movement unionism within the scholarly literature, is gaining popularity in the U.S. and abroad. SJU is a philosophical framework concerned with advancing social justice causes and concerns and centers concerns for community well-being extending beyond the union membership. Here, the union is framed as a potentially powerful platform from which to agitate for and realize broad-based socio-political and economic equity (see Camfield, 2007; Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Gall, Hurd & Wilkinson, 2011). SJU caucuses are groups that organize within unions to agitate for union transformation toward SJU ideals and concerns (for more on SJU caucuses, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation).
interactive workshops and conferences for their members and the public broadly (Kohli, Picower, Martinez & Ortiz, 2015; Maton, 2016; Riley, 2015a). These efforts are intended to increase the awareness, knowledge, critiques and social justice-grounded solutions of members and locals in support of local teacher-led change efforts within the broader educational justice movement.

This particular study is situated in the context of Philadelphia, which has faced an increased tendency toward market-based solutions in education over the past twenty-plus years, and presents a representative sample portrait of current neoliberal and racialized policy trends in the U.S.A. and beyond (Fine, 2013; Lytle, 2013). Local market-based approaches have included the ongoing closure of neighborhood schools and proliferation of new charters. There is also increasing effort to privatize after-school programs for children, and specific types of positions in schools such as school nurses and counselors (Fine, 2013; Khalek, 2013; Lytle, 2013; McWilliams, 2016). According to many Philadelphia activist educators, parents, students, and community agents, the Philadelphia district is undergoing a slow conversion to privatized public education, with children and families of color suffering the most deeply (Khalek, 2013). Many local groups locate the trend toward racial disparity in educational access and outcomes as located in long national histories of educational inequity steeped in systemic racism (Jones, 2016b; Khalek, 2013; Socolar, 2013; see also Countryman, 2006; Gadsden, Smith & Jordan, 1996).

Meanwhile, many local activist teachers position the local teachers’ union—the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT)—as complacent and not taking a strong stand to protect local public education. The union has shrunk in size from around 20,000 members in 1993 (see “PFT union slate,” 1993) to approximately 11,000 members in early 2016, and unionized teachers hold interest in resisting privatization both in order to effectively serve the needs of their students and families, and to protect the integrity and effectiveness of the school
system and their union. Thus, in early 2014, a group of politically-involved and activist teachers came together to form the Caucus of Working Educators (WE or the Caucus), a local social justice unionist grassroots teachers-led union caucus that is striving to push the PFT to take a more assertive stand in protecting local public education (for more on the Caucus, see Maton, 2016). The Caucus positions itself within a broader social movement dedicated to protecting the longevity of public education in the face of neoliberal market-based “reform.”

Like many social justice unionist groups, the Caucus frames its work as striving to partner in meaningful ways with parents and local communities to protect public education (see Brogan, 2014; Hewitt-White, 2015; Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2012). However, it experiences difficulty in attracting teachers of color to join the organization and also struggles to form close and meaningful relationships with local communities experiencing social marginalization—and particularly those facing marginalization along racial identity lines (Maton, 2016). WE values forming close relationships with local communities of color but simultaneously struggles to understand and take into account how deeply embedded community histories shape local experiences of schooling (see Campano, 2007) and education policy (see Gadsden, Davis & Artiles, 2009). The enhanced recent visibility of race-inflected social activism (#BlackLivesMatter, 2016) raises significant questions about how activist teachers—i.e., those engaged in efforts to improve and protect educational, economic and cultural opportunities for socially marginalized communities (see Picower, 2012; Quinn & Carl, 2015; Sachs, 2000, 2003)—can build on their socio-political understanding and exert greater influence in addressing issues of racial injustice.

This dissertation study examines the significance of learning in the Caucus as members come together to make sense of broader systems of power—namely, structural racism—and to think about how they might model the work of the organization and their own thinking in light of broader power structures. It constructs an understanding of how politically-
active teachers collaboratively make sense of race, structural racism and racial justice, and how they perceive the effects of this collective learning on their praxis and on the institutional context in which they work.

More specifically, this dissertation examines the collaborative inquiry work of nine politically active and racially diverse teachers who are members of the Caucus, and myself, who came together in an inquiry group formation in early 2015 to investigate structural racism and to put this learning into practice through our activist organizing work in the Caucus. Through an examination of how participants collectively engaged in learning about structural racism, I build a new theoretical framework for collaborative learning that helps bolster understanding about the nature and significance of teachers’ collaborative learning efforts about social justice themes more broadly.

This study holds scholarly significance for social and transformative learning theories, teacher education, and antiracism studies in education. It also holds practical significance for the educative work of teachers who are committed to learning about social justice and to bringing this practice to bear in their work in schools and grassroots teacher groups. At core, this dissertation chronicles how organized activist teachers might build stronger and tighter relationships and learning communities in order to engage in transformative learning about critical social justice issues. It presents a new framework for conceptualizing how educators might change the world through building relational and pedagogical bridges, and how they might build a stronger sense of collective power as they work together to change their own hearts and minds.

1.1 Research Questions

The research questions driving this study arise from both my reading of the scholarly literature as well as my experiences observing and organizing within the Philadelphia
educational activist community. The central research questions are: When politically active teachers come together in an inquiry group to discuss structural racism, how do they engage in individual and collective learning processes? How do they perceive the shape, form and effect of their learning?

1.2 Scholarly Significance

This study implicitly critiques a common framing of teachers as technicians (Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000) and instead positions teachers as active, organized agents who value working alongside other teachers and parents, students, and community members to trigger institutional and policy change (see Bascia, 2009; Basu, 2007; Blanc & Simon, 2007; Gold, Good & Blanc, 2011; Sachs, 2003). At core, this dissertation frames teachers as motivated change agents who are willing and eager to learn, transform their practice, and work together to improve equity and address social injustices within and beyond their activist organizations and schools. In so doing, it builds scholarship in three specific realms: the significance of collaboration in teachers’ learning initiatives; the relationship between learning and teachers’ social justice work; and, how multiracial learning supports teachers’ antiracist organizing and activism.

First, this dissertation examines the significance of collaboration in teachers’ learning efforts. There is substantial scholarship examining how teachers make sense of and implement curriculum, pedagogy, and policy structures (Coburn, 2001; Cohen, 1990; Ingersoll, 2003; Knapp, 2002). Much of this work looks at how teachers come to conceptualize and implement curricular and pedagogical demands placed on them by broader institutional contexts, including the school, district, or state and national policy arenas. A smaller body of scholarship is centrally concerned with how teachers engage with and shape broader policy demands and school contexts to meet the local needs of their students (Bascia & Maton, 2015; Beattie, 2002;
Picower, 2012). But in this literature, teachers are frequently positioned and conceptualized as lone agents working behind closed doors to effect change within their local classrooms (Little, 1990), rather than as centrally committed to collaborative and relational processes of knowledge generation and collective transformation (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Scholarship that does account for teachers’ collaboration in professional learning endeavors frequently shows the limitations posed by forced collaboration—what Hargreaves (1991) terms “contrived collegiality.” There is a dearth of scholarship examining the form and function of teachers’ voluntary collaborative learning efforts and the potential benefit this holds for teachers individually and collectively.

In response to this relative absence, this study builds theory about the nature and role of collaborative—rather than individualized—learning in teachers’ organizing and professional work. By specifically looking at teachers who voluntarily come together collaboratively to learn about structural racism and to act on this learning in ways that extend beyond the inquiry group, the study builds understanding about how teachers might apply collaboratively-constructed learning to their activist organizations and other professional realms, including classrooms.

Second, this dissertation builds greater understanding of the significance of professional learning on teachers’ social justice commitments and work within and beyond schools. Education is frequently positioned by policymakers and scholars as a panacea to social ills, including the problems of political disengagement and chronic structural and social inequities (see Darling-Hammond, 2010; Loflin, 2008; Mathis, 2010). In this paradigm, teachers are framed as the key to producing civic-minded students with liberal democratic values who will overcome all structural obstacles to achieve economic stability in their adult lives (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Race to the Top Fund, 2016). However, even in this paradigm, where teachers are framed as the key to maximizing democratic and equity-minded
values, there is limited understanding of the connection between teachers’ personal learning and their professional work promoting social justice and equity concerns within and beyond schools and their political organizations. There is some work being done to develop and publish social justice curriculum and related pedagogical techniques for teachers’ classroom use (see Education for Liberation Network, 2016; Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, 2016; New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2016; Rethinking Schools, 2016); however, little is known about the worldviews that social justice minded teachers themselves carry, or how these might shift over time as a result of concerted learning opportunities and efforts. Furthermore, little is known about how teachers perceive the impact of such social justice learning on their personal, professional, and political lives.

This study strives to address this gap by building scholarly knowledge about how collaborative inquiry supports skill development and worldview change among activist and politically organized teachers. Furthermore, the study explores the effects teachers perceive this learning to have on their work in schools and activist organizations, as well as on their home and personal lives.

Third, this dissertation builds understanding about how multiracial collaboration and learning might support teachers’ antiracist organizing and activism. There is some scholarship that examines the specific experiences of racialized and immigrant teachers within schools (Bascia, 1996; Foster, 1990; Hoodfar, 1997; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Thomas & Warren, 2013; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Much of this scholarship shows that teachers’ professional lives are intimately tied to their cultural and racialized identities, and that they face the same embedded barriers and discrimination within their workplaces as prevail within broader society. There is also discourse arising about the potential of multiracial partnerships for strengthening antiracist learning and action (see hooks, 2003; Tatum, 2003; Warren, 2010). However, little is known about how multiracial groups of teachers account for and/or overcome racial identity
differences to work and learn together and to strengthen their professional antiracist work and movements. This study addresses these gaps by building deeper knowledge about existing barriers and the necessary supports required for effective multiracial collaboration among teachers, and pays particular attention to highlighting how pedagogical and relational elements support multiracial collaborative learning.

1.3 Review of the Scholarly Literature

This dissertation examines the collaborative learning practices of nine activist educators who came together to make sense of racial justice and put this learning into practice within their teacher organization. The study examines what factors facilitated and/or limited their learning, and how. In so doing, it draws and builds upon four areas of scholarship: teacher learning, pedagogy, relationships, and diffusion of learning. In this section, I present a brief review of the literature in each of these four areas of scholarship, and point to their major assertions, areas of strength, and gaps in scholarship.

Teacher Learning

*Learning is both an individual act and a social act that draws on personal experience and social context* (Gadsden, 2008, p. 47).

‘[I]nquiry as stance’ is a framework that repositions practitioners at the center of educational transformation by capitalizing on their collective intellectual capacity when working in collaboration with many other stakeholders in the educational process (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 153).

As teachers collaboratively seek to initiate change in the education system and beyond, they engage in continuous and complex processes of social learning. This study builds understanding of how teachers come together to make sense of social justice issues, broader politics, policies (see Coburn, 2001), and potentials for grassroots organizing (Maton, 2016) as they organize within and beyond their union for education system change. It examines the
interconnections between teachers’ internal conceptual and operational learning processes (see Mezirow, 2000), the ways in which teachers engage in praxis (see Foley, 1999; Freire, 1970/2004), the textual and informational sources that teachers draw upon, and how collaboration shapes teachers’ learning. In so doing, the study brings together four areas of scholarly study on learning: social movement learning, transformative education, teacher education, and practitioner inquiry.

The social movement learning (SML) literature examines learning in social movements and activist groups. This literature asserts that social movements must be understood as pedagogical endeavors, where there is a spirit of support for autonomous learning as well as collective knowledge construction (Hall, 2012). Hall and Clover (2005) define social movement learning as both: “(a) learning by persons who are part of any social movement; and (b) learning by persons outside of a social movement as a result of actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements” (584). Social movement learning can result from informal activities in movements such as campaign organizing, or from intentional activities that explicitly seek learning as an outcome such as activist workshops or conferences (Hall & Clover, 2005). Foley (1999) argues, “popular struggles and movements have a, so far little studied, learning dimension, which when examined yields insights into the dynamics and effects of social movement activity” (143). In this sense, Foley frames learning as intrinsic to and inseparable from the political processes of social movements and their organizations. When applied to studying politically-active teachers’ learning, the SML literature implies that teacher learning results from frequently informal and unintentional activities embedded within social justice organizing and educational activism, and that examination of activist teachers’ learning processes reveals patterns structuring and driving teacher organizing and activism more broadly.

The transformative education literature views learning as a personally- and politically-
situated process embedded within informal structures and daily life. Mezirow (1991, 2000) theorizes how the human condition may be seen as “a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 3), and positions learning as a process that happens when an individual’s “frames of reference,” or ways of seeing and understanding the world, are put into practice and then refined, modified and altered. In his later work, Mezirow (2000) highlights how shifting views of the world hold potential for nurturing greater individual emancipation and freedom, where the individual might challenge her/his assumptions and achieve liberation from patterns and systems previously thought inescapable.

Scholarly work on learning for social transformation dates back to the 1970’s and has devoted significant time and pages to exploring how groups of people sharing similar ideologies and activist sensibilities construct knowledge (see Foley, 1999; Freire, 1970/2004; Mayo, 1999). Transformative education sees education and learning as a project of a revolutionary mindset, wherein a broader transformation of society is enabled through smaller individualized projects of personal growth. While much of this work looks at the individual emancipatory potential of learning, there is a gap in knowledge about how collaboration supports group learning processes.

The teacher education literature frames teacher learning and professional development as a vital component of professional growth (see Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bascia, 2000). This literature tends to emphasize the significance of professional learning for teachers’ enhanced ability to incorporate new curricular and pedagogical techniques into their classroom and frames professional learning as vital for teachers’ adherence to policy demands. The scholarly and policy literature frequently positions policymakers as responsible for designing curricular and pedagogical interventions and teachers as the passive purveyors of technocratic demands (Cochran-Smith et al, 2016), rather than framing teachers as active and critical constructors of knowledge in their own right (see Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000). This dissertation builds on this
work to position teachers as agentive knowledge constructors in multiple professional realms, including their classrooms, schools, activist organizations, and broader political contexts.

The scholarship on practitioner inquiry responds to the tendency to frame teachers as recipients—rather than constructors—of knowledge through exploring how teachers can employ inquiry groups to collectively reconstitute systems of knowledge. This scholarship centralizes teachers as both producers and recipients of knowledge and frames meaningful learning as emerging from critical questions in teachers’ daily and professional practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Riley, 2015b; Simon & Campano, 2013). Much of this scholarship examines how teachers engage inquiry groups to make sense of their students’ lives and learning experiences (Ballenger, 2009; Campano, 2007; Himley & Carini, 2000), the mechanics of establishing positive and productive collaborative communities in schools (Achinstein, 2002; Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, 2009; Hargreaves, 2008; Himley, 1991; Louis, 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stokes, 2001), and how to construct insight and strategies that might be explicitly taken up by teacher networks extending beyond the local school (see Himley & Carini, 2000).

The practitioner inquiry literature also frequently addresses how teacher inquiry groups can support social justice concerns in schools. Some of this scholarship examines how teachers make sense of the needs and experiences of students experiencing social marginalization (Campano, 2007; Campano, Ngo & Player, 2015). Other scholarship examines teachers’ use of inquiry groups to construct strategic approaches for advancing social justice concerns (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016; Griffiths, 2009). And, a small body of scholarship examines how teachers use inquiry groups to engage in personal reflection on their own identities as gendered, raced, and classed beings (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Michael, 2015; Waff, 2009). Of particular note is Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009b) work, which positions inquiry as a stance that might be carried into all facets of teachers’ professional lives, and knowledge
generation as holding agentive potential for increasing institutional responsiveness to student and community need.

Across these four areas of scholarship, there is little understanding of the form, function and significance of collaboration in learning processes. Furthermore, there is little understanding of the role that inquiry groups might play in supporting collaborative learning specifically regarding racial justice and oppression, and how this learning might trigger change in multiple realms composing teachers’ personal, professional and political lives. More work also needs to be done to examine the influence of teachers’ racial and gender identities on what and how they learn in groups. This study begins to fill this gap through examining the form and function of critical collaborative learning in an inquiry group composed of multiracial teachers, as they collectively strive to make sense of structural racism.

**Pedagogy**

*Pedagogy is a means whereby people might learn new ways of identifying relationally in order to develop new forms of reflexive identity* (Chappell, Rhodes, Soloman, Tennant & Yates, 2003, p. 56).

*The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second... this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people* (Freire, 1970/2004, p. 54).

When people come together to work on a common mission and cause, learning is implicitly embedded in the interactions between group members (Choudry, 2012; Foley, 1999; Hall, 2012). Pedagogical techniques and approaches structure the shape, form and results of these informal and formal learning opportunities and experiences, and thus it might be understood that pedagogy shapes what and how people learn in groups. There is a dearth of research exploring how pedagogical practices, including specific pedagogical processes and
literacy enactments such as reading and writing, shape the form and substance of learning within social justice minded teacher groups.

**Critical Pedagogy and Practice**


This dissertation builds particularly on the work of pedagogical strategists like Freire, through naming and examining what specific pedagogical elements supported the learning of group members.

**Literacy and Pedagogy**

The dissertation also builds on work in the field of critical literacy studies in conceptualizing the role of reading and writing in group learning. It brings together Freirean literacy theory and New Literacy Studies (NLS) to investigate the lived pedagogical experiences of learning and literacy in teachers’ professional and political lives.

Freire’s (1970/2004) book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, constructs a model for understanding how literacy and learning support and construct social change efforts. Adult literacy learning and dialogue are positioned as the means through which people might build knowledge about systems of hegemony and domination, and learn to critique broader social, economic, and political systems while simultaneously positioning oneself as a change agent.
Fundamental to this notion of literacy as personal agency within systems of oppression is Freire’s notion of praxis, which involves an iterative and recursive relationship between reflection and action. Freire’s critique of power and his positioning of agency bring together the field of literacy studies with social and transformative learning theory to construct a framework that identifies and critiques systems of power while positioning humans as powerful agents of change. The human ability to trigger change in dominant systems and ideology is thought bound up in the human potential for learning, critique, and triggering change in personal outlooks and worldviews.

NLS presents a model for deeper exploration of the specific role of literacy in the daily lives of people, both in and out of school (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Gee, 2010; Street, 2003, 2005; Street & Lefstein, 2007). Here, literacy is framed as a social theory of practice: “Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilizing written language which people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy” (Street, 2007, p. 143). Critiquing previous understandings of literacy for their taking up of an “autonomous” (i.e., uni-directional and non-reflexive) framework, Street (2003, 2007) argues that literacy enactments vary from one context to another, and are “embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street, 2003, p. 77). Together, Freire and Street inform an understanding of literacy that takes place through active and critical engagement with the written page, where understandings of—and interactions with—the text are inherently bound up in the individual’s socially embedded experiences.

It is significant to this study to note that Freire and Street tend to reinforce the significance of the individual rather than the collective. Both scholars situate the individual as intrinsically bound up in broader ideological and cultural forces. However, they fail to conceptualize learning itself as an inherently collective and collaborative act. Freire presents the concept of praxis to represent his notion of learning, but this framework positions the
individual as engaged in critical learning processes in ways that are separate from the critical theorizing and learning of others. Street critiques autonomous models of literacy and presents literacy as bound up in broader ideological forces, but still examines the ways in which literacy is enacted by individuals, rather than examining literacy as a fundamentally mutually constituted force through which people collectively construct and exert agency and strategic capacity.

Despite this critique, critical literacy scholars including Street—and particularly Freire—offer provocative concepts for understanding the relationship between literacy and broader systemic power structures and dynamics. Both scholars frame literacy as agentive and holding great promise for triggering shifted notions of social, political, and economic power dynamics. Their research holds implications for work on activist teachers’ collaborative learning processes through highlighting the necessity of understanding how teachers’ learning and literacy practices are shaped by prior experiences, families, communities, home cultures, workplaces, and involvement in activist groups and networks. They frame literacy enactments and learning as a means for aligning social ideals with one’s daily life, and show that shifts in worldview and outlook, supported through literacy education, can support broader social change.

This dissertation builds on work in the fields of critical pedagogy and critical literacies to examine how pedagogical processes and tools support the collaborative learning process. The study examines how teachers draw upon and produce texts individually and collectively, and looks at how the pedagogical integration of texts supports collaborative learning. Further, the study examines how specific pedagogical practices, and especially those emerging from liberatory and transformative movements, support collaborative learning in the teacher inquiry group.
Relationships

Trust has, paradoxically, been likened to both a glue and a lubricant. As ‘glue,’ trust binds organizational participants to one another. Without it, things fall apart... As ‘lubricant,’ trust greases the machinery of an organization. Trust facilitates communication and contributes to greater efficiency when people have confidence in the integrity of other people’s words and deeds (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 18).

The principles that govern interaction between black and women folks in a white-supremacist society, that help us resist and form solidarity, need to be identified. One principle is the will to form a conscious, cooperative partnership that is rooted in mutuality (hooks, 2003, p. 63).

People draw upon their unique experiences and knowledge when they work with others to make common sense of a critical social justice theme like structural racism. When sense-making is situated within an inquiry group, participants frequently draw upon their experiences in the world as raced and gendered people with intersecting identities (for more on intersectionality, see Hancock, 2016; Lorde, 1984) as they reflect upon and sometimes challenge their established beliefs about the topic and the world (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Michael, 2015). Relationships are central to how people come together to learn and make sense of a topic, and the development of trust can support group and individual learning about difficult topics like race and racism among people from disparate identities and experiences (Tatum, 1997; Warren, 2010).

Trusting Relationships

There is a substantial body of work on trust in the field of education (Cosner, 2009; Louis, 2006; Meier, 2002; Noonan & Walker, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2011, 2012). There is a general consensus among this varied scholarship that trust means “one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 17). The literature on trust in education tends to position trust as a utilitarian phenomenon for creating
quality and effective schools, and devotes substantial attention to questions of how to establish trust between specific pairings of school agents—such as administrators and teachers, teachers and parents, teachers and students, and others (see Adams, 2008; Noonan, Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

This literature tends to be based on two premises: first, that trust is necessary for effective and quality schools; and second, that school administrators hold core responsibility for—and face the most substantial barriers in—building trust in the school site. There is a substantial gap in literature that examines the significance of trust in teacher-to-teacher relationships, and the ways trust shapes what and how teachers learn within and beyond schools. Furthermore, the literature tends to overlook the significance of trust in relationships extending across diverse identities—including race and gender. This study strives to help fill this gap through examining the role of trust among a small group of racially and gender diverse teachers who work in different schools within the same geographic region. The study strives to de-center the literature’s focus on trust as significant for supporting effective hierarchical leadership in schools, and instead positions trust as significant for non-hierarchical group work, and specifically within a teacher inquiry group. The study strives to build better understanding of how trust-building and relationship development functions in a diverse group of teachers, and how trust and relationships impact the collaborative learning process.

**Identity and Learning Relationships**

“Critical race feminism” (Wing, 2003) brings together scholarship in critical race studies and feminism. The perspective centralizes a critical analysis of the ways in which social, political and economic systems and structures of power maintain ongoing social inequity and oppression for people holding marginalized racial and gender identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancie, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; see also Hancock, 2016). Central to a critical race feminist perspective is the view that race and gender
are themselves socially constructed phenomena. Hegemonic structures and agents construct
notions of identity that reinforce and maintain dominant hegemonic structures, and retain
power for some at the expense of others (see Butler, 1990; Holt, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994).
Society creates the terrain on which these oppressions operate by establishing the realms of
possibility for gender and race identity and enactments (see Butler, 1990). And yet, people
exert some agency and power within these pre-designed structures (Gadsden, 2007). People
align themselves with particular aspects of assigned identity roles and resist others (see
Anzaldua, 2012; Lorde, 1984), and they strategically enact agency through working particular
aspects of socially-defined identity categories to their political, social and economic advantage
(for more on strategic alignment of identity with dominant power structures, see Gualtieri,
2009). In this sense, identity might be understood as governed and mediated through broad
social discourses, but also enacted agentively by individual people within a broader system of
socialization, surveillance and governance (for more on surveillance and power, see Foucault,

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) presents a potent view of the ways in which inequity and
oppression are systematized and maintained through ideological modes, and how these might
be upended by adopting alternative frameworks for recognizing knowledge and power within
those experiencing social marginalization—and specifically African American women. Collins
(2000) defines oppression as “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long
period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (p. 6). She
frames oppression as maintained through ideology, which is “the body of ideas reflecting the
interests of a group of people” (p. 7). Collins asserts: “Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist
ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely,
seen as natural, normal, and inevitable” (p. 7). Collins shows that dominant populations
privilege their own ideologies and that this privileging leads to the pervasive failure of
majority populations to recognize or to value wisdom and knowledge presented by
subordinated others through varied modes and discourses.

Intersectionality theory examines how identities overlap and intersect to elicit social,
political and economic effects rooted in the maintenance of inequitable power structures. The
theory examines how social and cultural categories—including race, gender, sexuality, class,
ability, religion, language and age—interact on multiple and simultaneous levels (Crenshaw,
the assertion that identity itself is socially constructed, intersectionality theory lends a critical
view to how systems continually reproduce and reinforce diverse ranges of inequitable social,
political and economic results for people in accordance with varied intersecting identities.
Intersectionality theory also draws attention to the significance of individual identity in
relationships between people in groups, both for the potential ways intersecting identities
shape individual relationships between group members, as well as the form and depth of
learning made possible by identity-based group dynamics.

Critical race feminism with an intersectional analysis reveals that the deeply
embedded nature of institutionalized racism and sexism poses a formidable barrier to the
construction and maintenance of anti-oppressive public schooling. In this view, integrating the
histories of diverse peoples into curriculum, or recognizing the key roles and prominence
played by people of color and women in classroom courses are superficial fixes which fail to
fundamentally alter harmful institutionalized oppression (Sleeter, 1999). Thus, adopting a
critical race feminist viewpoint implies that we must critique the fundamental structures of
social systems—such as public schooling—in order to reveal the ways that institutions
perpetuate and maintain social inequity.⁵

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⁵ It is also worth noting that there has been substantial growth in the scholarship examining whiteness in educative spaces in the past half decade. Castagno (2014), Leonardo (2009), Michael (2014) and Warren
This dissertation brings together scholarship on trust with critical race feminism and intersectionality theory to examine the possibilities of relationships for supporting teachers’ perspective change and anti-oppressive social justice work. The study examines how a small group of multiracial teachers challenge their own and others’ perspectives as they strive to build collective insight into the form and function of structural racism within society, the school system, and their activist organization. The study is also concerned with how inquiry group members understand and mobilize their racial and gender identities in the collaborative learning process.

**Diffusion of Learning**

*Knowledge production is central to both the making and meaning of social movements* (Conway, 2006, p. 21).

*But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It’s about bringing those possible futures ‘back’ to work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today* (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 3).

Social movement theory is a framework that helps researchers identify and understand the interlinking role and significance of individuals, organizations and broader systems of power in the lifecycle of a social movement (Snow & Soule, 2010; Staggenborg, 2002). Social movement theory examines micro, meso and macro levels of action separately and together, and gives substantial focus to the significance of resources and framing in social movements. However, there is limited scholarship examining the influence of processes of learning,

(2010) have examined from different but complementary angles how whites make sense of the relationship between whiteness and systemic structures, including education and schools. Castango (2014) provides a close ethnographic view of how whiteness operates in schools, while Michael (2014) looks at how white people—particularly teachers—can engage in critical inquiry into race as a way of developing antiracist classrooms and positive racial identities. Leonardo (2009) tracks ways whiteness infuses systemic structures of schooling and argues that market-based and capitalist initiatives within education need to be reconceptualized and critiqued for their racist effects. Warren (2010) broadens this work beyond education to point out that education is fundamental to white activism and involvement in antiracist movements and politics. In this dissertation I draw upon this scholarship to reveal ways in which whiteness operated in the multiracial inquiry group space.
knowledge construction and meaning-making on movement formation, structure and longevity, and its influence on the experiences and identities of activists, or on their organizations and social movement work more broadly.

In the past twenty years, researchers have sought to address this literature gap from a variety of directions. For example, there has been an increase in social movement theory work on identity and culture within social movements (della Porta & Diani, 1999; Meyer, 2002); however, this has generally not been explored from a learning-oriented perspective (Sawchuk, 2007). A handful of scholars have examined the processes of knowledge construction within movements and how this impacts individual activist identities and work (see Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Conway, 2006; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991); but while this work tracks the influence of knowledge production at the individual level, it fails to fully acknowledge and describe the influence of collaboration in social movements and its effect on organizational structure. There has also been an increase in the work on diffusion (see Rogers, 1983) of ideas within social movements (Givan, Roberts & Soule, 2010); however, the research has not sufficiently explained how learning, pedagogical processes and relationships contribute to the spread of knowledge over time and space. There persists a limited breadth of literature examining the significance and form of collaborative learning in social movements, and how it impacts individual people, organizations, the movement, and society.

The term diffusion was initially popularized by Everett Rogers through his 1962 book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, which sought to explain how, why and at what rate new ideas and technology spread. Diffusion is theorized as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 1983, p. 5). The concept has been adopted within social movement theory to examine how ideas spread over time and space. Social movement theorists Givan, Roberts & Soule (2010) argue that diffusion tends to be highly relational and that it is multidimensional in
process, extending along diverse lines of actors, networks, and mechanisms of spread. Chabot (2010) shows that dialogue can impact diffusion and serve constructive purposes, and defines dialogue as “an ongoing and joint discovery process that leads to new questions rather than conclusive answers” (p. 104). Thus, learning may be understood as supported by dialogue and located well beyond the limits of individual and organizational boundaries.

This dissertation builds on social movement theory scholarship on diffusion to examine how social movement actors’ collaborative learning shapes their work in multiple realms extending beyond the inquiry group. More specifically, the study examines how teachers perceive the effects of their learning on their personal lives, professional work within schools and activist organizations, and the vision and structure of their broader activist organization.

1.4 A New Theory of Collaborative Learning

This dissertation presents a new theory of collaborative learning that brings together the four areas of scholarly study identified in section 1.3: teacher learning, pedagogy, relationships, and diffusion of learning. The theory emerged from the data in my study, which tracks the shape and form of learning amongst teachers as they learn about structural racism and apply this learning to their activist organizing practice. This new theory of collaborative learning specifically emerged from my study of teachers’ learning about structural racism, but I suggest that the theory might be applied to understanding the nature, form and function of learning in groups more broadly.
Collaborative learning may be understood as the collective and social search for knowledge and transformation. It involves an interactive and recursive relationship between four components that together characterize a collective sense-making process rooted in social participation. These components, shown in Figure 1.1, include the following:

1) **Learning**: people bring resources, prior learning, histories, and experiences to bear on their group participation. Each of these aspects might be considered a “text.” People learn through sharing and reflecting on their personal texts and through considering those offered by others. Depthy reflection on diverse texts supports new learning within both individuals and the group.

2) **Pedagogy**: pedagogical techniques and modes construct new opportunities for people to work and learn together. Pedagogy supports interpersonal work and collaboration, and thus creates opportunity for group learning and relationship development.

3) **Relationships**: developing trusting relationships supports group work and learning. Relationships extend between individual group members and also
encompass the group more broadly. These are fundamental to supporting group pedagogy and individual and group learning.

4) **Diffusion**: personal and group learning means the development of altered worldviews, perspectives, and/or practical techniques. Learning leads to possibilities for altered engagement with others and changes in the ways people conceptualize, approach, and do their work in workplaces, organizations, and the world.

These four components are mutually interactive and reliant. The first three components (learning, pedagogy and relationships) might be switched to any order and still act as a coherent theory. Diffusion is intrinsically bound up in the personal and group learning process and results from the mutual reliance and interactions of learning, pedagogy, and relationships. Together, these four components compose a new theory for understanding the nature, form and function of collaborative learning.

It is worth noting that the use of the term “collaborative learning” refers to this theory broadly, including within the dissertation title. The four components identified above also inform the structure of this dissertation—each data chapter explores one component in turn, and the conclusion draws out broad characteristics of collaborative learning across these multiple categories.

### 1.5 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is structured in the following way. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 present a deeper view of the contexts and design of the study. Chapter 2 provides insight into the background and contexts of the study. Specifically, it explores how national ideology and policy, teacher organizing, and the Philadelphia context shape local activists’ understandings of the problems facing education. I also present an introduction and overview of the Caucus of
Working Educators, the organization in which this study is situated, and highlight significant aspects of the Caucus’ formation, vision and platform, structure, and membership. Chapter 3 presents the methodology employed in this research, including study design, researcher roles, and ethical and methodological concerns.

Chapters 4 through 7 are data analysis and discussion chapters. These are structured to highlight my theory of collaborative learning, as presented in section 1.4, and each chapter engages with one component of the overarching theory. Chapter 4 examines the nature of learning in the collective effort to make sense of structural racism. In it, I assert that collaborative learning for racial justice is bound up in the development of group goals. Learning is made visible through a dialogic process that strives to make common meaning about the nature and work of structural racism and racial injustice in participants’ daily personal and professional lives. I assert that identity is intimately wrapped up in group learning processes, and specifically explore how multiracial learning, white privilege and gender identity shaped the collaborative learning experiences of the group. I examine the connections between inquiry and action within the learning process, and conclude the chapter with an examination of the role of individual learning in group learning processes.

Chapter 5 examines how pedagogical processes support literacy learning in the inquiry group space. The chapter is divided into two main parts. In the first part, I explore how literacy acts as reflective action shaping the group’s work. I specifically look at the complexities posed by time in teachers’ literacy learning, the role of reading and listening, and the role of writing and speaking in collaborative learning processes. Next, I identify and examine several key pedagogical elements of the group and how these impacted the learning experience. I specifically examine in turn: facilitation style; group norms; the role of discussing and creating definitions; engaging in go-arounds; geographic space in the group; the role of storytelling in
learning; the effect of talk time on group members; the role of taking action; and explicit conversations about group dynamics to support collaborative learning processes.

Chapter 6 examines the significance of relationships and trust-building in the learning process. The chapter opens by recounting a pivotal moment from an inquiry group session, and the meaning this moment held for participants in the group and the ways they continued to engage with questions raised throughout the remainder of the group meetings. Next, I discuss how racial identity differences shape the Caucus’ relationship with local African American communities, and the significance of this broader context for learning in the inquiry group space. The following section looks at the role of trust in individual relationships across racial identity differences. Then, I identify six key factors that supported the building of trust in the inquiry group. I show that previous relationships, building a sense of common purpose, acknowledging privilege, honesty and vulnerability, listening and acceptance, and the sense that one is supported by group members in spaces extending beyond the inquiry group, all supported the growth of trust in the group. I follow up this discussion with a description of four key “bumps in the road” or complications in trust-building. I probe more deeply into the complexities inherent in collaborative learning initiatives in multiracial spaces, and then describe the complexities inherent in three specific relational tools: humor, politeness and conflict. I argue that humor, politeness and conflict each contribute supports and barriers to building trust in collaborative learning spaces.

Chapter 7, the final findings chapter, explores how collaborative learning was perceived to diffuse outside the small inquiry group space to create broader change. I explore in turn how collaborative learning shaped teachers’ personal lives, their professional work, and the work of the broader activist organization. Chapter 8 closes with a discussion of the major findings from the data, and also offers several implications for research, practice and policy.
CHAPTER 2: Background and Context

Whittier (2002) identifies social movements as engaged in recursive and mutually shaping relationships with broader contexts. She writes: “State structures, dominant cultures, and civil society shape movements, and, in turn, movements can reshape the states, policies, civil societies, and cultures within which they operate” (p. 289). This study builds on Whittier’s notion of mutual and reciprocal shaping across contexts, and applies it to examining the connection between this study’s small inquiry group and broader contexts. Following this logic, the inquiry group was active in producing change within organizational and institutional contexts (see Chapter 7), even as surrounding contexts actively shaped the concerns, viewpoints, experiences and understandings of participants and the group. The learning experiences of study participants were intimately bound up with broader local and national ideological, organizational and political contexts.

The context/s significant to this study may be visualized as multiple rings of concentric circles. Surrounding the core circle, composed of the inquiry group are, in turn, the Caucus of Working Educators, Philadelphia, the national teacher organizing movement, and national ideology and policy. In order to identify and reveal the background and contexts influencing the study, this chapter provides an overview of the significance of each of these four identified contexts.

The chapter is structured as follows, and works from outer ring of the circle (see Figure 2.1)—i.e. the macro-level context—inward. First, I provide an overview of current ideological discourses in educational policy and governance. Here, I identify and discuss political trends toward market regulation, standardization and privatization of education and schooling, and their resulting effects on children and communities of color. Second, I highlight how the scholarly literature has framed and discussed teachers and other educational workers
in light of their activist and change-making work and identities. I show that grassroots collaboration in response to trends of marketization of education is a growing movement, and connect this collaborative activist work with the current growing movement for social justice unionism (SJU) across the USA. Next, I highlight several specific aspects of the Philadelphia education context and connect these contextual factors with the birth of WE. And finally, I provide background on the formation, vision and platform, structure and membership of Philadelphia’s Caucus of Working Educators.

**Figure 2.1: Study Contexts**

![Study Contexts Diagram](image)

### 2.1 National Ideology and Policy

The scholarly literature and American activism together reveal two strands of ideology shaping the politics, form and function of education in the U.S. First, principles of neoliberalism emphasize austerity budgets, markets and choice, and the regulation of schooling (Apple, 2004, 2006; Harvey, 2005; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 1995). The move toward the privatization and standardization of public education results both in the growth in number of charter schools, which obtain public money for private interest and sometimes
profit, and a proliferation of standardized testing of students and assessment of teacher quality (Baker & Miron, 2015; Basu, 2007; Hursh, 2004; Ravitch, 2010).

Second, legacies of racism persist in shaping the form and function of American society, governance, and public education (Orfield & Lee, 2005; Leonardo, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Stovall, 2013). There exist substantial gaps in the achievement of African American and Latino youth when compared with their white counterparts, and these continue to persist long after the legal end of segregated schooling (Reardon, Robinson-Cimpian & Weathers, 2015). Racialized children and families experiencing poverty suffer as a result of embedded inequitable funding structures and neoliberalist governance of education (Hedges & Sacco, 2012; Hursh, 2004).

Neoliberalism

Since the late 1970s, there has been a progressive demise of social democratic structures in the U.S. Governance that formerly sought “regulation of the markets and its outcomes for the purposes of attaining social justice” (Gall, Hurd & Wilkinson, 2011, p. 4) has been increasingly eroded and replaced with mechanisms for ensuring enhanced privatization of formerly state-distributed provisions. The new driving ideology asserts that market systems are the most efficient and equitable regulator of social and economic functions of American society, and this ideology has come to drive policy and governance in the U.S. and many other countries worldwide (Gall, Hurd & Wilkinson, 2011; Harvey, 2005; Larner, 2000).

When applied to American education, this premise has led to a trend toward replacing state-provisioned schooling with market-based solutions in order to maximize system “efficiency” (Rottmann, 2008). Choice rhetoric assumes that “good schools” will naturally draw more students, while lower-quality schools will experience depleted enrollment and be forced to close (Ravitch, 2010). “Good schools” are typically evaluated as such through their
students’ performance on state designed standardized tests (Allington, 2010; Hursh & Martina, 2003). Meanwhile, the market is thought to naturally and efficiently regulate the provision of high-quality schooling to all students regardless of their race, economic status, or other socio-economic identities (Baetjer, 2015; Coulson, 2009).

Under neoliberalist framing, students are primarily seen as future workers whose function is to contribute to the national and global economy. The ideology asserts that the school system’s primary function is to secure and monitor students’ individual competitiveness in order to support this future economy (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

Standardized tests are touted as the most efficient mode for generating statistics that allow for comparison of students, teachers and schools across diverse geographic and cultural locations (Race to the Top Fund, 2016; Ravitch, 2010; Supovitz, 2009). Willis (2008) argues that evaluating the worth of students primarily in light of their competition with each other and their contributions to a national economy reflect an ideological orientation laden with racist legacies and values that support the “sorting” and limiting of opportunity for poor and racialized children.

The belief in the value of standardization also extends to the structure and regulation of teachers’ classrooms. Curriculum and pedagogy are aligned with standardized testing for the purpose of improved student test performance (Ravitch, 2010). Standardized curriculum often creates limited space for more localized definitions of what constitutes necessary knowledge, especially for families who experience racial or economic marginalization (Willis, 2008). Furthermore, the curriculum is infused with what some argue to be hegemonic structures of power, in that it serves to reinforce specific ways of understanding and interpreting the world, and thus reproduces dominant ideology (Apple, 2004). Teachers’ classrooms increasingly become externally regulated and standardized spaces that must meet the demands of national governance structures, and this emphasis limits teacher and

Recent national and state policy initiatives targeting American teacher evaluation systems have also been fuelled by rhetorics of standardization. National funding formulas tied to Obama’s Race to the Top policy dictate that states must adopt models of teacher evaluations incorporating measures of students’ learning “growth” in relation to their performance on standardized tests (see Race to the Top Fund, 2016). This model assumes that growth in student learning is reflected through shifts in standardized test scores over the school year, where teachers are expected to bring their students from point A (quantitative performance of incoming students on standardized tests) to point B (measured statistical growth in quantitative student performance on standardized tests at the end of the school year). Teacher quality is tied to how effectively students perform on a defined curriculum dictated by policy and the state, rather than on teachers’ ability to build upon the local community’s “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 2005) or their responsiveness to the local interests and learning needs of their students (Nieto, 2009).

In addition to the enhanced standardization of curriculum, metrics of learning, and measures of teacher effectiveness, there is a growing trend toward privatization of public schooling. Private corporations are increasingly dominating functions previously performed by teachers and the state, such as curriculum development, standardized test development, and even the provision of schooling itself (Hursh & Martina, 2003; Ravitch, 2010, 2013). Mega-corporations like Pearson have their hands in multiple pots as they publish textbooks and curriculum while simultaneously developing and publishing standardized tests (Reingold, 2015; Simon, 2015; Testing industry’s big four, 2015). Charter schools and voucher systems are increasingly popular across the United States, as public money is directed out of the local district and into the coffers of charter schools that are known for offering low- to mid-quality
schooling opportunities, discriminating against which students they will enroll, underpaying teachers and other educational workers, union-busting, and depleting local school districts of valuable necessary funds (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Hursh, 2004; Ravitch, 2010; 2013).

Within this system valuing market regulation, standardization, individual choice and corporatization, narrow conceptions prevail about whose values and viewpoints count in policy development (see Bascia, 1994; Gold, Good & Blanc, 2011, Rottmann, 2008). National-, state- and district-level policy discourse and documents tend to take a technocratic approach to framing policy rationales and design, identifying researchers and policymakers as best suited for identifying student need and then developing curriculum and defining school functions in response (Bailey, 2000; Kumashiro, 2012). Teachers are presented as implementers of policy, rather than as experts holding key knowledge about student need or effective classroom practice that may inform policy construction (Bailey, 2000; Kumashiro, 2012; see also Bascia & Hargreaves, 2000). Teachers are charged with implementing varied—and sometimes conflicting—policies within their classrooms, often to what they perceive as the detriment of their students (Ravitch, 2010). And, teachers are expected to follow orders, but are not framed as intellectual knowledge workers and producers in their own right (Bascia, 2001; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kumashiro, 2012).

Legacies of Racism

The oppression of people holding racialized identities dates back to before the official origin of the United States. Starting with the slave trade and continuing today through the work of institutions like the justice and education systems, racial oppression has continued to form the basis of American social and economic systems (Alexander, 2010; Anderson, 1988; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Bonilla-Silva (1997) argues, “racism is the ideological apparatus of a racialized social system [sic]. This means that racial phenomena in any society have their
own structures” (p. 466). In his formulation, the racial structure of society may be detected through the impact of racism in specific social circumstances. Smedley & Smedley (2012) argue that race itself is a worldview, one produced through dominant ideology that maintains the power of some (generally whites) to the exclusion of the racialized other. And powell (2014) argues that race operates as a strong organizing principle that has continually structured all institutions organizing and governing American society and economics.

This history of racial oppression is in part rooted in a long history of segregation, which continues to shape the form and function of American education. After many years of social protests, activism and legal work (see for example Countryman, 2006), the United States Supreme Court ruled in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) case that “the segregation of children in schools was unconstitutional and in direct violation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution” (Cross, 2010, p. 8). This decision overturned the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision, which allowed for segregation along racial lines in public education. Following the Brown v. Board of Education case, there were many years of often locally contested efforts to desegregate America’s public schools. However, Gadsden et al (1996) point out that the promise of desegregation has never fully been realized, and that there are persistent repressed learning opportunities for many African American children. Orfield & Lee (2005) show that schools have become increasingly re-segregated for African American and Latino students since the 1980s, and that since this time, poverty and educational inequality persist in increasing rather than decreasing.

Across the nation, it is well known that America’s public schools are failing poor kids of color. Prevailing current state funding patterns centralize “adequacy” (or equity-neutral) policies over “equity-minded” policies (Koski & Reich, 2006), and there are alarming gaps in the equitable distribution of state resources across school districts. Steinberg & Quinn (2013, 2015) point out that there exist persistent disparities in school funding across district lines.
More poor kids of color tend to attend poorly-resourced schools than their middle-class white counterparts; poor kids of color tend to perform more poorly on standardized tests; and, poor kids of color often end up experiencing low employment rates as they enter adulthood (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010).

Gadsden & Fuhrman (2007) point out that there is disproportionate suffering among racialized communities facing poverty, with inequitable access to resourced and high quality schooling. They further point out that state systems hold expectations that low income districts will fund themselves, and thus there are difficulties with disproportionate taxation on poor communities of color, producing inequitable expectations that communities experiencing high rates of poverty will tax themselves at higher rates in order to fund local education systems. The problem is deeply ingrained and complex, and its solution does not rest within law and education policy alone, but rather requires bringing together multiple social services to meet the needs of racialized communities experiencing poverty (Gadsden & Fuhrman, 2007).

State sanctioned and structured approaches to reproducing dominant inequitable results in education and society bear witness to the need to provide quality and resourced education that respond to the intellectual, health, social, and economic needs and development of all children, and particularly poor children of color (Gadsden & Fuhrman, 2007; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Legacies of racism persist in shaping the structure of school funding and school systems, with African American and Latino children suffering at disproportionate rates as a result of inequitable education laws and policies.

2.2 Teacher Organizing

In the face of this current national trend toward inequitable access to education along racial lines, and the encroaching values of standardization, privatization and corporatization within the daily lives of students, teachers and schools (Apple, 2006; Fabricant & Fine, 2012;
Ravitch, 2010, 2013), there is a growing trend toward public resistance. Across the U.S.,
grassroots groups are rising up and forming organizations to resist market-driven public
schooling and to demand that all students have access to a fair and equitable public education
(Anyon, 2009; Blanc & Simon, 2007; Gold, Simon & Brown, 2005; Quinn & Carl, 2013;

Many teachers engaged in social justice concerns and causes recognize the inequities
inherent in dominant systems of power, and strive to centralize critical analyses of systems and
structures within their curriculum and pedagogy (Giroux, 1983; Janks, 2010; Morrell, 2002;
Simon & Campano, 2013), and within their activism (Picower, 2012; Sachs, 2000, 2003),
which often extends beyond the school walls. Teachers and other education worker activists
are organizing into local and national grassroots groups and networks, and are working within
diverse platforms like professional associations, unions, grassroots activist groups and teacher
research groups to assert voice and to produce changes in policy and the education system
(Quinn & Carl, 2015; Stern, Brown & Hussain, 2016). In this sub-section, I briefly highlight
scholarship on teachers as activists, and the ways that teachers use their unions and grassroots
organizations to promote the strength and longevity of public education.

**Teachers as Activists**

One powerful lens through which to examine the work of educators who are
organizing to take a stand within and beyond unions and grassroots organizations is to see
them as activists. Marshall and Anderson (2009) define an activist as “an individual who is
known for taking stands and engaging in action aimed at producing social change, possibly in
conflict with institutional opponents [sic]” (p. 116). Specifically addressing teachers, Picower
(2012) defines activism as “educators who work for social justice both inside and outside of
their classrooms (p. 562). Together, these scholars build a definition of education worker
activists as those who hold and work in accordance with their social justice ideals, with the intention of triggering social change both within and beyond classrooms and schools.

Teachers engaging in such activist-oriented grassroots work have been shown to hold strong political convictions that guide their sense of justice and contribute to a personal belief that there is an imperative to act (Picower, 2012). They take up a transformative politic and apply it to disrupting dominant codes, norms and identities that they perceive as structuring the daily life of schools (Sachs, 2003). And, they take action through constructing or altering curriculum and pedagogy (see Ayers et al, 2008), designing alternative or new structures for students and schools (see Beattie, 2002; Lund, 2006), advocating or agitating for system change (see Grossman, 2010), and even protesting or refusing to participate in systems or circumstances that they deem unjust. Taken together, these activist activities, which are intended to shift the daily life of schools, constitute a social movement where teachers collaborate with like-minded others to effect broader social change (Anyon, 2009).

**Teachers’ Grassroots Organizations**

Many American teachers are currently rising up and organizing for change in the context of inequitable education for racialized and poor youth, and the privatization, corporatization and marketization of education. Activist teachers are partnering with communities, and working together to make changes within their curricular and pedagogical work in classrooms and schools (Giroux, 1983; Janks, 2010; Morrell, 2002), within their unions (Maton, 2016; Uetricht, 2014; Weiner, 2012), and increasingly in policy circles governing implementation of technocratic policies such as standardized testing or the structures of schooling (Grossman, 2010; Bascia & Maton, 2015; Mediratta et al, 2009; Ozga, 2000).
Activist teachers are also increasingly employing grassroots organizations as platforms from which to make their political voices heard. Quinn and Carl (2015) describe how activist teacher organizations in Philadelphia support the shared belief in the collective power of teachers, create opportunities for teachers to challenge and strive to alter educational systems and structures, and support teachers’ efforts to alter classroom curriculum and pedagogy. They argue that grassroots teacher organizations pose a framework through which teachers can exert agency within broader systems of power. Grossman (2010) similarly highlights that grassroots teacher activist organizations support teachers in mobilizing resources to successfully agitate for change in state structures, including education policy and governance. Bascia (2009) shows that teachers agentively engage with policy at multiple levels and in multiple directions within the system, and that teacher-led struggles to alter state-controlled policy processes tend to be most visible when teachers employ formalized organizational approaches to change-making.

**Social Justice Unions**

Unions and teachers’ social justice union caucuses are one example of how teachers employ organizations to support their activist work. Education workers have a long history of using unions as platforms from which to organize for broader social change (Taylor, 2011). Social movement unionism (SMU) is a recently identified movement within the long history of labor organizing, and offers a theorized and principled approach advocating for a philosophical shift in the typically bureaucratic ways unions tend to strategize and act. Social justice unionism (SJU) may be considered interchangeable with SMU, and is the preferred term amongst educators.

SMU and SJU emphasize democratic decision-making, a greater focus on militancy, and a widened understanding of who should benefit from the work of the unions (Fletcher, 2011; Weiner, 2012). Fletcher (2011) defines SMU as:
a practice that is oriented towards broad movement-building; membership control of the union; clear societal objectives focused upon social justice; the conscious effort to build strategic relationships with other progressive social movements; and a clear sense of class politics (p. 276).

SMU/SJU frames unions as having a moral imperative to act on behalf of the working class broadly defined, rather than just card-carrying union members. Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) assert: “Union transformation must begin with the notion that the union has to build a broader labor movement as part of the process of introducing progressive change” (p. 200). When applied to education, SMU/SJU implies that education workers should form “deep coalitions” (Fletcher, 2011) with students, local families and communities. Here, educators act as social justice allies and advocates who work to ensure the public school system is meeting the needs of all constituents, and especially those who have experienced the negative effects of historic legacies of structural racism and classism.

Nationally, teacher union members are increasingly organizing in SJU caucuses within and beyond their local union chapters. These teachers see themselves as allied with local communities in striving to protect public education against the onslaught of neoliberal market-based policies, and strive to work in partnership with local communities of color in protecting public education systems (Maton, 2016; Stark, 2016; Weiner, 2012; Uetricht, 2014).

Educators and local caucuses frequently come to this work inspired by the work of Chicago’s Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE), which is credited with transforming the formerly conservative Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) into a “fighting union” that sought to establish deep alliances with the Chicago public and educated its members “about school reform and its place in a broader neoliberal project to dismantle public education” (Uetricht, 2014, p. 48). Nationally, union members are currently taking up SMU/SJU caucuses as a model and platform for change, seeking to trigger their unions to take a more radical stance on political issues and to respond in ways that resist, protest and otherwise counter corporate

2.3 Philadelphia

The Philadelphia context is host to a range of political and organizational dynamics that significantly shape its education context, including: the school district, the local teachers’ union, and a wide range of local grassroots political and activist groups with educational concerns.

School District of Philadelphia

The city of Philadelphia has long suffered from among the highest poverty rates in the country. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that twenty-nine percent of Philadelphians currently live in poverty, and child poverty rates hover near forty percent (State & County QuickFacts, 2014). The School District of Philadelphia (SDP) relies heavily on local funds gleaned primarily from property taxes, and thus faces a long-standing and chronic disadvantage in obtaining sufficient access to school funding. Steinberg & Quinn (2013) point out that the “adequacy gap” in SDP is nearly three times as large in Philadelphia than in other Pennsylvania districts sharing a comparable share of economically disadvantaged students.

SDP has also experienced significant cuts to state funding in recent years. Local organizations like Education Voters PA point out that charter schools harm the district’s bottom line, as pre-determined per-child fees are removed from the district funding pot and distributed to charter schools, leaving SDP to fund the district with whatever funds are left over following charter funding allocation (Gobreski, 2014). Together, these financial difficulties have led to a growing sense of crisis in Philadelphia public education. For example,

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Steinberg & Quinn (2013) define adequacy gap as “the difference between the funding that districts need for all students to achieve academically and the amount districts actually spend” (p.1)
at the end of the 2013 school year alone, 23 SDP schools were forced to close from an initial list of 40 schools. Philadelphia education activists and local community agents articulate that they see such closures and chronic underfunding as connected to a systematic effort to dismantle the local public school system (Fine, 2013; Khalek, 2013; Lytle, 2013).

Locals identify legacies of institutionalized racism as shaping persistent inequitable educational funding patterns in Philadelphia (Blanc & Simon, 2007; Hazelton, 2014). The promises of desegregation have not been fully realized (Gadsden et al, 1996; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), and Philadelphia continues to be identified as among the most segregated cities for African American students in the U.S. (Rich, 2012). The African American community is thought to have the most at stake in Philadelphia’s education system, with 55% of SDP children identifying as African American (Socolar, 2013). Philadelphia African American children suffer disproportionately due to displacement in their schooling as schools are shut down and replaced with charters and other marketized solutions. For example, in 2013, seventy-nine percent of students affected by upcoming neighborhood school closings were reported to be African American (Socolar, 2013). Local education activists identify racist legacies as shaping inequitable state funding patterns for Philadelphia education as well as patterns of “school reform” that are believed to disproportionately harm African American and Latino children (Hazelton, 2014; Maton, 2016; White, 2015).

Education activists and local communities express great concern over a lack of democracy and transparency in local educational policy processes. In December 2001, there was a shift in oversight of the SDP from local to state control. At the time, the district faced financial difficulties and the School Reform Commission (SRC) was initiated by the state governor to address funding issues. The SRC has since held responsibility for setting the district’s policy direction and is responsible for all finances concerning the district. The SRC consists of five members, two appointed by Philadelphia’s mayor, and three appointed by the
state governor, and decisions are made by majority vote. Activists state that this consistently weights local education decisions in favor of the state, and accuse the SRC of operating in undemocratic and non-transparent ways that lack sufficient public oversight or local involvement in education-related decision-making processes (Caskey, 2014; Khalek, 2013; Rieser, 2003).

The education system in Philadelphia has consisted of long contested terrain between state and city representatives, each vying for power over the local system. Meanwhile, African American and other children are caught in the middle, facing instability in their schools through frequent school closures and a shrinking body of teachers (Khalek, 2013).

**Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT)**

The PFT is the local chapter of the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The PFT’s membership is composed of more than 16,000 members. Membership includes workers in the following positions, according to the PFT website:

- PFT members include teachers, librarians, school nurses, counselors, psychologists and social workers, secretaries, paraprofessionals, classroom assistants, non-teaching assistants, supportive services assistants, Head Start/Comprehensive Early Learning Center and Bright Futures teachers and staff, food service managers and professional and technical employees (About the PFT, 2014).

The PFT is responsible for negotiating collective bargaining agreements for its members, administering benefits to its members, and assisting members with workplace problems (About the PFT, 2014). PFT’s collective bargaining includes negotiating salary and benefits as well as working conditions such as the length of the school day, class size, rules governing hiring and layoffs, and teacher evaluations. The PFT is frequently critiqued by local activist groups like the Caucus for taking a conciliatory approach to negotiations with the SRC and a weak stand on policy issues more generally by its members and by local education activists.
Grassroots Organizations

Long-standing local political conditions and problems have nurtured the growth of a wide array of grassroots education organizations over the years in Philadelphia. Local activist organizations and networks include student, parent, teacher, community and citizens groups.

Student groups in Philadelphia tend to be concerned with elevating students’ voices to advocate for quality public schools with sufficient resources (Conner & Zaino, 2014; Gold, Good & Blanc, 2011). Student groups include the Philadelphia Student Union and Youth United for Change. Parent groups tend to be dedicated to advocating for the rights of local children (Gold, Simon & Brown, 2005; Quinn & Carl, 2013). Local parent groups include Parents United. Teacher activist groups seek to effect change in realms including classrooms, local schools, their local union, the district, and state or national policy circles (Bascia, 2009; Grossman, 2010; Quinn & Carl, 2013). Local teacher activist groups include the Caucus of Working Educators, Teacher Action Group (TAG), and Teachers Lead Philly.

Community groups take on a range of issues within their organizing, often including the assertion that historically marginalized groups like African Americans and Latinos deserve an equitable and high quality public education (Gold, Simon & Brown, 2002; Mediratta et al, 2009). Philadelphia community groups include Juntos, Action United, Media Mobilizing Project or Philadelphians Organized to Witness Empower and Rebuild (POWER). Philadelphia hosts a range of liberal-minded citizens’ groups, including Education Law Center, Education First Compact, Education Voters PA, and Public Citizens for Children and Youth. Philadelphia is also home to formal networks of activist groups that facilitate organizational partnerships in the effort to increase local mobilizing power. This partnership and networking model is most visibly seen in Philadelphia Coalition Advocating for Public Schools (PCAPS).
2.4 Caucus of Working Educators

The Caucus of Working Educators is the city’s newest grassroots group working on education issues, and it grew out of an identified need to push the local teachers’ union to take a more hard-lined stand in advocating for local public education. The Caucus officially formed in March 2014. The organization formed as a result of ongoing conversations among PFT members about the need for a more transparent and politically active union. It was formed with the intention of pushing the union to take a more radical stand in issues that affect education workers directly, such as negotiating their contract, and those that shape the policy context more broadly, such as state-wide distribution of education funding. In this sense, the Caucus has consistently framed itself as a radical teacher organization that views the union as the most powerful platform from which teachers might agitate for change in the education system. The organization strives to push the union to better protect teachers, Philadelphia schools, and the public education system (Denvir, 2014; Maton, 2016).

During the time of my study, the group as a whole was still engaging in early processes of collective identity formation (see Robnett, 2002), as members grappled with constructing a collective sense for the organization’s desired goals, structure and strategy. The Caucus explicitly identifies social justice unionism (SJU) as guiding its work and vision, and Caucus members frequently cite the work of Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) in Chicago as inspiration, especially for their winning union leadership and subsequently leading education workers in a city-wide strike in 2012 (Maton, 2016; see also Brogan, 2014; Nunez et al., 2015; Uetricht, 2014).

On its website, the Caucus identifies its platform as follows: “WE [sic] work to defend and transform public education in Philadelphia. As a caucus within the PFT, we seek to support and energize our union as well as work alongside the students, families, and
communities of Philadelphia” (Our Platform, 2014). The organization lists the following six-point platform:

- Member-Driven Union
- Transparency, Accountability, and Shared Decision-Making
- Defense of Publicly Funded Public Education
- Transformed Curriculum and Autonomy to Teach, not Test
- Education for All
- Strong Contract and Rights of Members (Our Platform, 2014)

WE seeks a combination of goals that range from directly benefiting Philadelphia education workers, such as through a member-driven and transparent union that supports its teachers’ autonomy to teach “transformative curriculum and pedagogy,” to those benefiting the Philadelphia and national public education more broadly, such as through countering “institutional racism” and partnering with communities to protect the longevity of public education (Our Platform, 2014).

Membership in the Caucus hovers just over 300 people (as of mid-February, 2016), and its 11-person steering committee is composed of members with varying degrees of time-investment in the organization. Approximately 20% of its membership is composed of people of color, and 80% identify as white. Key Caucus participants include original founders, steering committee members, and those who have stepped up to design and take up leadership roles within the organization through organizing events and campaigns, writing and circulating information, and engaging in thinking and visioning work for the organization.

The Caucus’ campaigns have shifted and complexified over time. Initially WE largely focused on organizing and sponsoring social events to connect existing members with potential members. It proudly sponsors a series of book clubs each summer, including nine groups in 2014 and eleven books in 2015 (see Riley, 2015). It also regularly sponsors book talks, an annual retreat, multiple yearly membership meetings, and an annual conference. The
organization also runs campaigns in the following areas: a union election campaign (which was particularly active from September 2015 to February 2016), a racial justice committee (formed in September 2015), an Opt Out campaign to support local parents in opting their children out of standardized tests, political campaigns that extend into local elections, a “Reclaiming PD” campaign that includes an effort to push the school district to incorporate more teacher-driven professional development, and a pre-service teacher campaign where members speak in local college classrooms about the power and potential of unions. The organization also regularly partners with area organizations on mutually-sponsored campaigns, including “Fight for 15” which campaigns for a $15 minimum wage, the Philly Socialists, and other area groups and events.
CHAPTER 3: Methodology

[F]eminist scholarly practices (reading, writing, critiquing, etc.) are inscribed in relations of power—relations that they counter, resist, or even perhaps implicitly support. There can, of course, be no apolitical scholarship (Mohanty, 2003, p. 19).

[A]n endarkened feminism seeks to resist and transform these social arrangements... seeking political and social change... as the purpose for research, versus solely the development of universal laws or theories for human behavior (Dillard, 2000, p. 678).

This study is situated within the Caucus of Working Educators, which is a teacher-led grassroots organization that is also a caucus of the local teachers’ union (i.e. the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers). The Caucus positions itself as seeking transformation of the local teachers’ union into a more radical entity from which to protect the longevity of public education in Philadelphia and the equity of educational outcomes among Philadelphia schoolchildren and families (see Chapter 2 for more on the Caucus and its contexts). This study situates itself both within and outside this organization, in that the study took the form of an inquiry group that was composed of nine teachers, all of whom were members of the Caucus. However, the inquiry group was a closed group, meaning that only these nine teachers could attend meetings and it was not open to the general public of the Caucus. As highlighted in Chapter 1, the inquiry group came together to investigate the topic of structural racism, and to identify how it shapes the Caucus’ organizing practice.

This study draws upon qualitative research methodologies, including practitioner inquiry, a modified version of grounded theory, and community-engaged research. This chapter outlines significant aspects of research design, including data collection, participant selection, and data analysis. I introduce readers to my nine participants, each in turn. And, I describe my role as researcher and identify significant ethical and study limitations.
3.1 Qualitative Methodologies

This study is informed by several qualitative research methodologies commonly used in teacher education and literacy research: practitioner inquiry, a modified version of grounded theory, and community-engaged research.

Practitioner Inquiry

The study draws upon practitioner inquiry (PI) methodology. PI takes a critical orientation to the study of collaboration and collective sense-making processes and positions members of the inquiry group—in this case, teachers—as central agents in research and knowledge-construction processes (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Campano et al, 2015; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999, 2009). Campano (2007) draws attention to the ways in which practitioner inquiry might inform the development of a broad horizontal outlook or perspective, as both the teacher and those with whom s/he works—in Campano’s case, students—come to take up an “inquiry stance” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) in their collaborative work. Here, the teacher—and others with whom s/he works—come together to co-investigate questions and problems encountered in their practice, and seek new insights through experiments in creativity and new expressions of learning (see Campano, 2007). I build on the work of Campano (2007) and Cochran-Smith (2009) through framing the work of the inquiry group as centered in a stance and orientation that is rooted in inquiry and the search for collective meaning, as participants sought to make sense of structural racism and to consider how to put this into action through their activist work.

For the purpose of this study, PI has been extended to study the work of teachers as they make meaning of experiences that extend beyond their classrooms and schools and into broader realms in which they seek to trigger institutional and political change. The inquiry group in this study engaged in a meaningful process of local knowledge generation. This work
strove to generate theoretical and practical ideas that were applicable to multiple contexts, including their activist organizations (Maton, 2016); classrooms (see also Ballenger, 2009; Campano, 2007); practitioner groups (see also McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006); and, their teacher networks extending beyond the local school (see also Himley & Carini, 2000).

**Modified Grounded Theory**

Charmaz (1983) explains that the “grounded theory method stresses discovery and theory development rather than logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks” (p. 110). This leads grounded theorists to engage in four distinct strategies. First, they seek out “solid, rich data” (p. 110) and shape their collection of data based on their analytic interpretations. Second, they shape their processes and products of research based on the data rather than based on the literature in the field, because they seek innovative new ways of explaining phenomena. Third, they make systematic efforts to check their developing ideas with further observations and make systematic comparisons between observations in order to verify their findings. And finally, they “assume that making theoretical sense of social life is itself a process” (p. 111) and seek to develop new theoretical interpretations of the data rather than final or complete interpretations of social phenomena (Charmaz, 1983).

I take up grounded theory as Charmaz (1983) has outlined it, but with two major modifications. First, unlike Charmaz’s (1983) description of grounded theory, I base my coding system on both the patterns emerging from the data and the literature in the field. Especially in the beginning stages of coding, I found that the literature provided a good starting-place for orienting my work within traditions of teacher and adult education. Secondly, and most importantly, I take care to situate myself within the research process and pay attention to the ways in which I shape the study’s formation, data collection and analysis (see Behar, 1996; Brown & Strega, 2005; Lather, 1993). I incorporate race feminist theory and
methodologies into my understanding of grounded theory (for more on race feminist epistemologies, see section 1.3).

**Community-Engaged Research**

MacQueen et al. (2001) define community as a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives and engage in joint action in some way, and often also share geographical links and ties. Building on this notion, community-engaged research means partnership between researchers and community. Hacker and Taylor (2011) reveal that there is a continuum of community engaged research, ranging from research situated within communities where there is less community involvement by the researcher to research that is deeply embedded within and highly responsive to the needs of communities.

My study was deeply embedded within and responsive to the Caucus community’s needs. It enacted deep community-engaged research along two major dimensions. First, the questions driving the research and the structure of the study emerged from the community. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2006) writes that true community research emerges from the community and that the process of the research is more important than the outcome. Regarding research, she writes, “Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate” (p. 128). This study strove to similarly emerge from deep partnership with the Caucus community. Prior to the start of this study, I was an active member of the Caucus community for over a year and had been an active volunteer and leader in many of its core campaigns and committees. I built close relationships with many members of the organization and allied myself with its work as I straddled roles as both a participating activist and a researcher. This volunteering work allowed me to better understand the inner workings of the organization and the questions of salience to Caucus members. Furthermore, I ran a pilot study prior to the
dissertation, and the questions driving the group’s inquiry (i.e. What is structural racism? And, how does structural racism shape the organizing practice of the Caucus?) emerged directly from this pilot study and my conversations with Caucus community members. Caucus members were key drivers in defining the framing and purpose of the inquiry group and the recruitment of participants. There was substantial reciprocity and collaboration with leaders and Caucus members at all stages of study design, implementation, and analysis.

Second, the community was engaged in ongoing processes of thinking through and identifying their own needs regarding programmatic and organizational outcomes from the study. Scholars point out that ethical community research should be deeply embedded within and emerge from communities themselves (Campano, Ghiso, Yee & Pantoja, 2013; Delgado-Bernal, 1998). Similarly, participants felt connected to the research and revealed this through their engagement in the professional development activity, their attendance at meetings, and their enthusiasm to present about the research at the Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania one year later, in February 2016. The participants in my study not only identified the initial topic in question, but also together decided upon and drove the professional development sessions that resulted from our work together. They participated not just in the two professional development sessions that we spearheaded in our study, but following the end of the study proceeded to run professional development sessions based on the curriculum developed in our group for numerous education workers and students at various sites across the city and country over the next six months. Participants were deeply wedded to and invested in the inquiry group work and in subsequent projects stemming from the group.
3.2 Research Design

Data Collection

The purpose of this project was to deepen scholarly and practitioner understanding of participants’ approaches to collaborative learning about racism and racial justice through their involvement in a small inquiry group. This qualitative study began in February 2015 and ended in June 2015, and the total time commitment for each participant in this project was approximately 20 hours over a period of five months. The study employed four methods of data collection: inquiry group meetings; semi-structured interviews; observation in context; and, document analysis of texts produced by participants. Please refer to Table 3.1 for specific information about the dates, themes, and areas of focus for inquiry group meetings, interviews, and observation of action in context.

Table 3.1: Study Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Date/s</th>
<th>General Themes/Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview 1</td>
<td>February 12 to March 10, 2015</td>
<td>Personal identity and experiences of participants. Knowledge of Caucus, organizing, racial justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry group meeting 1</td>
<td>March 4, 2015</td>
<td>Introductions; Defining race, racism and structural racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry group meeting 2</td>
<td>March 17, 2015</td>
<td>Continuing to define and discuss structural racism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry group meeting 3</td>
<td>March 24, 2015</td>
<td>Continuing to discuss structural racism; Connect structural racism concept with Caucus organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry group meeting 4</td>
<td>April 8, 2015</td>
<td>Connect structural racism concept with Caucus organization; Brainstorm ideas for action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 2</td>
<td>April 8 to 21, 2015</td>
<td>Reflect on personal involvement in group and group dynamics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action planning meeting 1</td>
<td>April 22, 2015</td>
<td>Planning professional development session 1 &amp; 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development session 1</td>
<td>April 25, 2015</td>
<td>Observation in context. Provide outside facilitators with plan for presentation at TAG curriculum fair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action planning meeting 2</td>
<td>May 9, 2015</td>
<td>Planning professional development session 2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development session 2</td>
<td>May 19, 2015</td>
<td>Observation in context. Gave presentation to teachers from across Philadelphia at Central High school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final debrief meeting</td>
<td>June 16, 2015</td>
<td>Reflecting on work together as a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview 3</td>
<td>June 17-24, 2015</td>
<td>Reflecting on personal involvement within group, and group dynamics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Inquiry group meetings explored varied themes in relation to the topic of structural racism and the organizing work of the Caucus. The group met for four initial inquiry group meetings in which the group discussed racism and structural racism as philosophical concepts and explored what implications these concepts had for the organizing work of the Caucus. Prior to each of these four meetings, I asked participants to read some short textual excerpts in preparation for the discussion (see Appendix A for a list of assigned readings), and to engage in reflective writing following the inquiry group meetings (see Appendix B for a list of assigned writing reflection questions). More information is provided on the reading and writing elements of the study in Chapter 5.

Following these four initial meetings, we met for two action planning meetings, in which participants created the lesson plan to run two professional development sessions for teachers and community members in Philadelphia. The inquiry group also met for a final debrief meeting in which I presented transcripts from previous inquiry group sessions and asked the group to engage in data analysis. I also asked the group to critically reflect upon inherent group dynamics over our time working together. In total, our inquiry group met seven
times for inquiry group meetings and the author audio-recorded all meetings and took field notes after the completion of each meeting.

Semi-structured interviews provided participants with the opportunity to privately reflect on and share their personal experiences in the inquiry group with the researcher. The interviews both drew upon an existing list of topics and questions and simultaneously allowed for conversations, clarifications, and elaborations (Patton, 1980). I met with each participant three times over the course of the study. The first interview was before the inquiry group meetings began, the second interview was mid-way through the study after the fourth inquiry group meeting, and the final interview concluded the study after the final debrief meeting. In interviews, I asked participants to share their beliefs about the purpose and dynamics of the inquiry group, the ways that their involvement in the group shaped and shifted their understanding of racism and structural racism, and how they saw the inquiry group as shaping their work and behavior beyond the inquiry group. I audio-recorded all interviews.

Observation in context at the participants’ organizing project was utilized in April and May. I attended and assisted in presenting the professional development sessions. I did not audio record these sessions, but instead recorded field notes after the sessions were complete and noted dynamics in social interactions and participants’ sense-making surrounding the central topic of the inquiry group. I also asked participants to engage in reflective writing and to collectively debrief the previous sessions in our final debrief inquiry group meeting.

Throughout the project, I collected textual data sources produced by the participants. These textual data sources included their reflective writing for the purpose of the inquiry group (see Appendix B), as well as social media posts and emails to members of the inquiry group. These sources were triangulated with the data from the interviews, the inquiry groups, and the observations in context. They were analyzed to track how the knowledge built by focus groups
extended outward to influence the group as a whole, the types of resources that were
distributed among WE members, and the internal conversations within the group.

**Participant Selection**

Nine members of the Caucus of Working Educators were invited to take part in this
study. All nine people were identified either as a result of our personal acquaintance through
involvement in the Caucus or through an informal approach to snowball sampling. I felt it was
important to engage in careful selection of participants for the project, because I wanted to
attract participants from varied identities; sought to involve participants who had some
acquaintance with consensus and horizontal models of decision-making; and desired to attract
participants who held some similarity in basic assumptions about race and racism.

Participant selection involved three stages. In the first stage, I met with Kathy, who is
a key organizer within the Caucus. Over the twelve months prior to the study formation I had
formed a professional and personal relationship with her and thus trusted her opinion about
who might be appropriate to invite to participate. I knew that Kathy understood the goals of

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7 Seven of the nine participants were identified through prior personal acquaintance, and two (i.e. Mary
and Camille) were identified through snowball sampling.
8 I strove to invite participants from a variety of identities for two main reasons. First, I believed that it
was essential that people of color drive the strategy and work of the Caucus toward racial justice
perspectives and goals, and wanted to ensure that their voices were the center of the conversation around
structural racism. Second, I was interested in having diversity along multiple intersecting aspects of
identity (i.e. class, gender, sexuality, race) because I was curious to see if there might be patterns in
learning about structural racism across variation in social identities. As it turned out, I found that race
and gender were the most significant identity factors in this study, but I did not predict this finding at the
outset of the study.
9 The inquiry group drew upon practitioner inquiry methodology, which holds some similarity to
horizontal and consensus models of organizing in social movements, and I believed that it would
strengthen the group to attract participants who had some familiarity with these models. I believed that
familiarity would allow the group to delve deeper into the subject rather than spending time learning the
implicit rules surrounding the norms of communication and decision-making in these models.
10 As researcher, I felt a strong ethical commitment to the well being of my participants. At the outset of
the study I was highly conscious of my own identity as a white woman facilitator and researcher, and
how this might lead people of color in particular to feel unsafe. Thus, I felt it incumbent upon me to
maximize opportunities for feelings of safety in the group. I was careful to invite only those whites who
displayed some criticality about race and racism in order to maximize opportunities for feeling safe in
the group.
the inquiry group and trusted that she held concern for the well being of participants during the process. She agreed to take part in the study and together we identified a number of other prospective members. In the second stage, I approached each identified member personally in order to invite them to participate, and connected with them either in person or over the phone when in-person meetings were not possible. I had met all of the members previously, with the exception of Camille. Not all of the prospective members agreed to take part in the study. One invited member had work commitments that inhibited participation, and another member claimed that he could not participate due to family considerations\textsuperscript{11}. However, eight participants agreed to take part in the study, plus Kathy. In the third stage, I advertised the group through the Teacher Action Group’s annual Inquiry to Action Groups event (itAG) (see Appendix C), but did not glean any viable candidates for the study through this method. Please refer to Table 3.2 for an overview of study participants, and see section 3.3 for more information on the individual participants.

\textbf{Table 3.2: Study Participants}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial (cultural) identity</th>
<th>Gender identity</th>
<th>Approx. Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camille</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corey</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>White (Jewish)</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{11} One member, who was an African American man, explained to me that he could not take part in the study due to family reasons; however, I later learned through word of mouth that he was not comfortable taking part in a group examining structural racism that was facilitated by a white woman. One of the participants (Zak, an African American man) vouched for me, but the man still felt uncomfortable and did not join.
Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two phases. Phase one involved the construction and collection of field notes and transcripts from the interviews, inquiry group meetings, and observations in context. Data from these four sources were triangulated. During this phase, I initially referred back to a coding system I had previously developed that was based on the scholarly literature. This coding system had been developed for my proposal hearing prior to the start of the study. I sought to “discover, identify and ask questions about” embedded assumptions in the data (Charmaz, 1983, p. 112), and used this information to construct my second draft of a coding key. I noted ways that the data provided evidence of emergent themes and how these were similar or different from the first draft of the coding system. Through this, I came to develop a second draft of a coding system that emerged from the data even as it took the literature into account (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Phase two of data analysis took place in two parts. First, analysis involved member-checking initial analysis with participants. I modeled my approach to member-checking on Delgado Bernal’s (1998) work, who shows that engaging focus groups in analysis of researcher interpretation allows for participants to take up roles “not just as subjects of research, but also creators of knowledge” (p. 573). In this phase, which took place in part during the final debrief session, I presented some findings from my initial analysis to participants and asked them to conduct their own data analysis in order to see how they made sense of the data. I asked participants to reflect on two transcripts pulled from the initial inquiry group meetings and to identify trends and themes that they believed were significant,
and to give their feedback on the patterns I had identified in my analysis. Following this, I presented some of my initial findings and asked participants for feedback. During this phase, I found that there was general corroboration between my and the participants’ understanding of the data.

In the second part of phase two data analysis, which occurred after the completion of inquiry and focus group meetings, I continued to review audio files and transcripts from the interviews and focus groups and to identify emerging themes. I primarily engaged in inductive analysis, in which the “patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data” (Patton, 1980, p. 306), and also employed axial coding, in which I grouped the codes according to conceptual categories reflecting commonalities among the codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I wrote a series of analytic memos in which I would “take codes and treat them as topics or categories” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 121). These memos were sorted and integrated (Charmaz, 1983) and constructed both the broad topics for the findings chapters in this dissertation as well as the specific themes located in each chapter. In the final phase, I revisited the scholarly literature and assessed my argument and findings against that of related research.

It is also worth noting that I engaged in numerous informal conversations with some inquiry group members (i.e. Zak, Miriam, Josh, Ben, Penelope, and Kathy) during the data analysis stage about my findings, and sought to elicit feedback on whether they agreed with my analysis, or not. And, while I led data collection through reviewing transcripts and audio files, participants were active meaning-makers during the analysis phase, and tended to express enjoyment of reflecting upon inquiry group meetings and drawing out themes. Furthermore, in

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12 This particular group of participants engaged in informal feedback mainly due to circumstantial reasons. I would run into them at various social and organizing events and informally mention my findings and emerging questions, and they tended to enjoy discussing and conversing about these findings. Thus, analysis involved significant informal collective sense-making and member-checking processes.
February 2016, five participants from the group, plus myself, presented on our findings at the University of Pennsylvania Ethnography in Education Forum. We met thrice to design and practice the presentation, and these meetings served as opportunity to reflect upon findings and analysis in the study, and to continue making meaning of the inquiry group meetings eight months after the study ended. This process also served as a form of member-checking, as I shared some of my analysis (particularly that on relationships and trust-building) with participants and elicited their feedback during the presentation preparation process. Through this, I learned that participants were in general agreement with the analysis.

3.3 Participants: Who Are the Teachers?

Nine people participated in this study, as seen in Chart 3.2. All participants shared in common that they were teachers and also that they were members of the Caucus of Working Educators. All participants had become involved in the Caucus due to their concern for the future of public education in Philadelphia. Participants also shared in common that they had some developed analysis about race, racism and racial justice, although the extent and depth of this analysis varied. Each participant brought a unique identity and set of experiences to their participation in the group. In this section, I provide a brief introduction to each participant. \(^{13}\)

Please also refer to Chart 3.2 for a quick summary of the nine participants and their age, racial and gender identities.

**Ben** is a white man in his mid-twenties who was raised in the suburbs outside Philadelphia. He is a teacher in the local school district and identifies as middle class. He came to be involved in the Caucus due his personal interest in reading about grassroots movements. Prior to his involvement in the Caucus, he had never been involved in organizing or social

\(^{13}\) Please note that I asked participants to self-identify racial, gender, sexuality and class identities. I also asked participants to review the short synopsis included in this section prior to publication, out of a concern for their comfort with revealing personal information and anonymity, and received participants’ assent to publish these personal descriptions.
movements. Since becoming involved in the Caucus in the summer of 2014, he has grown to be deeply involved and a member of many Caucus committees. Prior to the start of the inquiry group he had engaged in minimal reading or education about racial justice issues. In the inquiry group, Ben situated himself primarily as a learner about organizing and racial justice.

**Camille** is a teacher in the local school district who grew up in Philadelphia and identifies as a Black woman in her mid-thirties. She also strongly identifies as a teacher and as a close ally to students, and frequently speaks about her role and identity as a dedicated wife and mother. Camille came to be involved in the Caucus not long before the start of the inquiry group due to some members of the Caucus helping her deal with negative dynamics in her workplace that had strong tones of racial injustice. Since learning about the Caucus, she keeps an eye on its campaigns and attends meetings on occasion and tends to identify as a peripheral member. Prior to involvement in the inquiry group and the Caucus, she had not been involved in grassroots movements or organizing, but did attend the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) summer training session for teachers where she enjoyed processes of engaging in inquiry and working with others to make sense of racism in schools.

**Corey** is an African American man in his mid-twenties who works at a local private school and plans to embark on doctoral studies in the field of education. He identifies as working class and grew up in the Philadelphia area. He is not deeply involved in the Caucus but is loosely acquainted with many of its members both through his attendance at Caucus functions as well as through the numerous committees and projects he serves on and supports in Philadelphia. He has a deep interest in social movements, and particularly racial justice issues and movements, and has read a great deal about the histories and philosophies of change-making movements. Corey understands himself primarily as an intellectual rather than an activist, but aligns himself with the Caucus’ commitment to public education.
Josh is a white man in his mid-twenties with Jewish heritage who grew up in the urban northeast. He is a teacher in the school district and identifies strongly as an organizer and activist and has been active in a number of activist movements in the past. Josh is a core organizer in the Caucus who tends to take up primarily administrative and campaign-driven organizing tasks. He tends to work behind the scenes, but is a member and driver of many committees in the organization. Josh had some prior experience reading and thinking about racism and structural oppression, and joined the inquiry group both because he felt he had more to learn personally as well as to support the work of the Caucus. Prior to the start of the study, Josh knew many of the participants, although the depth of these relationships varied.

Kathy is a white working-class woman in her mid-forties who is a teacher in the school district. She is a core organizer and strategist in the Caucus. Kathy is highly motivated and deeply passionate about the work of the Caucus and draws upon her eleven years of prior experience as a community organizer in varied cities across the nation. Kathy points to experiences in South Africa in her early twenties as a pivotal experience for understanding the social significance of race and racism. She draws upon personal experiences of multiracial organizing and relationships in her sense-making about race and racism. Kathy was a key driver in the design and conceptualization of this study due to her knowledge of strategic organizing and her identification of potential participants.

Mary is a Black woman in her mid-forties who grew up in both the Caribbean and the western United States. She expressed at the start of the study that she is strongly committed to the central values of the Caucus and particularly to its struggle to protect public education in Philadelphia. She is not a core member of the Caucus, but does occasionally attend its social functions. She identifies strongly as both a teacher and an artist. She also acts as union representative at her school. Prior to her work as a union representative and her membership in the Caucus, she did not have experience organizing in social movements or grassroots actions.
Mary entered the study knowing one of the participants well through tied personal social networks, but did not know other participants.

**Miriam** is a white woman in her mid-twenties who holds a strong link to her Jewish heritage and religion. She grew up in an upper middle-class suburb outside of Philadelphia and is currently a local charter school teacher. Miriam entered the study with some peripheral involvement in the Caucus, but with an initial reluctance to publicly identify as a Caucus member. Prior to her involvement in the Caucus she had a small amount of experience as a member of Teacher Action Group (TAG) and PhilWP. Over the course of the inquiry group she became increasingly involved in the Caucus and vocal about racial politics on social media. She had done some reading about racial justice, but identified as knowing little about structural racism prior to the start of the study.

**Penelope** is a woman of color in her mid-thirties. She identifies as having a unique relationship with racial identity and racial privilege due to being a visible minority who was adopted and raised by white Mennonite parents. She identifies strongly as a teacher and loves teaching children in the school district. Penelope is deeply committed to the principles of equity and access, which she sees as underlying the Caucus’ work. She has served as a core leader in the Caucus since its emergence and tends to shy away from electoral politics, but is interested in how the Caucus can support her curricular and pedagogical work as a teacher. She is invested in thinking about systems of racism both for its intersections with her own experiences as a racial minority who identifies as having privileges due to adopted social norms, as well as to support her students through her work as a teacher.

**Zak** is a man in his mid-thirties who identifies primarily as African American but also holds Latino heritage. He places high value on intellectual development and spends a great deal of time reading. His intellectual interests center on racial justice and he is passionate about bringing racial justice concerns to the forefront of local and national debate. He
identifies strongly as a teacher and often speaks and writes on social media about how he centralizes critical orientations toward race and racial justice within his teaching curriculum and pedagogy. Zak became involved in Caucus due to a desire to become involved in local activism to protect public education, but was concerned about its commitment to supporting and centering racial justice movements in its work. His analysis of race and racism was a key driver in the design and conceptualization of this study.

3.4 Researcher Roles

My own work as researcher stems from a critical race feminist anti-oppressive tradition that maintains a focus on embedded power relations within and beyond the inquiry group that I study, and strives to support the development of a space where all voices may be heard (see Anzaldúa, 2012; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; hooks, 1989, 2003; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 2003). As a white middle-class woman who engages critical race feminist theoretical perspectives and approaches within my research and analysis, I believe it is vital to engage in ongoing reflexivity and to clearly situate myself within my study (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Oslender & Reiter, 2015).

I take up a critical understanding of identity and power relations informed by feminist and gender theorists (see Anzaldúa, 2012; Butler, 2006; Hill Collins, 2000; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1991, 2003). And I situate this study within a critical view of race and its ideological construction and simultaneously tangible work in social and economic systems of power (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Omi & Winant, 1994; Smedley & Smedley, 2012). Together, these viewpoints construct a critical race feminist analysis and perspective that underlie my scholarship and research (for more on how I engage critical race feminism, see also section 1.3). I recognize and actively grapple with the complexities of doing race-feminist work as a white middle class woman. I understand that my family,
education and cultural knowledge are intimately bound up in my racial identity as a white person, and that my worldviews are shaped by these experiences (Castagno, 2014; Michael, 2015). I have been afforded many privileges based on my white identity and strive on a daily basis to recognize (see also McIntosh, 1990) and account for these, and to widen my perspectives through ongoing reading, scholarship, and the breadth and depth of my personal and professional relationships. I strive to grow my antiracist viewpoints and practice through critically interrogating my perspectives and work in the world while acknowledging the imperfections with which I do this work on a daily basis.

I believe that as a white scholar, I hold a number of important responsibilities. First, I must act as a listener in order to hear from those who experience the result of legacies of domination, and strive to understand where the challenges and conflicts with the system lie (Brown & Strega, 2005). Throughout all stages and aspects of my research, I strove to learn from my participants and to challenge my preconceptions and assumptions about who they were and their experiences. Second, I believe that as white scholars we must also take up roles as allies, where we fight for justice under the direction of people of color and socially marginalized others who deeply understand the embedded problems and experiences of systems of domination and oppression (Freire, 1970/2004; hooks, 2003). In my research, I sought to act as an ally to all teachers in my study and particularly to teachers of color, and to locate ways that I could provide support that responded to (rather than directed or controlled) their needs as they engaged in ongoing intellectual work and strategic insights and decision-making. And finally, I believe that as white scholars we must also take up roles as advocates who “fight the fight” always under the direction of those affected (Brown & Strega, 2005; Freire, 1970/2004; hooks, 2003). I see my role as that of an ally and as working from behind to support an antiracist movement led by people of color.
I take up a role as an “activist participant observer” in this study, meaning that I straddle roles as both researcher and participating activist. My work as researcher is visible in the planning of this study, the identification of questions and ideas that stemmed both from the scholarly literature and the field, and the writing of this dissertation as a documentation of what happened. And my work as an activist may be seen through my active work with the Caucus as an organization before, during, and after data collection. Throughout my work with the organization, I consistently return to my fundamental passion and support for the Caucus’ vision to protect public education for Philadelphia’s children and citizens, and see my research as one means through which to support the Caucus’ development as an organization and its educational activist work. I recognize that I am different from members in the Caucus in that although I have been a public school teacher in other contexts, I am not, nor have I been, a Philadelphia educator. I find that I sit both inside and outside the group as I engage in its activities.

The inquiry group was designed with both research and activist considerations in mind. I formed the topic of the inquiry group around structural racism in response to the Caucus’ expressed need and to assist in strengthening its work as an organization (see also the Preface, for a story of my initial involvement in the organization). I recognize that there are both commonalities and differences in the ways that I engage in the work and the meaning of the organization in relation to other members. There are commonalities in that, like other members, I am committed to the cause of protecting public education and engage in activist activities in an effort to support this movement. I see my dissertation as contributing to this broader goal, and situate my future publications as also seeking to advance the common interest of protecting and enhancing public education, particularly for those who have been socially, economically and politically marginalized by embedded systems of power. And there are differences in the ways I engage this work in relation to other members, in part due to
racial identity differences as expanded upon above, and also in part due to having never myself been a Philadelphia educator.

3.5 Ethical Concerns and Study Limitations

How do I foreground the dilemmas involved in researcher struggles with the anxiety of voyeurism without entangling myself in an ever more-detailed self-analysis, an “implosion” into the self? What is my goal as researcher: empathy? emancipation? advocacy? learning from/working with/standing with? (Lather, 1993, p. 685).

My ethical obligations for conducting and communicating this study extend to both the institutions supporting my research, including the University of Pennsylvania and the broader scholarly community, as well as to the Caucus and the participants in my study. My fundamental challenge in meeting these varied ethical obligations has been to produce “good research” that reflects and protects participants’ voices and experiences, benefits the work of the broader Caucus as an organization, and produces knowledge that can be used to protect and enhance the interests of those who have suffered as a result of historical legacies of marginalization and social power structures (Campano et al, 2013).

Marshall and Rossman (2011) point to the central concern of research ethics when designing a research study. They argue that issues of research validity are deeply entwined with ethics: “trustworthiness considerations cannot be separated from ethical issues” (p. 39). Lather (1993) responds to scientific constructions of validity, arguing for an expanded view of the multiple modes and conceptualizations of “transgressive validity” bound up in the personal. And, Collins (2000) demonstrates that knowledge is built and communicated in ways that vary across racial and cultural identity and that recognition of this knowledge is subject to prevailing and dominant paradigms of power. Together, these scholars challenge us to broaden traditional notions of trustworthiness and validity and to consider the ways in which they are bound up in personal and structural relationships of power and the researcher’s ethical
obligations. I take this orientation seriously and center a core consideration for ethics and a critical understanding of validity throughout all aspects of the research process.

I sought to maintain a central awareness to the ways that identity can function to privilege some and disadvantage others (Lorde, 1984) throughout all phases of the study, including planning, conducting, and writing about the study. Through study design, I sought to create space for those whose voices tend to be ignored within dominant power structures and to maintain responsiveness to the needs of different participants in the process of data collection and knowledge dissemination. I have keenly sought to protect the identities of participants and to ensure that my research will in no way bring harm to my participants, nor jeopardize their positions professionally, personally, or otherwise.

This study, like any research, is incomplete, and I recognize some limitations shaping my work. The primary limitation is myself as a white scholar and how this positionality affords me limitations in viewpoint. I strove to account for this limitation partially through engaging in member-checking with participants (see Delgado Bernal, 1998), as well as through asking myself critical questions about understanding and representation on an ongoing basis, including: “How can I best capture the complexities and contradictions of the worlds, experiences, or texts I am studying? Whose voice will/does my research represent? Whose interests will it serve?” (Strega, 2005, p.199). I recognize that despite asking participants for their critiques and feedback on my research, as well as despite critically interrogating my own assumptions and viewpoints on an ongoing basis, that my positionality shapes how I interpret my data (please also see section 3.4).

Secondly, my research has focused on the dynamics of a small inquiry group and I recognize that the findings are not generalizable to all groups of people. However, I believe the theory of collaborative learning that is built through this study holds potential for application to other contexts and for continuing to build greater understanding about the nature, form and
function of learning in groups beyond this study. However, the theory surely needs to be applied to a greater number of cases and contexts in order to test its applicability to understanding the learning patterns within groups more broadly.

Campano et al. (2013) point out that community-based research “creates spaces for working together for educational justice” (p. 314). Throughout this study, I have been similarly committed to shaping my research in a way that is responsive to the needs of the organization and provides a space for working toward greater justice. Some members of my inquiry group voiced that research provides an opportunity for reflection upon their activist practice. My study was designed to benefit the group through providing “service” to the organization. The readings (see Appendix A) and the action component of the study were chosen in consultation with inquiry group members and Caucus leadership, and the study’s action component sought to directly address an area of need identified by Caucus leaders. In this sense, there were real and tangible benefits to the organization as a result of the study (for more on benefits to the Caucus community, refer to Chapter 6). I have also sought to benefit the Caucus and local educator community through supporting the conversion of relevant findings to direct recommendations to the Caucus (see Appendix D), and formal pedagogical opportunities such as workshops and presentations offered to Caucus members and local educators.
CHAPTER 4: Learning: On Defining Structural Racism

I think a lot of people’s... inherent implicit bias, unconscious racism, is based off not being aware. I mean, john powell talks about not being aware of it, not understanding how structures are formed within our society that shape your perceptions. I think that reading about it, talking about it and actually engaging with others brings that out (Zak, Interview 3).

Social movements present significant opportunity for learning (Conway, 2006; Eyerman & Jamison, 1991; Givan, Roberts & Soule, 2010), where people can think alongside others about important social issues—such as structural racism—and put their learning into practice within and through their activist organizing (see della Porta, 2009b; Foley, 1999).

However, little is known about the form and function of learning within the current leftist public education movement in the U.S., and even less is known about the special significance of learning for activist and organized American teachers (Maton, 2016). This chapter provides a deeper view into the form and function of teachers’ personal learning in an inquiry group as participants came together to make sense of structural racism and apply this learning to their organizing practice.

In her autobiography, Angela Davis (1974/2000) describes the multi-pronged work of the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee (SNCC) in the late 1960’s as “in the first place, educational” (p. 180). Davis positions SNCC’s antiracist activism as primarily focused on education of the public and SNCC’s membership about the nature and ideologies bound up in systemic racism. Like the radical civil rights organizations of the past, today’s social movements—including movements for change in public education—continue to retain a strong educative component in their activist focus and work. Adult education and social movement scholars have built upon the foundation laid by the civil rights movement to theorize the significance and nature of learning in social movements (see Chovanec, 2009; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Crowther, 2006; Foley, 1999; Freire, 1970/2004; Mezirow, 2000).
While the social movement learning scholarship builds a strong sense for the breadth and variation in learning across time and context (see Butterwick et al, 2007; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Chovanec, 2007; Hall, 2012; Foley, 1999; Sawchuk, 2007), it is still in the initial stages of formulating a solid view of what learning means and does for those involved. For example, Freire (1970/2004) shows that transformative learning—meaning, learning that transforms personal perspectives and views and in turn broader social dynamics and patterns—can be supported through the development of critical literacy among the oppressed through inquiry into common problems and systemic power structures. However, his work is primarily theoretical and concerned with the South American context, so there are barriers to its direct application to movements for change in northern states like the U.S. Furthermore, his tendency to dichotomize people as either oppressed—or not—leads to questions about how to apply the theory within diverse activist groups, where intersecting identities create complex identities and varied experiences of privilege and oppression that are not so easily polarized.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) build understanding of inquiry as an enduring perspective and stance held by the learner, and their edited volume shows how it may inform practice transformation in varied classrooms and contexts. However, more work is needed to explore the nature and form of learning as people take up an inquiry stance within their learning efforts and apply these beyond the initial practitioner inquiry-focused group, such as into classrooms, teacher organizations, and social movements.

Griff Foley (1999) takes up a Marxist framework to assert that learning is embedded within emancipatory struggle in social movements and intrinsically bound up in organizational structures and practice. His text is foundational in the field and constructs an initial framework for understanding the implicit ways learning shapes social movement activity. However, Foley’s work does not adequately track or account for the many ways in which learning opportunities are explicitly and intentionally structured into social movements. Nor does he
acknowledge how learning in social movements is shaped by raced and gendered ideologies and structures (for more on this critique, see Gouin, 2009).

At the outset of this chapter, Zak describes how learning means fighting both personal racism and broader racist systems of power that are structured into the daily operations of schools, organizations, and society. His comment points to how challenging systems, structures and institutions that are steeped in and emerge from long histories of racism (see Crenshaw, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; powell, 2014) is a multi-layered process. In part, it involves those who are engaged in the activist work to consider ways they might embody, hold or enact racist ideologies (Leonardo, 2009; Michael, 2015; Tatum, 2003). It also requires participants to consider how they might work collaboratively across identity differences while engaging in learning and inquiry that is rooted in mutuality (hooks, 2003; Tatum, 2003; Warren, 2010).

This chapter builds on this previous scholarship to examine the nature of learning about racial justice in an inquiry group context. In it, I point to four specific factors that composed and supported learning in the group. First, I examine how the development of group goals composed a significant first step in the learning process that then went on to frame subsequent learning. Second, I show how processes of making common meaning allowed people to learn from the experiences and insights of others and to refine their personal perspectives. Third, I examine the role of identity in learning, and pay particular attention to the dynamics of multiracial learning in a group setting, how white participants make sense of their own racial privilege and how this supports learning in the group, and ways gender was perceived to shape the learning experiences of the group. And finally, I show that inquiry and action were intrinsically connected and that this connection was fundamental to the learning process.
4.1 Development of Group Goals

The social movement theory literature dedicates significant attention to the development of collective identity within social movements and their organizations (Steinberg, 2002; Reger, 2002; Robnett, 2002; Taylor, 1989). In organizations and their social movements, people interact with organizations, the political environment, and each other in ways that produce a sense of collective identity while simultaneously establishing symbolic and organizational boundaries (Reger, 2002). Collective identity is a “shared definition of a group that derives from members’ common interests, experiences and solidarity” (Taylor, 1989, p. 771) and expresses the group goals and visions for social change (Reger, 2002). Robnett (2002) adds that there is a recursive relationship between collective identity and organizations: “Collective identity is embedded in and shaped by organizational structure and practices that, in turn, are embedded in and shaped by collective identity” (p. 279). If we are to understand collective identity as wrapped up in the development of common group goals and visions for social change, and that this development of goals is shaped by broader political and organizational contexts, then it becomes important to understand how group goals develop through the collaborative learning process.

Learners draw upon their prior beliefs and experiences and bring these to bear on shaping the conversation and learning when they engage in collective goal development processes (Steinberg, 2002). In this study, I found that participants came to the group holding diverse goals for our work together. Their goals spanned a number of realms, including those for their personal lives, for the Caucus organization, and for the research. These initial goals were sometimes complementary and sometimes positioned quite differently from each other.
**Personal Goals**

Participants’ personal goals tended to focus on building enhanced knowledge about the nature of racism and structural racism. Even as their overarching commitment to building deeper understanding of racist systems and structures remained common to all participants, individual participants tended to articulate different specific goals. For example, Ben articulated that he sought to “become more aware of my privilege and how that manifests itself” (Interview 1), while Camille was concerned with gaining skills “to deal or even to talk with the coworker” who was exhibiting racist assumptions and behaviors in the workplace (Interview 1). Josh saw the group space as an opportunity to challenge himself, and articulated his personal goals as questions: “Am I really trying to get outside my comfort zone? Am I trying to see where these spaces of segregation are and overcome them in an authentic way?” (Interview 1). And, Kathy similarly sought to push herself to personally confront racism: “I hope that my participation… will allow me to see the ways in which I express my racism still, on a daily basis” (Interview 1).

Zak expressed that he desired to sharpen his rhetorical skills at discussing racism with others, and to connect with other participants through engaging in a mutual conversation: “I hope through the structural racism thing to be able to better articulate it, to sharpen some of the weaker areas of my understanding, and really embed myself in a conversation” (Interview 1). Miriam articulated a desire to connect with others and build relationships through the group: “I like feeling connected to people, and I like feeling connected to people like who are doing this stuff and who care about their students, and who care about teaching” (Interview 1). Across these varied individual reasons for joining the group and the goals they hoped to achieve through their involvement, participants expressed a common desire to learn about the form and function of racism for personal reasons. They wanted to deepen their ability to articulate the experience and effects of racism, to better understand their own role in maintaining systems of
power through enacting privilege, and to build deeper relationships with one another through their collective work.

**Goals for the Caucus**

Camille connected her personal goals for involvement in the group with her goals for the Caucus more broadly: “nobody is a clean slate and we’ve been through different things. So I think if it’s a nice open honest discussion, we’ll then figure out what we need to do as far as getting more Black teachers involved [in the Caucus], really taking a stand” (Interview 1). Like Camille, Kathy similarly articulated that she saw personal work as necessary for facilitating organizational change in the Caucus. Kathy explained her commitment to the inquiry group’s work in the following way: “Why I’m doing this group is because we’re too white as a caucus. Personally speaking, the biggest thing I want to get out of this group is to make sure that… we’re asking ourselves the right questions, we’re using the right methodology to grow an organization” (Inquiry Group 1). Kathy brought her activist organizing identity to bear on much of her involvement in the group, and she entered the inquiry group with specific organizing goals for the Caucus: “I was looking for really specific actions that we can take to ensure a greater diversity in terms of general membership levels, but also to think really deeply about the ways in which we put meetings together, and events together, how those may be exhibiting this institutionalized racism that comes from our personal racism” (Interview 1).

Penelope articulated that she saw the group as supporting the work of the Caucus, which would in turn support national public education more broadly. She asked: “How do we appeal to a larger group of people? Because ultimately we all want the same thing, we all want kids to get a fair education and to have a good education that gives them the best chances that they can at survival, at success.” (Interview 1). Like Penelope, Corey articulated a goal of
“moving towards solidarity with more and more folks” in communities extending beyond the organization (Interview 1).

Participants varied in the specific ways that they conceptualized and articulated their perception of necessary change within the Caucus; however, all participants saw the group as important for triggering broader organizational change within the Caucus. Participants tended to see the inquiry group as helping to create a strategy for diversifying WE’s membership, for making meetings more racially conscious and desirable for people coming from racially diverse backgrounds, and for partnering better with communities extending beyond the organization. Ultimately, participants saw their work in the inquiry group as bound up in goals that centered on improving the Caucus in order to strengthen its work at helping preserve public education for Philadelphia children.

**Goals for the Research**

Participants tended to see the research produced through our collective work as significant and powerful in itself. For example, Mary saw her involvement in the inquiry group as connected to her concern for the youth she teaches and her commitment to supporting a strong public education system. She saw participating in this research as one way to bring attention to the issue: “I think if this [research] will help to get the word out and just offer another perspective, because I know there’s going to be a bunch of perspectives that are one-sided minded and [that don’t] accurately represent what’s really happening [in the Philadelphia education system]” (Interview 1). Mary expressed that she felt the research produced through the study would be useful for strengthening the organization’s work in the public eye and would strengthen the social movement for public education more broadly.

Participants saw the inquiry group as useful for personal reasons combined with the achievement of specific organizational and social movement goals. They brought varied
identities and conceptualizations of the importance of their work together, and meanwhile exhibited common commitment to using their work to strengthen the organization. Participants saw their learning—and the relationships and knowledge formed through collaborative inquiry—as strengthening the work of the Caucus broadly.

**4.2 Making Common Meaning**

Conway (2006) identifies knowledge production as a process “in which the generation of movement-based interpretation of the world becomes central to the movement’s self-understanding and development” (p. 21). Activist groups strive to make meaning of their work and to relate this internal meaning-making to their understanding of, and service to, the broader social movement. Eyerman & Jamison (1991) point out that organizations “can be thought of as vehicles or instruments for carrying or transporting or even producing the movement’s meaning.” They continue, “meaning, or core identity, is… the cognitive space that the movement creates, a space for new kinds of ideas and relationships to develop” (p. 60). If we are to take these scholars together and understand meaning as a continually produced and refined phenomena that is central to the development and work of the organization, then it becomes apparent that spaces for the production of meaning form the very soul of the broader movement for change and the work of the change-seeking organization.

Participants in the study saw their meaning-making as an activity that was both concerned with forming an understanding of structural racism broadly, as well as an opportunity to engage in deep reflection about the meaning and significance of systems of racial inequity and power for the social justice unionist movement. They strove to create a common sense of structural racism through their work in order to refine both their own personal perspectives as well as the work of their broader organization. In the meantime, they understood making common meaning about the significance and functions of structural racism
to ground their work together as a small group, which in turn supported their change-making initiatives within the Caucus organization. Many participants felt that the group never fully agreed on a common understanding of the form and function of structural racism; however, most felt that the group came close. In this section, I explore what common meaning the group made of structural racism in order to begin to track the form and function of group learning.

Upon entering the group, participants held a range of personal identities and experiences that informed their unique personal understandings of racism and structural racism. Because the explicit goal structuring group meetings was to engage in deep conversation about the nature of structural racism and then to put this into conversation with the Caucus’ organizing practice, participants felt it was important to establish a common sense for the meaning and significance of structural racism.

I opened our group in the first session by asking participants to articulate: What is race? What is racism? What is structural racism? Through conversation centered on these questions, it quickly became apparent that some participants were widely read in critical race studies, while others were newer to theorizing the subject through an academic lens. However, regardless of the extent to which they had previously theorized or read about structural racism, all participants positioned themselves as learners and as willing to engage with and consider the ideas of others. Over time, participants came to commonly define structural racism as located in historical legacies shaping current social, economic and political systems that result in ongoing socially-embedded inequity for people of color.

As the group progressed, Corey and Zak came to take up strong leadership roles in discussing and theorizing race, racism and structural racism. In the last few meetings, when the group began to prepare curriculum for a professional development workshop we were running, group members asked Zak to develop a working definition for what structural racism is and
does. His definition was written on multiple sheets of paper that were taped together. The definition is as follows:

Structural racism is the normalization and legitimation of an array of entrenched dynamics - historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal that advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color which reinforce existent racially developed societal structures. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” that reflect the distribution of material and symbolic advantage and disadvantage along racial lines while acknowledging the realignment of socio-political institutions developed throughout time to maintain continuity of racialized power systems.

When Zak emailed group members for feedback and critique regarding this definition, group members across the board asserted that they agreed with the definition. Although the definition was not collectively-written, its key principles and assertions very much emerged from conversations within the group and was consistently repeated by participants in their personal interviews upon study conclusion.

While all group members agreed with the written definition, it is perhaps no surprise that there persisted differences in the learning and knowledge carried by individual people. In reflecting back on the group at the end of the study, Penelope articulated: “I think some people were more ahead of others in what they believed. I think I myself evolved in my understanding and interpretation of the issue. I think some people are still in the group or are still basing – like they’re still developing, and or haven’t shared outwardly their true feelings about it or ideas about it” (Interview 3). As Penelope points out, there was diversity among the group in terms of the depth to which they understood the central concepts of racism and structural racism, as well as how open individuals were about their personal understanding and beliefs about racism.
Zak saw the group as useful for establishing a common base or framework for understanding racism and saw the process of understanding the form and function of racism as a life-long endeavor. In reflecting on the first four inquiry group meetings, Zak said:

I think there’s more of a convergence, more of an understanding... I think we were able to smash some base assumptions regarding racism. I think we were able to articulate with each other more clearly how racism functions, not only as a personal prejudice or discrimination against individuals, but more as a system that influences everybody’s perceptions” (Interview 2).

Zak holds a personal and lifelong commitment to exploring the form and function of racism, and he applies these principles to his personal life, including how he rears his children, his professional work as a teacher and the curriculum and pedagogy that he employs, as well as within his self-perceived revolutionary work within the Caucus. His articulation that there is a “convergence” and more of a common “understanding” established among the group reflects his commitment to centering teaching and learning as a means for dismantling racist systems of oppression. He saw the group’s convergence in establishing a common understanding as reflecting movement toward a common revolutionary outlook and set of aligning goals.

Participants in my study greatly valued and prioritized processes that would allow them to develop common meaning and outlooks through their work together. They saw convergence in meaning and outlook as indicating a successful first step toward triggering change in realms extending beyond the inquiry group. Participants drew upon their prior knowledge and experience in ways that helped them grapple with the subject, and they engaged in a push and pull between their personal perspectives and those of others. They saw their personal knowledge as bound up in the collective knowledge construction processes of the broader group, and their work centered on helping move all members forward in their conceptualization of the topic at hand. Each participant framed her or himself as an active learner within this process of collective meaning-making, and they tended to see the degree to
which their colleagues moved forward in their thinking on structural racism as dependent upon their prior knowledge, experience, and exposure to new conceptualizations of structural racism through the group.

4.3 Identity and Learning

Gouin (2009) argues that learning in social movements is rooted in “historical, economic, and political relations of ruling” (p. 162) that are subject to pervasive racist and gendered ideology and structure. In so doing, she both builds on and critiques Foley’s (1999) Marxist framework that positions learning as intrinsic to the nature and daily work of social movements. Gouin argues that Foley’s framework must be expanded to account for pervasive inequitable power dynamics shaping social movement ideologies and activities. This critique might also be applied more broadly to the social movement learning literature, which sometimes accounts for gender and class (for example, see Chovanec, 2009; Harley, 2012) but rarely explores how race structures movement ideology and participation.

Warren (2010) responds to this literature gap in the book, *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*, where he tracks how whites move from passivity to racial justice activism through building awareness and moral commitment to antiracist worldviews and concerns. Fundamentally concerned with how white activists learn to make sense of racial justice in and through their activist practice, Warren identifies multiracial organizing as a significant opportunity for moving antiracist thinking forward in leftist movements. However, his view of antiracist movements is primarily focused on white activist growth and learning, and more work is needed to examine the complex ways that activists come together to learn across their racial, gender, and other identity lines.

Scholar and public intellectual bell hooks (2003) implores us to consider the ways that people form solidarity across racial identity lines and engage in mutual processes of learning:
The principles that govern interaction between black and women folks in a white-supremacist society, that help us resist and form solidarity, need to be identified. One principle is the will to form a conscious, cooperative partnership that is rooted in mutuality (p. 63).

Here, hooks expresses the notion that deep solidarity between people across racial and gender identity differences requires critical examination of and conscious effort to disrupt oppressive structures and systems that govern dominant power paradigms, dynamics and the self. What does it mean to work across identity differences and how can people build solidarity with each other as they do so?

This study brought together people holding varied racial, gender, class, sexuality, and age identities. At the outset, I had expected to see learning process patterns associated with each of the varied and intersecting identities of participants (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, religion). However, I found that race and gender held primary significance for the collaborative learning practices of participants in the group, while other identity categories—particularly sexuality, class and religion—did not emerge as significant for shaping the learning experiences of participants. This section explores how participants made sense of their own and others’ identities in light of their sense-making work together, and highlights why race and gender were of particular salience to members of this group.

Participants tended to associate racial identity with knowledge about racist systems and structures. In reflecting upon the extent to which the mostly-white Caucus members consider the needs of people of color and the existence of broader racialized barriers and systems of oppression shaping the daily lives of people of color, Mary identified a need for personal learning within some members of the Caucus. She said: “the whole membership [of the Caucus] in general is status quo. Oblivious or not. But there are folks there who are very aware [of racism] and they try to be inclusive… [but] the general membership are just the usual” (Inquiry Group 3). Mary frames some members in the Caucus as conscious of patterns
of racial inequity. She says that these members do what they can to counter and to address racism. She highlights the majority white “general membership” as unintentionally engaged in reinforcing racist structures and behaviors. Mary labels this phenomenon as “not intentional” while Zak names a similar phenomenon “unconscious racism.” In both framings, education is thought to be the solution for increasing member awareness about dominant racist structures.

The inquiry group provided space for participants to engage in a personal learning experience about racism that was intimately bound up in the learning of their peers. It acted as a formal space for inquiry and allowed for people to come together from across a range of identities, experiences, and backgrounds. Ben points to the significance of intentionality in group learning about identity and issues of racism: “the setting that you created formalized it in a way” (Interview 3). Here, Ben points out that the Caucus needed to engage in deeper conversation that probed at the roots and functions of racism within society in order to understand and track lines of racism within the organization. He points out that informal conversations about racist assumptions and structures within the Caucus were already taking place in the organization prior to the start of the inquiry group, but points to the inquiry group as an explicit and intentional space in which people could take these conversations to the next level.

**Multiracial Learning**

Scholar hooks (2003) points to the need to create cooperative partnerships extending across racial lines. Similarly, participants in this study tended to express that there is something special and significant about discussing race and racial justice in a multiracial space. This opportunity was thought significant both for the learning of group members as well as for new forms of relationship development. Many participants, across both white and racialized identities, saw multiracial dialogue as meaningful for personal learning.
Some participants of color felt that it had been meaningful to feel listened to and heard by white folks. Camille vocalized this experience in the following way:

**Camille:** I’ve never really been in a room with people who actually admitted it [structural racism]. So it’s like, “Oh—”

**Rhiannon:** Like white people admitting it?

**Camille:** Yeah… [Before this group,] I didn’t really see white people as a part of the change, as a meaningful part of the change. And really, that’s the main part of the change, admitting it. So I think that kind of changed my perspective, hearing other [white] people talk about having these conversations with family members and they are part of that.

Camille identifies the interracial space as a unique space in her experience, as it was the first time in which she had seen and heard white people acknowledge her experiences of racism. She says that she has never had this experience of hearing white people admit to systemic racism, and that it felt surprising and pleasing to feel that white people heard her and were committed to recognizing this pain and to working to counter it in ways that allied with African American communities.

Similarly, Mary felt that the personal expression of experiences with racism was significant for some people of color in the group. She said: “I think it was therapeutic. I really do, I think people got a chance to voice their opinions, and vent, and express themselves… I don’t know for the people who had to listen, what they took from it, or how they felt about it” (Interview 3). Here, Mary points to the ways in which the interracial inquiry group space allowed for some people of color to experience an outlet for emotions associated with their own experiences of racism. She also points to the complexities and limits of understanding how listeners—who we might assume are primarily white—understand these expressions of emotions and the telling of stories by people of color in the group.

White people in the group tended to articulate that they were emotionally moved by the trust people of color invested in the group, which was expressed through their sharing of
experiences, analysis, and stories. White participants tended to desire creating more interracial spaces for dialogue and learning based on this experience. Josh spoke to the rarity of having true conversations about race that stand outside of the usual white activist organizational space. He said: “I think the fact that it was an interracial group was really big… I feel like everyone was coming from a distinct place and set of experiences, it wasn’t necessarily just your usual hippie activist group—even if that were an interracial space I feel like often sometimes in those spaces everyone has very similar experiences to some extent—and people were really willing to share their experiences and be open and share that more raw…“ (Interview 3). Josh expresses appreciation for the honesty people of color brought to the group. He articulates his personal ongoing commitment to doing work on racial justice, but also expresses the feeling of limitation that he sometimes encounters in activist spaces, where people tend to enter with similar identities, experiences and analysis. He says that the power of talking and listening within an interracial group supported his own learning as a white person.

Corey complexified this orientation. In interviews, he talked about his desire to hear specific whites in the room speak more—such as Josh and Ben. He thought this would allow for more conversation across racial boundaries and help him better understand what the white people were thinking and feeling. He sometimes felt like it was difficult to gauge this with particular people and expressed feeling that this made it more difficult to trust across racial boundaries.

Together, the participants show that the opportunity to talk about race across multiracial lines was powerful. It was powerful for building trust across racial identity differences, for the therapeutic expression of experiences and personal harm due to racism, and for moving forward in thinking and understanding about race (particularly for the white participants). Talking about race across racial identity difference also posed challenges, as Corey points out, particularly with regard to balancing speaking and listening across racial
identity lines and the extent to which white people “took up space.” In Chapter 4 I return to issues of talk time and space.

Making Sense of White Privilege

Tatum (2003) argues that whites may come to develop a positive racial identity through embracing commitment to racial justice causes. She argues, “deepening awareness usually leads to a commitment to unlearn one’s racism” (p. 106), and that whites can come to a positive view of their racial identity in light of pervasive systems of oppression through the search for white allies and the restoration of a sense of hope. This allyship and restoration of hope is bound up in whites acknowledging commitment to racial justice struggles (Tatum, 2003). Michael (2015) similarly argues that white teachers need to build a positive racial identity in order to develop positive multiracial and antiracist classrooms. And, Warren (2010) addresses how white activists conceptualize multiracial collaboration, pointing particularly to the need for whites to address their privilege when working in partnership with people of color in activist endeavors.

Together, Tatum (2003), Michael (2015) and Warren (2010) build an understanding of white antiracist work as rooted in developing a long-term positive view of white racial identity. This involves a learning process where whites acknowledge their privilege and then come to recognize ways they can engage in allied antiracist work alongside people of color. My study shows that this process of whites developing and expressing a critical view of whiteness and white privilege was significant both for the white participants themselves, as well as for the participants of color.

Camille explained that she had long been acquainted with white privilege in her daily life, but that the term “white privilege” was new and held special significance for her. In reflecting on what she has learned about structural racism through the group, Camille wrote:
“My knowledge and ideas have remain the same. I have come to realize that it is the work of everyone but especially of white Americans to realize it [structural racism] and name it” (Journal, April 22). In her description, Camille writes that she sees white Americans as holding an ethical obligation to recognize, name, and work to counter structural racism. She locates this insight as fundamental to her learning in the group.

The term and concept “white privilege” came up numerous times in the inquiry group space. White privilege was used to name the experience of whites garnering advantage in all facets of their lives, including within their economic, political, social and daily life experiences and opportunities. White participants generally agreed that they experienced privilege based on their racial identity, and that there was a need to unsettle and dismantle this privilege. It was a central effort among white participants to think about the privileges associated with their racial identity and to deconstruct these both privately and publicly within the group. This consciousness shaped the ways that whites in the group participated and their experiences of personal learning and the collaborative learning process.

Kathy described how easy it is to ignore and overlook racialized power dynamics and structures as a white person in the USA. She said:

[White people, we don’t have to look at our whiteness, we just don’t ever, until something or someone makes us, whether that’s another white person in your life or a person of color. Like you do not have to look at yourself, you are in power and power is hegemony and you don’t have to even name yourself because you’re just it, you are just invisible and in power and until you have that experience of being shaken out of that blindness, whether it’s by another white person or by a person of color, you can just live your whole life in that cloud (Interview 1).

Kathy implies that a moment of shock often pushes white people into recognizing how they are complicit in systems of racial supremacy. She says that it might take another white person or a person of color to push white people to think about how they are positioned in hegemonic systems of oppression. This being pushed to think is vital for becoming aware of how one
benefits and buys into systems of racial oppression and to learning how to counter these systems both internally and within broader systemic structures.

The increased consciousness about white privilege and the struggle to disrupt white privilege through involvement with the group led many white participants to feel highly conscious of how and when they spoke. Josh reflected on feeling inclined to publicly acknowledge his white privilege within the group at times, and located this viewpoint as intimately bound up in his privilege. He said: “[W]e all have accepted already and gone over the fact that white privilege plays a role, like what does it – is it just me assuaging my guilt by saying it?… I mean, somehow playing that like, ‘Oh, look, I’m a cool white person because I know that this is privilege’…” (Interview 2). Josh questions whether vocalizing privilege would play a positive and productive role in the group, in that he locates such admissions of privilege as sometimes connected to ego, or a desire to be recognized as a “cool white person” who is aware of patterns of racial inequity. He expresses the desire to move beyond lingual admissions of privilege and into a space where he can struggle to address and dismantle his privilege and behave in ways that align with his values, rather than simply vocalizing a theoretical analysis and perspective.

Josh goes on to explain that he sees white privilege as wrapped up in the process of naming it as such. He said, “For me, just having racial justice in the front of my mind all the time… that’s obviously coming from a place of white privilege to be able to say that, because I get to pick and choose when I want racial justice to be at the forefront of my mind or not” (Interview 2). Differentiating his experience from those of people of color, Josh points to the privilege inherent in consciousness about white privilege, and how he can “pick and choose” when he is aware of privilege according to when it acts in his favor.

Penelope further complexifies notions of white privilege. She points out that she is a visible racialized minority who also benefits from white privilege. Her analysis points to the
need to understand privilege as complex and wrapped up in intersecting identities (see Crenshaw, 1989; Lorde, 1984), rather than simply accorded with visibility of race in skin tone. She says:

I sometimes have problems with this term ‘white privilege’ because I have privileges that I get because of where I live, and who I’m from, and the money that I have, that kids that have the same skin tone or parents who have the same skin tone, but because they think a different way, and they don’t speak academic English, that I get privileges that they don’t. And that’s not based on skin color… Yes, there is white privilege, but we also need to talk about… being a person of color or a part of the middle class, we still have privileges over other people. And we as people of color need to recognize that as well, because otherwise we’re perpetuating the system (Interview 1).

Penelope positions herself as benefiting from white privilege despite being a visible racial minority in the U.S. She articulates that privilege is more complex than simply racial identity, and points to parents, class, language and other factors as bound up in privilege. Penelope positions herself as an insider to both racial oppression and to privilege. There are no easy answers for how to reconcile the problems of white privilege for any of our participants, and Penelope reminds us that privilege is deeply bound up in intersecting identities that extend beyond race into language, class and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 1991, 2003).

**Gender Identity and Learning**

Many of the women—although not the men—pointed to gender as a significant factor shaping group dynamics. I did not initially ask the women participants directly about gender dynamics; however, in the second interview, when asked about what dynamics shape group discussions, four out of the five women mentioned that they perceived gender as shaping group discussions. Later, I wanted to hear how men in the group were experiencing gender, so I asked a few men directly about their experience/s of gender in the group. Unlike the women,
all of the men expressed that they did not think that gender was a significant factor in shaping inquiry group dynamics.

African American women in the group acknowledged that they noticed African American men taking up a substantial portion of talk time in the group space. One woman understood this talk time discrepancy as located in the men’s prior knowledge and theorizing around the topic and the expertise that they brought to the group. Camille said, “I don’t want to say the men were dominant – they were just very knowledgeable, and they offered a very interesting perspective of things that is very easy when you’re in education to think of it from a woman’s, from the girls, and it’s very emotional. And not to say that they weren’t emotional, but they were also able to talk about things in terms of the systems and just the systematic nature of it” (Interview 3). Camille identifies woman as engaging with discussions of racism from a more explicitly emotional perspective, and sees the strength in how men in the group spoke about racism in their intellectual theorizing and the way that they could describe structural racism’s connection with “systems” in ways that extended beyond emotion (for analysis and theorizing of heteropatriarchy within African American communities, see Collins, 2000; Woodson & Pabon, 2016).

Camille follows this up by articulating that she sees Black men as more vulnerable to racial oppression than Black women: “[P]eople aren’t trying to emasculate you [Black women]. They’re not. And that’s a whole different thing that they have to go through that we don’t” (Interview 3). Mary similarly cites that she learned through this group that “our black men, I realized that this racism seems like it’s hitting them harder” (Interview 2). Mary goes on to articulate,

I think it’s a gender and race thing. I mean, I know this is kind of a simple perspective, but people are being shot. Well, people are being shot all over by police all the time, but I think you’ll find that it’s fairly the majority would be a black man, it’s not black
women. It’s black male. …as a woman it makes me nervous, but if I was a black male I’d be really nervous because, you know, the stereotypes (Interview 2).

Together, Mary and Camille articulate that they understand African American men as more visibly and violently affected by systems of racial oppression. They believe that the violence targeted toward black men by institutional systems like the justice system leads to a very deep sense of anger at hegemonic systems of power and oppression, and link this deep-seated anger with dynamics in our inquiry group.

Mary articulates that African American men also feel great commitment to their families and that this shapes their experiences of racial oppression. She said: “[T]hey may feel it more, the direct abuse or whatever on the police and from others, and as men they want to live, they want to support their families… I mean, the men are mad, they want to fight this thing, but we [women] don’t have to go that far” (Interview 2). Mary articulates that African American men are concerned with protecting and supporting their families and feel anger at the violence they face from the police. She articulates that this anger was visible in how and how much the men spoke within the inquiry group space.

Miriam also struggled to understand gender dynamics in the group as a white woman. On the one hand, she expressed a deep gratitude toward the Black men in the group, for sharing their experiences and insights into the dynamics of race and racial justice. Yet on the other hand, she struggled to reconcile her awareness of unequal gender dynamics in the group with her own commitment to gender equality and feminism. Miriam articulated:

I respect them both [i.e. Zak and Corey] really deeply. And often put what they say on this giant pedestal. But then in that space, I realized how giving them all of that space puts them at higher levels than women of color in the room… I don’t see their talking as mansplaining. When a white man does that to me, I see it, like when a white man calls me out and says that I’m wrong, and then proceeds to tell me why, which happens all the time, then I’m like, ‘you can shut the f*# up.’ But when a black man does it, or a man who’s a person of color does it, I’m like, ‘Oh, say more about that, I
want to hear what you have to say,’ but I don’t question the space that they’re taking up, and I only notice it because there are black women in the room (Interview 2).

Miriam points to how race and gender combine to create complex power dynamics in multiracial spaces. She states that it is easy to point out gender inequity when the dynamic simply involves white men and women, or racial inequity when men of color and whites are present. She points out that it is more difficult to understand power dynamics embedded in the room when there are both men and women of color in the room. She expresses that her inclination is to value and help elevate the voices of people of color in the room, but that she is uncertain how to understand or respond to complex and intersecting racial and gender dynamics at work within the room.

Camille, Mary and Miriam point to the complexity of intersecting identities in multiracial learning spaces. Within this group, African American women tended to see their role as supporting African American men in theorizing and activism, and valued creating a therapeutic environment in which all participants could make sense of racial oppression. African American men expressed great personal concern about the effects of racism on their lives and those of other African American men, and tended to express anger over inequitable systems of power through deep theorizing and commitment to thinking through and addressing structural racism within their personal lives, professional work, and their activism. And some white women in the group grappled with how to reconcile gendered differences in expression and talk space in the group with their analysis of racial systems of oppression, but struggled to identify gendered dynamics when it involved complex and intersecting identities. Like Bannerji (1995), Collins (2000), Lorde (1984), Mohanty (2003), findings point to the ways in which feminist and antiracist politics might be fused together to inform a critical view of the relationship between race and gender in adult learning spaces.
4.4 Connecting Inquiry with Action

Freire (1970/2004) names praxis as the key to revolutionary change. He defines praxis as “reflection and action [sic] directed at the structures to be transformed” (p. 96), and sees praxis as intimately bound up in the revolutionary struggle to transform broader systems of power. Freire is concerned with action that is bound up in revolutionary goals, and sees personal transformation as resulting from processes of reflecting then acting, reflecting and then acting again. Wenger (1998) articulates a similar notion of the interconnections between reflection and action, but rather than expressing concern for revolutionary movements, he emphasizes their significance for professional communities of practice. He argues, “Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning” (p. 96). Wenger sees learning as fuelling all practice, and articulates that one can reflect on learning through reflecting on the action (i.e. practice) one has taken in the past. Both scholars see learning as a process of reflection and action that triggers effects in spheres extending beyond the self that might include the professional workplace or the revolutionary social movement.

Participants in the inquiry group similarly saw action and reflection as interconnected. They entered the group with the common goal to grow in their understandings of racism and their organizing skills in order to strengthen the broader organization. Participants came together in the initial few meetings to engage in inquiry and common reflection, and they planned to move this reflection into action toward the end of the group. However, as the action component of the project became eminent, tensions became apparent regarding participants’ different emphases on inquiry or action components of the study. Some participants felt that the inquiry aspect of the study was most significant and should be the focus of the group, while others saw inquiry as valuable mainly for its service to action.

Josh speaks about this inherent tension when reflecting on the fourth inquiry group meeting: “we kept oscillating very strongly between, ‘Here is a bunch of concrete stuff.’ ‘No
wait, but we need no concrete stuff.’… it was oscillating back and forth, and really rapidly” (Interview 2). Participants conceptualized inquiry and action as interconnected concepts, but participants tended to weight their value differently. Some participants prioritized educative approaches with perspective change goals, while others believed that concrete action was a necessary expression of group learning.

Participants struggled with how to reconcile the focus on deep inquiry with their desire to trigger change within their broader organization. Corey was strongly in support of allowing the inquiry group to exist in a space of contemplation and reflection, rather than pushing for resolution and an illusion of clarity in action. He said:

“[W]hat I hate is, especially in talks of these sort of big, overarching huge ideas, where you go, we have to resolve this. Naaaaah. I think sometimes letting it breathe a little bit. We’re gonna still be here and we can talk about it more. But quick resolutions, I’m not a fan of” (Inquiry Group 1).

Corey expresses his view that there is a fragile relationship between inquiry and action. He hesitates to delve too quickly into action because he believes that superficial engagements in inquiry lead to superficial solutions.

While Corey saw inquiry as the fundamental goal for the group, and while he felt that sometimes a focus on action can push forward superficial solutions and responses, other participants felt that action is useful both in itself as well as for making the inquiry component of the group come alive in a new way. Miriam articulated: “I think that the fact that we did those actions… pushed us into a place where we all have a goal, [which was] to get people in the two workshops that we did to talk about these things” (Interview 3). Miriam saw action as allowing the group to bring the opportunity for inquiry to a wider audience outside of our small inquiry group, and to engage wider populations of people in meaningful conversation.

Zak similarly saw the process of designing the action as an extension of the inquiry work: “I think talking through the ideas was the biggest contributor to the group becoming one
on the same page… I think the actions are sort of just the consequences of such collaboration, it’s like, ‘Okay, now we’re kind of on the same point, now what?’ And I think most of the learning… happened through talking the ideas out” (Interview 3). As it turned out, the struggle to design an action with group consensus required a great deal of discussion and debate. Participants felt that this process of designing the action became part of the inquiry process itself. Through striving to reach common consensus on the direction of the action, the group increasingly became “on the same page” and made concrete decisions about how to move forward to trigger change within the broader organization. In this sense, like in Freire (1970/2004) and Wenger’s (1998) conceptualizations, the action was inherently both a part and an extension of the inquiry work.

4.5 Discussion and Summary

This chapter has explored critical aspects of learning in this multiracial group of politically active teachers. I have shown that raced and gendered ideologies and structures shape the learning of participants as they work together to create common goals and to make sense of race and racism as systemic structures. This conclusion draws attention to three main findings. First, that collaborative work allowed participants to begin to concentrate their thinking in ways that helped them to formulate important questions about structural racism—i.e., this process of inquiry supported their learning as a group. Second, that learning about racial justice requires participants to take substantial personal risk, both in sharing personal knowledge and experiences, and in their openness to new ideas and influence. And third, that learning required participants to integrate their identity and personal experiences into the learning process in order to support personal and group learning.

An inquiry approach to thinking and learning centralizes a “continual process of questioning and using the data of practice to investigate those questions critically and
collaboratively” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 121). Over time, participants in the study came to concentrate their thinking in ways that helped them hone their orientation toward and skill at asking questions. Rather than simply drawing conclusions about the form and function of structural racism, participants came to greatly value developing questions and exploring these questions through their collaborative work in the group. They saw their sense-making as wrapped up in developing and inquiring into key lines of thinking, and saw this questioning as fundamental to their personal learning work and to their work together in the group.

When groups of diverse people come together to learn about racial justice, substantial risk is involved. Deep learning requires that participants be willing to consider viewpoints that diverge from their own. The encounter with new and divergent viewpoints can at times be discomforting (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), but in order to learn, participants must be willing to reassess their personal assumptions and understandings while considering the emotions, experiences, and theories of others. In this study, participants expressed that they had moved forward in their thinking and articulation about racial justice. The nature and form of this learning was often bound up in the identity of the participants—for participants of color, learning frequently involved movement in the ability to articulate an already existing feeling and experience with racism; while white participants tended to experience learning as developing deeper understanding of the power and dynamics of race in system structures and their effects on the lives of friends and colleagues, along with a deepened view on how white identities and lives are bound up in maintaining racial injustice through racial privilege. For all participants, learning relied on their taking risks in challenging themselves to consider the viewpoints of others, to think through what and how they articulate the effects of racism, and to test new ways for thinking and talking about racial oppression.

Participants came to see the inquiry group as an intellectual center for the broader Caucus organization, and they took risks in both re-imagining what the Caucus could be and in
sharing these visions with one another. Participants felt a sense of responsibility to bring their personal and group learning to the broader organization, and struggled to identify the best way to share their collective learning. There was some initial disagreement about whether it was more important to engage in inquiry or action through their intellectual efforts, but over time participants worked through their differences and established consensus. They chose to develop an inquiry-centered approach to action, through designing and running professional development workshops for colleagues. Participants took risks in trusting and learning from one another as they strove for the development of a common understanding about structural racism, goal convergence, and consensus in their development and implementation of the professional development action.

The teachers integrated their identity and experiences into the learning process in significant ways that shaped their work together. Racial and gender identity were significant for how participants engaged in the group, and informed the shape and form of their learning. Positionality and intersecting identities were found to be significant for the learning in the group. While whites tended to primarily strive for a deeper understanding of racism, people of color in the group tended to see their personal learning as bound up in developing enhanced skills at articulation of their already-existing knowledge of racism. Learning took varied forms and functions across the participants’ varied racial identities, and this indicates that learning is dependent upon participants’ prior knowledge and personal experience. Across racial identities, both whites and people of color saw great value in coming together to talk about racism across racial identity difference, in part due to its support for growth in their own and others’ learning.

Gender was considered significant for shaping patterns of talk time and emotional expression in the group. Gender and race intersected in complex ways to shape how participants felt the effects of racism on their lives and that of their families. Expressions of
emotion were defined in part by the intersections of race and gender, and at times participants struggled to tease apart the intersections of gender and race in communication and learning dynamics within the group.

In this chapter, I have shown that learning seeps through every aspect of participant engagement in the group. This includes components such as coming to articulate common goals within the group, and developing a common sense of meaning for structural racism itself. Learning is shaped through the personal experiences, emotions, and effects of racism on the individuals in the group, and participants took substantial risk in sharing their experiences, knowledge, values, and their learning with one another—including across identity differences—as the group progressed over time.
Chapter 5: Pedagogical Processes for Literacy Learning

What we’re doing is new here, but we’re [also] continuing work that’s already happening… Other people are having this conversation, and we need to bring it here in some kind of deep way. I feel like, people, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Like teaching to do it, and learning to do it, that they [i.e. the work of others] can ground us (Miriam, Interview 2).

Giroux (1983) points to a tendency among education theorists to emphasize the ways in which schools reproduce existing social inequity. He argues: “Reproduction theorists have overemphasized the idea of domination in their analyses and have failed to provide any major insights into how teachers, students, and other human agents… both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence” (p. 259). Pointing to the agency inherent among educational stakeholders, Giroux’s observation leads us to question: what pedagogical elements and tools allow stakeholders to come together and exert agency within schools and their educational organizations?

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that inquiry-based pedagogy poses significant opportunity for teachers and other educational agents to “investigate and critique a set of overarching questions” that are “continually renegotiated” (p. 109). Contexts that center an inquiry stance within pedagogical design tend to center the critique and (re)negotiation of questions, experience, and insights (Cochran-Smith Lytle, 2009). This model of “inquiry as pedagogy” holds possibility for enacting critical race-feminist pedagogical approaches (see Gore, 1993; Hoodfar, 1997) within teachers’ learning. In this way, teachers may engage and employ critical theoretical questions to work through and improve specific pedagogical strategies and then apply this learning within their inquiry groups and to broader contexts including their classrooms, activist organizations, and other spaces.

At the outset of this chapter, Miriam points to the need to build upon previously-established pedagogical techniques developed within multiracial organizing and critical race
inquiry. She argues that the challenge is in discerning how to bring this thinking and organizing to the Caucus in a deep way. Miriam’s comment reminds us that many of the critiques, modes of inquiry, and pedagogical strategies employed by our inquiry group have previously been employed in similar race-feminist and critical pedagogy spaces within activist and education circles. However, our inquiry group put these pedagogical approaches into practice in new ways that aligned both with the relational and educative needs expressed by participants as well as the particularities of our context.

This chapter builds a stronger understanding of what pedagogical elements supported the collaborative learning of our inquiry group. The chapter is broken down into two broad sections, with each containing multiple sub-sections. First, I explore the ways in which literacy created opportunity for reflective action. I pay particular attention to teachers’ literacy learning, and their experiences and perceptions of the role of reading and writing on collaborative learning experiences. Next, I explore nine specific pedagogical elements in group learning: the role of facilitation, establishment of group norms, processes for discussing definitions, the pedagogical work of go-arounds, the influence of geographic space, storytelling, talk time among participants, vital components of taking action, and processes of open communication about group dynamics. Together, these varied facets of pedagogical process and practice build a stronger understanding for how pedagogy supported the group’s collaborative learning.

5.1 Literacy as Reflective Social Action

Literacy scholar Brian Street (2003; Street & Lefstein, 2007) is careful to point out that literacy itself is a contested term. What is considered to constitute—and not constitute—literacy is embedded in social contexts and cultural assumptions about the meaning of reading and decoding, and writing and encoding, when engaging with language and ideas. Street
identifies how New Literacy Studies (NLS) is grounded in a view of literacy as a social practice, rather than technical skills acquisition. Literacies thus vary according to time, space, and relations of power. At any one moment, Street encourages us to ask: whose literacies are dominant? Whose are marginalized? And whose considered resistant?

Street (2003; Street & Lefstein, 2007) critiques traditional literacy research for holding assumptions of autonomy. In the autonomous model, literacy is said to exist outside social power relations and to impact other social and cognitive factors. In this way, literacy is thought to naturally act upon people to improve them and their lives. Street asserts that this autonomous model of literacy dangerously ignores the impact of underlying cultural and ideological assumptions, and falsely presents itself as neutral and universal. Street asserts that the solution to this view of literacy as autonomous is to understand it as ideological in nature and form. This ideological model views literacy as “embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (2003, p. 77). Street asserts that literacy varies from one context to another, as do the effects of diverse literacies in diverse contexts.

Freire (1970/2004) similarly sees literacy as situated within social contexts, but his central concern is with literacy’s potential for triggering broader social change. Freire & Macedo (1987) argue, “literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people.” Viewing reading and writing skills as a means through which to gain more critical views and analysis of the world and processes of social domination and subordination, Freire sees literacy as a means to enhanced humanization through enabling personal and social transformation.

When put together, Street (2003; Street & Lefstein, 2007) and Freire’s (1985, 1970/2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987) work build understanding of the varied forms literacy takes in social contexts and its power to effect personal and social transformation through development of critical faculties and reading and writing skill. Literacy thus becomes a process
of reflective action, wherein participants are required to use reading and writing as means to understand broader relations of power and through which to exert agency in order to transform the world to become more equitable and just.

In this study, participants engaged literacy practices to make sense of structural racism, and put this understanding into conversation with their activist organizing practice. Participants drew primarily upon textual reading in their discussions, but also engaged writing to make sense of their learning and the knowledge and experiences of others. In this dissertation, I argue that reading and listening are both elements of a similar decoding phenomenon centered on personal transformation, which is Freire’s (1985) notion of “reading the world and reading the word.” Similarly, I argue that writing and speaking were both elements of encoding activity, wherein participants took ideas and translated them into expression in order to share their thoughts and perspectives with others and to engage in a mutual process of reflection and transformation. In my study, I found that participants placed high value upon listening and speaking in their enactments of literacy for personal transformation in the group.

**Time and Teachers’ Learning**

Time is frequently a limiting factor for teacher collaboration efforts taking place both in and out of school spaces (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Collinson and Cook (2001) address the complex and dynamic ways that teachers understand and interact with time in their professional lives, concluding that teacher learning and knowledge dissemination is intimately bound up in matters of time that need to be understood and accommodated through the design and structure of learning opportunities for teachers. Teachers in my study similarly expressed that they felt time limitations upon the extent and depth of their group involvement. They made the time to participate in the formal inquiry
group meetings to their utmost power. However, they displayed both through their participation in reading and writing activities, and through explicit verbal acknowledgements, that time sometimes limited their full participation and involvement in the inquiry group.

In our fourth inquiry group meeting, Kathy shared that she felt her involvement in the inquiry group was suffering as a result of time limitations connected with her activist organizing commitments. She said, “I’m way over-committed and I feel like I’m not prepared when I come, well except the first time. Ever since, it’s been like, no. And so while the discussions are great and it’s exactly what we need to be doing, I feel like I’m cheating myself and the process by not coming prepared” (Inquiry Group 4). In a private interview, I asked Kathy to tell me more about how she perceived the effect of time limitations on her participation in the group. She responded:

**Kathy:** I just feel like I have not invested myself in the way that would have created even more meaning for me and also for the group. Like, there’s so much potential, and it’s so important, and it’s deep, and it’s hard, and it’s slow… it’s not something you can do a drive-by on, and I feel like I’ve done a drive-by, knowing that the deeper pool is just there waiting…

**Rhiannon:** What would that deep process look like, that would be different from what you feel has happened?

**Kathy:** Well, I would have done all the readings first of all. I feel like I’m missing huge chunks. I’ve probably done about half the readings seriously. And then I have not reflected before a meeting. I reflect during meetings and a little bit afterwards, but I don’t come in having processed things. And I know that if I sat down to write before the conversations, that I would come better prepared to engage. That’s what I mean by drive-by (Interview 2).

Kathy expresses that she believes that her personal investment in the group creates meaning both for herself and for the group more broadly. She sees learning as a “slow, “hard,” and “deep” process that takes place over a long period of time. She explains that making meaning through a group experience involves personal commitment and engages a range of literacy behaviors in the process, including reading, reflecting, processing, and writing.
Kathy was not the only participant to express that time limitations shaped the extent and quality of inquiry group involvement and engagement in individual and collaborative literacy practices. Miriam echoed that she is over-committed from her activist and professional commitments: “I just am doing so many things. I’m out to ten clock every night; I’m exhausted” (Interview 2). Penelope expressed that a sense of exhaustion and over-commitment shaped not just her engagement in reading, writing, and other reflecting and processing activities, but also her involvement within the group space. She reflected, “I’ve felt a little frustration with the group itself because I feel like that that time of day was not a good time for me because I was coming in, I was already tired and then my mind buzzing with a thousand other things from the day, and I still had to go home and do a whole bunch of work” (Interview 2). The extent and depth to which Penelope could focus and listen to the words of other participants, as well as speak and engage with their ideas, was limited by her outside commitments and the timing of meetings.

The feeling of being overcommitted seemed to permeate throughout the group, particularly affecting those with children and romantic partners, and those with extensive after-school commitments to activist organizations and professional development activities. Penelope said, “I feel guilty that I haven’t been able to invest as much energy and time into doing the readings, and doing the responding. But I – I’m also feeling like I’m incubating overall that information anyway” (Interview 2). Pointing to the sense that her participation in the group is meaningful despite a lack of time to engage in the full range of activities encouraged by the inquiry group, Penelope expresses that she is “incubating” ideas and expects her learning to continue simmering and taking shape over time in ways that she cannot predict.14

14 Interestingly, in a presentation at the Penn Ethnography Forum that the group ran one year after the start of the study, Penelope expressed that her knowledge about structural racism had indeed grown and
The teachers were busy people. And yet, they persisted in prioritizing the group. They tended to see their commitment to the group as bound up in their relationships with other participants and their commitment to me as researcher and activist colleague, and thus prioritized their attendance. However, time limitations shaped the extent to which they engaged in activities connected to the group, and particularly those activities that they perceived as optional, such as the professional development planning and the assigned reading. Many participants hesitated to admit how much they had read for the group and the submission rate for reflective writing was generally low. However, despite the time difficulties that limited participants’ reading and writing activities, they tended to place great emphasis on their relational engagement in the group and carefully considered the ways in which they engaged listening and speaking.

**Reading and Listening**

Freire (1987) defines reading as bound up with experience and work in the world. He states: “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (p. 29). Reading is thus in direct conversation with one’s past and present experience, and the thoughtful and recursive reflection on text and practical experience may guide readers on a journey to see the world in new ways, identify broader patterns structuring society, and engage in processes of personal liberation and social transformation (Freire, 1970/2004). Participants in my study saw reading in ways that closely aligned with Freire. They saw written texts—and each other—as vital sources of knowledge in the learning process.

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continued to take shape well past the completion of inquiry group meetings. In some ways, perhaps her most significant learning happened after the completion of the group, when she continued to ponder and make sense of the questions raised by the group through the lens of her daily life and professional and activist practice.
Written texts were considered crucial sources of information and participants referenced both those they had read themselves, as well as those from which other participants had shared ideas. Participants tended to place high value on “book knowledge” about structural racism—both their own knowledge and that of others. Some participants, and particularly Zak and Corey, entered the group widely read and consistent drew upon textual information when speaking. They tended to reference texts a great deal throughout the meetings, and particularly during the first two sessions when the conversation was just getting started and participants were in the beginning stages of developing relationships. Other participants in the group expressed greatly admiring how widely read certain members were, with Miriam admitting she placed Zak and Corey “on a pedestal” for their very expansive and deep knowledge of the subject.

Participants passionately drew upon a range of texts in their inquiry group conversations. They raised ideas from articles, books, classes they had taken and taught, film, photography and media, scholars, and public figures and writers. They also drew upon articles that they had located on social media, and as time passed participants increasingly came to reference the articles posted by other participants on social media. For example, Penelope was very moved by an article that Miriam had shared with the group, which provocatively explored the question, “how is grassroots organizing embedded in whiteness, and what can we do about it?” Participants also drew upon books that had previously been read within the summer book clubs organized by Teacher Action Group, and particularly Countryman’s (2006) book *Up South*, which chronicles the civil rights movement in Philadelphia and examines the significance of youth and community organizing for shaping the programming and policies of city schools. In reference to this book, Miriam wondered aloud, “How are the same issues impacting us now?” (Planning meeting 1), and strove to identify ways Countryman’s description of the civil rights movement related to the group’s critique and understanding of

Prior to each meeting, I scanned and distributed short readings that were usually five to ten pages in length. I asked participants to come prepared to discuss the texts. My motivation for providing the texts was to help ground the discussion in the group, provide a common topic for discussion, and explicitly identify themes to shape group discussion. I saw the texts as a pedagogical tool that would help establish a common frame of reference for the group, and act as a means of grounding discussions. Please refer to Appendix D for the list of assigned readings.

As addressed in the previous section, I found that participants frequently came to the meetings without having done the reading. A few people would consistently strive to reference the readings in our sessions, but most simply did not mention them. I asked participants outright about this, and some evaded the question while others admitted to not having kept up with the readings. Miriam confessed, “I didn’t read the readings deeply; if I had read them three or four times before coming, I would have had a deeper understanding of connecting with them” (Interview 2). And while participants seemed to struggle to keep up with the readings, I found that there was considerably greater success in their referencing and engaging with ideas from the assigned John A. Powell (2014) audio lecture. Camille stated that she appreciated the audio format because she could listen to the lecture while driving, so it was easier to access in a busy day.

Although it was difficult to gauge the overall extent to which participants had done the reading due to their avoidance of conversations about the texts, I found that participants still had a great deal to say about the topic of structural racism and frequently relied on their own experiences in the world or with outside texts that they had read to ground discussions in the
group. Ben expressed that even though people didn’t do all the readings, “I don’t think it took away from the group… I think the group was just as productive and meaningful” (Interview 2). Participants viewed the inquiry group as textually rich despite their generally shallow engagement with the assigned written texts.

As members were exposed to new books, articles, films, and other texts referenced by participants in the group, they expressed increasing interest in the topic and in locating textual materials to further their future learning. On occasion, some participants came to the inquiry group bearing new books that had been previously mentioned by participants in the group. In reflecting on the significance of the group for her own life, Kathy wrote, “I gained a newfound desire to do more reading and reflection about racism and how it shapes our world. I was driven to read several books over the summer [following completion of the inquiry group] that brought a racial analysis or critique on current systems” (January, 2016 reflection). Kathy’s comment reveals that participants came to read texts on structural racism in their own time. Many of the participants participated in the summer book club series, which focused on race and structural racism (the theme for the 2015 summer book club was developed in our inquiry group, see Chapter 7 for more information). I found that participants tended to read when they felt they had the time, and they verbally expressed to me in the year following data collection that they continued to seek out and read texts on the topic.

As time proceeded, participants came to rely on each other’s stories and experiences from the meetings, and to draw upon these as texts in their own right. Miriam expressed that participants’ ability to hear others improved over time: “I think towards the end, people started to allow other people’s stuff to take up some space for them as opposed to just thinking about what they wanted to say next” (Interview 3). In the third inquiry group session and beyond, participants began to open up more and to share personal experiences with racism and white privilege. I argue in Chapter 6 that this opening up was intimately bound up in the trust-
building within the group, as members came to trust each other and make themselves vulnerable. Through listening to the verbal texts of others, participants came to engage in another form of reading, one that strongly aligns with Freire’s (1985, 1970/2004) conception of literacy as reading the word and the world.

**Writing and Speaking**

Freire’s (1970/2004) notion of praxis situates reflection and action as intertwined in a circular and reiterative relationship that together construct the learning process. Within the inquiry group, Freire’s conception of praxis provides a useful lens through which to view the relationship between writing and speaking. I have already shown that reading—and listening to the experiences of others—composes an aspect of reflection. Together, reading and listening allow for the taking in of new input and information. Writing and speaking might also be considered an aspect of reflection, in that they allow for output that facilitates the processing of one’s perspectives, knowledge, and how one integrates and expresses new forms of information. However, what aspects of writing and speaking contributed to the reflective components of praxis in the group?

In part, participants engaged in reflection through their textual writing. In the initial meeting of the inquiry group, I handed out notebooks to the participants and asked them to write and reflect on the readings and ideas from the inquiry group sessions. I also gave participants the option of writing online and emailing the writing. After each meeting, I would send out a few questions to participants by email and ask them to reflect on these questions in writing within their journals. Please refer to Appendix D for this list of questions.

I found that participants tended to avoid assigned writing activities. For example, I received only three journals from the nine participants at the end of the meetings, and these were quite short and felt “performative” (i.e. created for me, rather than for the reflective use
or enjoyment of the participant). In January 2016, I emailed each participant a list of questions asking for reflection on the work we engaged in together, and I received written responses from seven participants, the majority of which were very short on detail or description.

Occasionally, I would open a meeting by asking participants to do a quick-write about their thoughts on the week’s topic. Although I only received copies of a few of these quick-writes in data-collection, they served as valuable pedagogical activities. This quick, reflective writing posed an important opportunity for participants to collect their thoughts and to outline key subjects that they hoped to talk about in the group. Pedagogically, the quick-writes allowed participants to remain focused on the topic. Furthermore, the opportunity seemed to hold particular significance for the participants, for as teachers they often came to the meeting feeling somewhat frazzled after a busy day of working with students and other staff, and needed a few moments to focus and to recall the topic at hand.

Even as there were difficulties collecting writing from participants and with participants completing the assigned readings, I still found that wrapping reading and writing elements into the group posed a useful framework for our meetings. Writing, whether done in private at home by participants or integrated into the meeting design as a short free-write session, provided opportunity for participants to think through their ideas, to raise questions about themselves and their organization, and to structure ideas and responses within the broader group. Together with reading, writing helped focus the inquiry group.

When asked for their advice on how to improve the pedagogy of the group, a few people expressed that they felt integrating writing more deeply into the group might be a good technique both for supporting relationship growth between participants as well as for ensuring that all voices were heard. Corey felt that this sharing of writing and personal thoughts would support the individual learning, and help people who tended to primarily take on listening roles in the group to become a more central part of the dialogue: “I think more – more sharing, more
instigating of like no, you’ve got to make something. You can't just be here and be a listener; you’ve got to put up something on the board” (Interview 3). Corey frames writing as an opportunity to encourage the sharing of personal thoughts and an opportunity to open the door to vulnerability and greater trust-building between members (see Chapter 6 for more on trust-building).

Miriam reflected that she felt writing contributes to feelings of safety in groups. When asked about what additional techniques we could have used to help create a safe space for the inquiry group, she responded:

**Miriam:** [In the sessions, and particularly the final debrief session] it would have been interesting to have time to write. For us all to stop and, “Okay, let’s take a moment to like write” because then it can be on paper, so I think that can be helpful sometimes.

**Rhiannon:** In creating a safe space? How does that contribute to creating a safe space?

**Miriam:** I think if people have a chance to process what they’re thinking and then, before they’re actually thinking about sharing it, they might move through discomfort in a different way, or they might decide they shouldn’t share it because it’s complicated, or they might want to hold the thought. I don’t know if it’s necessarily safe for people, but it’s safety for ideas. (Interview 3)

Miriam’s view that writing connects to creating a safe space in a group setting likely connects with her involvement in the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP). PhilWP is a local branch of the National Writing Project, and places emphasis on using writing, and the reading of other teachers’ writing, as an opportunity for the professional development of teachers. Miriam also holds a strong identity as a writer herself, and this is displayed through her frequent posts on social media, both in her own name and for area activist teacher groups. Miriam enjoys reading and writing political nonfiction and poetry in her spare time. Thus, it is not surprising that Miriam sees writing as an opportunity for personal self-expression and enhanced safety for ideas.
Miriam’s description points to ways writing might support the reflective process. In Miriam’s words, writing allows people to “process what they’re thinking” and “move through discomfort” in new ways. She also shares that she sees writing as allowing for people to reflect on whether it is appropriate for ideas to be shared publicly, or whether they should be kept private. In this sense, Miriam’s framing of writing as a reflective process that allows for the revision of self and moving through ideas is strongly aligned with Freire’s (1970/2004) emphasis on praxis as the process of transformation. Writing constructs opportunity for reflection that may in turn inform action in the group and in the world.

Participants spent a great deal of time reflecting on how and what they spoke. Some participants felt that the talk of others did not go deep enough to truly engage them in learning. Penelope said, “I guess a lot of times I felt like the conversations didn’t go deep enough for me to feel that [the group made great impact in how I understood the issues]” (Interview 2). Meanwhile, other participants felt that the group made great progress in the depth shared through talk, and saw this depth of talk as key to triggering their own learning.

Writing, alongside speaking, allows for an output of expression, and the processing of the relationship between one’s perspective and experience and new information. In this sense, reading and listening, and writing and speaking might be understood to together compose the reflective process wrapped up in Freire’s (1970/2004) concept of praxis. These aspects of the reflective process were later put into practice in the inquiry group through planning and engagement in action (as discussed in section 4.4).

5.2 Pedagogical Elements

Gore (1993) argues that critical pedagogues tend to either articulate an abstract political vision or practice-based alternative pedagogical strategies (see also section 1.3). In this section, I build particularly on Gore’s (1993) notion of the “pedagogical practice”
tradition, revealing and highlighting specific pedagogical strategies employed during meetings that supported the inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and transformative learning practices (Freire, 1970/2004) of participants. I show that throughout the varied pedagogical elements, inquiry drove and infused all aspects of pedagogy in the group and centered the development and maintenance of a query-based worldview and orientation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Inquiry-based pedagogy gave participants opportunity to explore their own and others’ assumptions and ideas about race and structural racism, and to make collective sense of concepts. It also gave participants opportunity to translate their inquiry into action in ways that extended beyond the inquiry group itself.

Facilitation

Reiter (2009) draws attention to differences in cultural and organizational factors within participatory social movement traditions, showing that there is an increased tendency to pay attention to how, when and where internal members participate within new social movements. Activist participation—both the extent and the modes through which members participate—is bound up in the decision-making and relational processes of organizations (della Porta, 2009b; Reiter, 2009). Organizations that take up more consensual-oriented approaches to decision-making tend to value horizontalism with high-quality dialogue among varied actors and leaders (della Porta, 2009b). This consensus-oriented dialogue prioritizes membership participation in organizational decision-making through anti-hierarchical facilitation methods.

In my own role as facilitator, I built upon this tradition of horizontal consensus-oriented dialogue and decision-making. Meanwhile, I saw my roles as complex in relation to the group—on the one hand, I was a researcher and facilitator, while on the other I saw myself as a participating activist within the Caucus, and initially also within the inquiry group. Over
time, I came to see that my participation in the inquiry group was largely centered on facilitation and research, rather than active knowledge-generation alongside other members of the group. This pattern emerged mainly because I found it difficult to juggle roles of researcher and facilitator with being an active participant, and so over time I came to prioritize my roles as researcher and facilitator.

As facilitator I drew upon prior personal activist experiences in grassroots groups, including the Caucus organization as well as anti-hierarchical consensus-oriented radical activist groups (see della Porta, 2009b for a definition and description of consensus in social movements). I had previously found that the Caucus took up both deliberative democracy processes (della Porta 2009a) and a soft consensus orientation (della Porta 2009b) within the social and cultural norms, and that these tended to drive facilitation styles within Caucus meetings. I chose to engage a loose facilitation style in order to fit into existing group norms as well as to allow space for group learning to take a form and function that emerged directly from group members. I did not want to be overly intrusive or directive within the sense-making stage of the group because I saw this as getting in the way of the group establishing its own norms of communication and collaboration. As researcher, I was interested in how the group would come together, and the different roles people would take up in the leadership and learning process. I was also interested to see who would step up to take on facilitation roles when they were necessary.

In the initial four inquiry group meetings, my loose facilitation of the group allowed ample space and time for conversation to follow the ideas and trails of members in the group. I strove to balance creating a space where all members felt included, heard, and part of the group, even as it was also a space where individual members could take strong leadership in raising significant points to the group and guiding conversation while making sense of structural racism. And, even as I took a light facilitation approach, I did structure some
significant pedagogical strategies into the group at various points. For example, I asked members to participate in establishing group norms, I engaged go-arounds and asked each person to bring their voice into the circle at the beginning and end of most group sessions, and I explicitly invited participants to discuss and develop definitions of race, racism and structural racism as a means of focusing conversation and discussion early in the process. Each of these pedagogical modes is discussed in following sections and functioned to shape communication in the group.

In the two action planning meetings, I took up a more assertive facilitation role. These meetings were focused on planning two professional development sessions for teachers to think about structural racism, and I strove to guide conversation to solve the question “what will we do to make our action achieve our goals and be successful?” Often this facilitation would involve re-focusing participants on the topic at hand, and sometimes redirecting conversation toward the intended goals of the meeting. I took this stronger role in these sessions because members were frequently distracted from the action planning by philosophical concerns and there was an imminent deadline that was necessary to meet (i.e. the professional development workshop we were to facilitate was booked).

I had initially entered the planning meetings hoping that participants would take up strong facilitation roles within the meetings, and even explicitly asked who could facilitate the meetings, but found that participants tended to want me to facilitate the meetings and to take up a strong leadership role in the planning of the sessions rather than taking leadership themselves. This dynamic was reiterated within the professional development activities; for example, in the first session I was “appointed” by Kathy to lead the professional development session. In the second professional development session, Zak took up a strong leadership role in running the session, but the participants relied on me to spearhead and organize room set-up, the collection and organization of many of the materials, and indeed left me to organize
most aspects of the session. Initially, participants tended to see these actions as something that they were *doing for me*, rather than something that they were deeply invested in running themselves. Over time, this dynamic changed, as participants came to use the materials and curriculum they developed to run their own sessions beyond the inquiry group. For example, Zak, Miriam, Josh, Corey, Kathy and Ben came to use the curriculum to run professional development sessions at events such as the U.S. Social Forum, and Teachers Lead Philly’s Teacher Leadership Summer Institute. In these spaces, participants stepped up to facilitate and organize the groups themselves, and meanwhile the curriculum that was co-developed within our group space took on a life of its own (please refer to Chapter 7 for more on diffusion).

In the final debriefing meeting, I took an assertive role as facilitator. I had designed a thorough agenda for the meeting and asked participants to remain on topic throughout the meeting. After asking participants to debrief our actions, engage in data analysis of two data excerpts from group conversations, and construct a plan for how to continue addressing structural racism beyond the completion of our group, I asked members to provide me with requests and recommendations for how to support the work of the Caucus through my research. At this time, a few participants questioned me on how I view my role as facilitator in the research. They made direct requests of me, both for how I might describe my role as facilitator to others who might hope to run a similar type of group in the future, as well as for me to articulate how I position myself as a researcher, facilitator and white person, in relation to the inquiry group space.

**Josh:** I don’t know if you’re doing this in your own writing, but documenting your process of facilitating this, is that–

**Rhiannon:** What do you mean?

**Josh:** I mean the program, you do the program notes… in the fall, so we want to do something similar right, keep this conversation going… here is Rhiannon’s notes… almost a one page, “how to run a structural racism discussion group.”

**Zak:** Did you have a hypothesis before you started?

**Rhiannon:** Hypothesis?
Zak: Yeah. Like did you write something down beforehand?
Rhiannon: I mean, I had ideas that came out of reading the literature and from interviewing people in the fall, and from being part of the Caucus. I didn’t have a straight up hypothesis because [the style of research that I engage in]… doesn’t tend to emphasize hypotheses.
Corey: Will you be visible facilitator in this research? I was listening and I was struggling with this throughout this, and – because I don’t think we get to hear too much of you throughout this process. So I would love to see how you responded to all these different things as you took our responses.
Rhiannon: Yeah. How would you like to see that? Like would that be a conversation or that would–?
Penelope: I’d like an interpretive dance. [Some laughter]
Corey: I mean when I – I was thinking because if you get to write this up, you know I don’t want to double it. You know if you’ve got to write it up I would just want to see it when you write it up. So–
Rhiannon: Like for me just situate myself–
Corey: In it, like you are a part of the circle too.
Rhiannon: Okay.
Zak: [to Corey] I know, I’ve formally asked her, especially being Canadian, and her – you know and being categorized as white and how she – like, we’ve had that conversation, yeah, and she definitely is a processor. Yeah, [to Rhiannon] not to talk to you as an object.

This dialogue segment from the final debriefing meeting starts out with Josh asking me to produce a short document that describes how to run a similar group in the future. Zak then interrupts with a new train of thinking, revealing his interest in understanding my process as researcher, and asks me if I started the study with a hypothesis. I respond that I engage in a style of research that does not emphasize hypotheses, and Zak may be about to ask me more about the research method that I engage when Corey interjects to ask me about how I situate myself within the research. He implies that I am a white person who is part of the group and that I have not always been vocal about my own positionality to the group. He inquires about whether this will be written into the dissertation. I listen and ask him for clarification about what he would like to hear. Then Zak addresses Corey directly with a tone of defending or vouching for me, saying that he has had direct conversations with me about how I see myself
as a raced person who is from another country, and reinforces that he believes that I have thought about and “processed” my identity in relation to the group. Following Zak’s comment, I go on to directly engage with Corey and to answer his question. However, Josh’s earliest comment goes unaddressed, as does Zak’s question about my process as a researcher.

This conversation is significant because it reveals the questions participants carried about my roles as facilitator and researcher while being a white person researching learning about race. Participants questioned me directly about how I approach writing the research, and wanted to know how I positioned myself in relation to the research. Participants of color went through a screening process of sorts with me, and reveal in this segment how the trust that they feel for me shapes their involvement in the group. Zak “vouches” for me to another African American man, and speaks directly to him about having trust in my approach to research. This was not the first time that Zak had vouched for me with other African American men (see Chapter 3). His trust and faith in me as researcher, facilitator and activist ally were wrapped up together. Whereas, it seemed that Corey felt ongoing uncertainty about the ways that I would represent my participants as researcher and how I would situate myself in relation to the group as facilitator and participant.

As Corey implies, my relationship to the group was complex. I was concurrently a researcher, facilitator and participant in the group. Corey had hoped to hear more about the ways in which I understood my identity as a white person in relation to these complex and sometimes conflicting roles (see Chapter 3 for more on this topic). Participants in the group were also curious about the research process. They wanted to know how the research was designed and what I sought to understand through running the study. Participants saw my facilitation of the group as wrapped up in my role as researcher. And, they saw my identity as a white person as significant to how I would write up my results, how this would shape the
potential for future similar groups, and how I would understand and communicate the data from the group and study.

**Group Norms**

Goffman (1971) defines a social norm as a “guide for action which is supported by social sanctions, [including] negative ones providing penalties for infraction, [and] positive ones providing rewards for exemplary compliance” (p. 95). Goffman’s conception is predicated on the idea that social norms are sometimes explicitly identified and communicated, but are most often implicit within social interactions.

At the outset of our inquiry group meetings, I knew there were many implicit social norms that were already in place that would govern participants’ participation in and expectations for the inquiry group. These social norms emerged from broader cultures and contexts, including implicit group norms within the Caucus governing interpersonal behavior and norms around decision-making processes. I also knew that there were social sanctions within society and the organization that would subtly support and discourage specific types of behavior, and that this would shape dynamics within the group. However, I felt that it would benefit the group to have an explicit conversation about group norms. I believed that explicit conversation would help newer or more peripheral Caucus members understand some of the norms already governing the group, and also feel part of creating explicit norms to guide interactions. I hoped explicit conversations about norms could help create a “safe space” for participants.

In our explicit conversation about group norms, which took place at the outset of the first meeting, I asked participants to express their desires and needs for safety in the group. This is how the conversation took shape:

**Rhiannon:** So my question to everyone is, what do you need from your fellow participants in order to feel trust and to share deeply and honestly in this space?
Mary: I think being able to express an opinion without being attacked. I can understand someone disagreeing, but not turning it into a personal attack.

Josh: Mine is sort of a reminder for myself and for anyone else, which is to embrace the discomfort of this conversation of these kinds of conversations. Unfortunately, I’m sitting here thinking it’s been too long since having a space for having this conversation. And as a group effort, just reminding myself to be okay with that, because unfortunately it’s not a common enough conversation.

Kathy: I was going to say, to suspend judgment and presume best intentions.

Corey: We all take part in a system which holds up racism. So, in the conversation when we talk about… these things that exist, that is race in the air, and we just take it in. I kinda expect to get some bad, some wrong, some guilt, some, all sorts of things to come up. And if it doesn’t, then I feel like I don’t know what’s going on in the conversation…

Josh: Are you recognizing that we’re all part of the system?

Corey: Ya. Unified in the struggle to break free from it.

Miriam: I think challenging our own sense of what it means to be safe. And to be open to questions, like to be open to follow up questions to be open to… be challenged. I can be like, this is how I saw this thing, always reminding myself that in conversations about race, that I as someone who is white am seeing things through my white lens. That I feel actually safe in these conversations when people are challenging me, are asking me for follow up, like “what did you mean?” [and] being pushed. I think this should be a space where people are pushed.

Penelope: I need self-awareness and equity in conversation. So, self-awareness of you know, am I speaking too much, am I not speaking enough, and equity in that everybody participates, not saying that everybody has to talk every time, but that we do get to hear everybody, for people not to be too shy or too overbearing (Inquiry group 1)

This explicit discussion about safety needs in the group allowed members to express their personal needs and desires for communication patterns. Each participant had the opportunity to express her own needs, and each theme was written on a large sheet of paper for safekeeping.

The opportunity to openly discuss specific needs, such as Penelope’s desire for “self-awareness and equity in conversation” allowed group members to hear the needs of others and to think about how to alter their own communication tendencies in order to create space for others to feel comfortable and welcome.
As group facilitator, I also wanted to be sure that participants had the opportunity to predict and address possible future strains on the group. Thus, I asked them to think about how to proceed if conflict arises in the group. Here is how group members responded:

**Corey:** Roll it! Roll the dice [laughter].
**Penelope:** We solve conflict in my classroom with rock-paper-scissors [laughter].
**Miriam:** I expect that conflict of opinions come up, and like [Corey] was saying, that if we weren’t having it then we might not be doing it right. But that embracing of it, being willing to be uncomfortable in the conflict, and being willing to move through it as a process. In that we might leave… a meeting without something resolved, but I think that like a norm should be like, “hmmm, all right!”
**Corey:** If I could just agree, then what I hate is, especially in talks of these sort of big, overarching huge ideas, where you go we have to resolve this. Naaaaah. I think sometimes letting it breathe a little bit. We’re gonna still be here and we can talk about it more. But quick resolutions, I’m not a fan of.

While participants opened up the conversation about conflict with humor, they did in fact take the topic seriously. This is revealed first through Corey’s comment “roll the dice,” which is both meant for humorous effect and elicited laughter, but also was grounded in his real view on conflict, which is to allow conflict to take its course and to learn what one can through it.

Penelope then jokes that the group could adopt a “rock-paper-scissors” approach to conflict resolution, which she adopts in her classroom. Miriam then states she agrees with Corey that conflict or disagreement is a necessary component in working through different perspectives in a group. Corey adds to what Miriam says by emphasizing that the group should not necessarily strive for agreement as a goal, but rather allow people to give space to and think through the perspectives of others. His approach is grounded in a taking a personal learning approach to conflict in the group.

This initial conversation about conflict allowed group members to explicitly address the potential for conflict and to discuss their own comfort with conflict. It also revealed initial patterns in conflict resolution among the various members, which interestingly tended to hold true across the subsequent sessions (see Chapter 6 for more on conflict in the group). For
example, Penelope tended to avoid conflict through the use of humor, while Corey preferred to address it head-on, and Miriam expressed both desire to explore disagreement but also hesitation to get too deep into it.

The prospect of explicitly discussing how they understood respectful communication allowed for the group to more explicitly engage with Goffman’s (1971) concept of group norms. And, while the group chose not to embed explicit rewards and sanctions for behaviors that aligned or conflicted with these rules (see Goffman, 1971), the process of establishing group norms might be understood to provide groundwork for dynamics in the group, and participants’ expectations for the behavior of others.

In interviews, many members reflected on the significance of establishing group norms for shaping the subsequent group dynamics. In my third interview with Camille, I asked:

**Rhiannon:** What do you think allowed for that respectful engagement between people?

**Camille:** Well, I think just the ground rules that we set up, and people were genuine and honest when they said it. You know… space that people are free to speak, because you have to have these ground rules, and if you do then you get on with people, and you appreciated that.

Camille points to the group norms process as vital for establishing an initial sense of trust with others in the group. She believed that this explicit conversation about the expectations for how and when to contribute to the group and different comfort levels and approaches to conflict, informed an initial respectful engagement between members that persisted throughout subsequent group meetings.

Tshannen-Moran (2004) points out that explicit rules tend to proliferate within institutions and organizations when trust is weak. Rather than taking on explicit governing rules, our inquiry group chose to engage in explicit conversation about personal experiences with safety and vocalize expectations for social norms within the group at the outset of our
meeting. This helped breed better understandings of each other and nurtured enhanced trust between people in the group.

**Discussing Definitions**

In the first and second inquiry group sessions, I asked members to come to a common definition of race, racism, and structural racism. In this endeavor, I put three big sheets of paper up on the walls with one term listed at the top of each. I asked participants to construct definitions as an activity. As it turned out, the group did not produce a common written definition on any of the posters, however having the posters on the wall was helpful for driving and focusing conversation and for revealing embedded assumptions and understandings about the terms and their meanings.

When asked about what he felt that he and the group took away from the reading and discussions of texts, Ben responded: “I think it’s a combination of the texts and then our first meeting allowing us to have the common terminology, or agreed-upon definitions to different terms. And we all came to [the inquiry group] with different backgrounds, and different thoughts and opinions and stuff, and we still had those. But it helped ground it a little more” (Interview 2). Ben identifies the discussion of definitions as a way of allowing members to draw upon their learning from texts, and their previous personal and academic learning about the topic of the group. He sees the process of collectively striving to define key concepts like race, racism and structural racism as central to allowing members to draw upon their diverse knowledge sets. Ben believed that talking about definitions brought the topic up for initial discussion and allowed participants to see how their ideas and knowledge fit with those of others in the group. In this sense, the construction of definitions as a pedagogical tool allowed group members to draw upon their knowledge and to reference the sources of this knowledge.
in ways that supported a collective conversation, discussion and collaborative learning process among group members.

Go-arounds

Go-arounds are a pedagogical tool that provide each person in a group with the space to speak in turn within the group setting. Pedagogically, go-arounds are useful for ensuring that all people in the room have a chance to insert their voices in the group space, and I employed go-arounds at both the start and the end of most meetings.

I opened meetings with go-arounds because I found that this allows members to immediately insert their voice into the group space and to feel heard by other group members. I found that people were more likely to feel part of the conversation and to contribute if they had inserted their voice into the conversation early in the meeting. This was of particular use for participants who tended to be more quiet, as I found that these participants might be quiet in the general group discussions as the meeting proceeded, but would exert a greater tendency to engage in discussion subsequently if they had had a chance to speak at the outset of the session.

On occasion, I would ask participants to do a go-around at a mid-way point in the session. This was usually inserted as a way to allow participants who had been quiet during the conversation to raise their voices and to feel part of the conversation. The technique was also used to re-direct conversation if it had veered in a sustained off-course direction from the central concern or focus of the meeting.

Go-arounds were also useful at the end of each session, as the pedagogical strategy gave participants the opportunity to raise ideas that they had not mentioned previously in the meeting. It allowed members who were more hesitant to assert their voice within conversations to be heard by others. And, closing go-arounds provided participants with the opportunity to
vocalize connections, emotions, questions, or ideas with which they were left. Go-arounds were also a good way to create a sense of closure at the conclusion of a meeting, and particularly at the end of our final meeting.

**Geographic Space**

Inquiry group meetings were held at the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP) space, which is located in West Philadelphia and not far from University of Pennsylvania. The space was chosen due to its accessibility to public transportation, the availability of free parking, and its centrality given the various locations across the city in which participants lived. The room in which the meeting was held is a large room with many tables that could be moved around. Prior to the start of each meeting, I would move tables into a central circle formation such that each participant could have sufficient personal space as well as be a part of a central circle in which each group member was an equal physical part.

Goffman (1997) points out that social organization is structured around claims to the self, and that these are often expressed in spatial realms. One of the ways in which people express claim to space is through “the stall,” which Goffman (1997) defines as the “well-bounded space to which individuals can lay temporary claim” (p. 47). Similarly, participants in my study expressed that they noticed patterns and trends in how and where people had sat in the room, and the decisions that they made about where to sit in relation to physical room elements and to each other. Penelope expressed that she had paid particular attention to the geography of the space in the final debriefing meeting:

We all sat in pretty much the same spaces. You [Rhiannon] always sat—there were a couple of times where you sat on the door side of the room, but for the most part you sat on the far window side of the room from the door, and [Mary] sat always sat on that side of the table. And [Corey] and [Zak] usually sat next to each other, and I always sat on the door side of the room, occasionally I would sit on the window side of the room, but I’d never sat next to [Mary], and I never sat next to [Camille]. [Camille]
almost always sat next to [Kathy]. So that’s what I was noticing, but that we didn’t really mix – like [Zak] never sat next to [Camille] (Interview 3).

Penelope expresses here that it is important how people sit both in relation to each other and to physical features in the room like the door and windows. She implies that there are important patterns that reveal how comfortable participants felt with each other, and that seating choices both reflect and create patterns of trust and comfort. In this sense, we might understand seating choices as situated within personal feelings of comfort both with the group and in the space broadly, as well as in relation to other participants.

In the third interview, Corey also brought up participant seating choices. He vocalized that there was a change over time in where he sat, and that his seating choice connected with communication patterns and philosophical alignment:

Corey: I know me and [Zak] started sitting next to each other at some point.
Rhiannon: Yeah, but it didn’t start off that way?
Corey: No, but we just started having little inner dialogues during the conversation.
Rhiannon: You were sitting so close to each other – or you like verbally had dialogues?
Corey: Yeah. Verbally and nonverbally. (Interview 3)

Corey’s articulation that seating choices aligned with “inner dialogues” that took place in both verbal and nonverbal ways underlines the significance of room geography and use of space to participants. Through coming to sit together, as their relationship deepened and took shape during the group sessions, Corey and Zak came to establish a means of communication that extended beyond verbal talk.

As time passed, participants established an enhanced sense of trust with the group broadly, as well as with each other in more personal ways. Corey spoke to the ways in which he and Zak formed a tighter relationship through their involvement in the group, and how their interaction with the geographic space both reflected and enabled their relationship formation. Goffman (1997) points out that “stalls… provide external, easily visible, defendable
boundaries for a spatial claim” (p. 48). Corey and Zak came to combine their “stall” over time and to take up alternative modes of communication within this space that were discernable only to them. They interacted with their personal space in a way that supported their development of internal communication patterns and established a stronger sense of safety for and with each other in the group space.

**Story-Telling**

There has been a “narrative turn” in the social sciences since the 1980’s, with a focus on studying stories within their political, educational, and institutional contexts (Polletta, Chen, Gadner & Motes, 2011). Within the context of social movements, theorists have long examined the powerful ways in which narrative is wrapped up in and shapes activist identity and the ideological work of social movements (Davis, 2002; Glover, 2004; Loseke, 2007; Polletta, 2006). Similarly, scholarship on transformative education asserts that stories act upon the listener/reader over time to alter sense of identity and self, and assumptions about the world (Freire, 1970/2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Stories are narratives that powerfully shape the storyteller’s sense of self and have the potential to shape the listener/reader’s view of self and the world. Stories help form and re-form the outlooks and perspectives of both the storyteller and the listener.

There were a few participants who tended to consistently center stories within their contributions to the group. Camille was one such person, and over time other members came to greatly value her narrative contributions. In an interview, Kathy observed, “[Camille’s] stories helped the rest of us in ways that I don’t think she even knows or appreciates, just her willingness to share her story helped all of us” (Interview 3).
During the initial go-around in the final debriefing meeting of the inquiry group, I asked participants to identify any connections they saw between the work of our inquiry group and the world outside the group space. Camille opened the session with the following story:

You know one connection that I made… I’ve felt a little bit more comfortable with addressing issues of white privilege in my school. So it was me and another colleague who was also having issues with our administrator, and we were able to speak to other teachers who were kind of the privileged teachers you know, and we were talking about our treatments, and you know the – one of my colleagues kind of looked at me, and I said, “You know, that’s white privilege.” [Josh: Wow] And I was able to then – have a framework to be able to then show her evidence of that… I said, ‘Just think back to five six years ago.’ I said, ‘I’m the same person I was before, I do the same things and I -’ I said, ‘I’m getting two completely different evaluations for treatment’… And she was like, ‘Oh, I see it now.’ So it was not nec – I think I came at it with not being so accustomed and upset, because I think before I was more emotional and upset about things that were happening, but I think the kind of having that in an academic – having an academic conversation about it makes it then easier for you to lay out facts without it being one way because she doesn’t like me.

Here, Camille gives a storied description of how her inquiry group participation led to a shift in her workplace communication patterns and her relationships with colleagues. In section 7.2, I will return to this segment to highlight in greater detail how collaborative learning leads to diffusion into professional spaces beyond the group. Camille’s story serves an important grounding point for revealing the varied functions of storytelling within the inquiry group space.

Participants tended to agree that stories helped members get to know each other and to bond. Corey said, “I definitely feel like stories were a part of the bonding experience… being able to feel with someone else’s feeling, you know. I think that’s what creates bonds for real” (Interview 3). The act of hearing the stories and experiences of others, and to learn through feeling their feelings and seeing the world through their eyes, brought participants closer together.
White participants in the group tended to feel that stories from members of color in the group in particular helped them understand what racism feels like, and to develop greater empathy for and awareness of the dynamics of racism. Along these lines, Ben said,

> [Camille talked about how] she was dealing with being abused everyday, and [Penelope] was like ‘fuck, yeah.’ So [that] put a racial standpoint, that’s something obviously I’ve never had to deal with you know, and it… just made it so much more real…. it’s just not like it’s new information per se, but just having these conversations just kept it, due to my white privilege, they don’t have to be in the front of my mind” (Interview 2).

Stories served to help participants go deeper in their understanding of themselves and others, and even to defy standard social rules of convention and etiquette, which tend to dictate the importance of keeping things “light and fluffy.” Participants were able to use stories as a means for talking about more difficult personal experiences, digging beneath their public persona, and sharing experiences that felt personally meaningful. Corey reflected, “I think we need to be doing more of, stop speaking to the good parts of the story and just – and tell the real parts. But, what was really happening? We’re all built in the same way, so we feel the same things, and… if you just told the real story, I get it” (Interview 3). Participants who shared personally meaningful stories held faith that others in the group could relate to their experience and pain. Camille communicated through her story a sense of relief at being able to articulate and address systemic racism in a new way, and educate others. Camille’s narrative allowed her to share the “real parts” of her experience, and the lived effects of racism on her professional life.

Participants greatly valued the opportunity to listen to each other and placed listening at the center of the mission and focus of the group. Josh articulated the significance of the group as partially wrapped up in “having a space to very consciously stop and listen to people’s experiences, and just absorb them and not feeling like I had to do something about it” (Interview 2). Josh and others found it freeing to be part of a context in which their mission
was to focus on coming to greater understanding of each other and of broader system structures. In organizing spaces, this may be particularly meaningful and salient, because much of the time spent in organizational meetings tends to focus on action and on doing. Thus, the opportunity to slow down and listen to each other simply for the sake of listening and learning, was particularly salient for many participants in the group.

Josh followed up his comment about the freeing nature of being in an inquiry-oriented space by stating, “listening to their stories, of course in the back of mind there’s always, ‘okay, how do we infuse this into the WE structures?’” (Interview 2). This conflict between wanting to listen and also feeling committed to forming a concrete action was in tension at times, as pointed out in Chapter 4. Corey powerfully speaks to this tension in the following way: “there was a couple of nights we were like… ‘All right, so what are we going to do?’ Then we kept slipping back into the stories, and we were trying to come out and like, ‘No, but we need to do something’” (Interview 3). Through pointing to the difficulty in staying on topic and grounded in an action orientation, with constant pull to keep “slipping back into the stories,” Corey points to the potency of intentional spaces for storytelling. He believes that political action needs to be deeply grounded in the lived experiences of people.

Embedded space for inquiry and story allows members of an organization to come together and make sense of the movement in deeply personal terms. Members came to form deeper understanding of the experiences of others, and shared powerful and intimate parts of themselves that might not be acceptable in more public spheres within the organization. It also allowed members to identify and vocalize the ways in which their learning in the group connects with the world beyond the group space. Storytelling created opportunities for reflection and sharing, and supported sense-making and relationship development within the group (Polletta, 2006).
**Talk Time**

Participants expressed awareness and concern for how much time and space they took through their talk. They desired to create an equitable space in which there was room for everyone to contribute. This awareness of and orientation toward talk time in the group context may have been nurtured through participants’ involvement in organizations and rituals of meeting situated within social movements, where desires for democracy tend to reinforce personal awareness of what and how one speaks in groups (della Porta 2009a).

Participants expressed that they spent time thinking about how they contributed to the group and reflected on the time they took in group discussions. Josh remembered, “I was very aware of speaking and trying to step back and not speak very much… for me, the best moments were when I was sitting back and not trying to say things…. [My struggle was] how much do I really need to add versus just sitting and listening” (Interview 2).

Despite their desire to create equal space for all people to speak and share, a few members tended to consistently speak for longer periods of time than others. When asked about talk patterns in the second and third interviews, a few members expressed that Corey and Zak talked a great deal in the inquiry group space. African American women in the group, Camille and Mary, both pointed out that African American men have lifelong gendered experiences with systemic racism, and that these experiences are deeply embedded within their daily lives and experiences. The women attributed this daily experience of racism as contributing to the passion that the men brought to the group, and likely fueling their active and vocal roles in the group. Group members tended to express that they were grateful for the knowledge and intellectual engagement the men brought to the group and felt that their expertise and theoretical knowledge greatly contributed to group learning.

Talk space, or the lack thereof, also contributed to the emotions some members felt toward other members. Kathy said, “I didn’t address [name withheld] on what I had been
feeling the whole time about how [this person] takes up so much space. And I struggled with it in the room like should I – how would I do that? How would that affect the dynamics of the group?” (Interview 3). Kathy expressed concern that talking with another group member about talk space would lead to hurt feelings, and Kathy wanted to avoid hurt feelings both due to personal relationships, as well as in order to avoid this person’s alienation from the inquiry group and the Caucus more broadly.

In the final debrief meeting, I asked members to reflect on their own and others’ talk patterns in the group, and to put these patterns into conversation with racial and gender identity. In the subsequent conversation, Miriam expressed that she felt she talked too much in the group space. Josh reflects on this moment in the inquiry group: “So naming [talk patterns] and making it open [for discussion] I think it was really powerful… but then [Mary], who doesn’t speak so much, saying [to Miriam] ‘it’s okay, [everyone doesn’t speak in] one sentence you know.’” (Interview 3). Here, Josh points out that Miriam’s tendency to talk for extended periods of time was located within broader group dynamics and personality traits. He reflects on how Mary had said that some people need to talk more out loud in order to process their own feelings and ideas, while others might be able to do such processing in their head or on paper. This element of forgiveness and understanding for others, and recognition of difference in communication styles, highlights the ways in which members tended to retain a strong and committed focus on nurturing relational elements and bonds within the group.

The cases of Corey, Zak and Miriam, who all tended toward greater verbosity than other members on the whole, shows that while the tendency for certain members to dominate talk time is significant and perhaps sometimes annoying to other members, that it is also situated within broader relational and communication patterns that shape the learning of the group. Miriam and Corey both tended to process their ideas through talking and sharing aloud. They would frequently start speaking with an idea that took shape as they spoke, and the act of
speaking was wrapped up in processing the idea. Emotion and personal connections to the topic also contributed to the amount of space that members took up. Zak and Corey in particular experienced deep passion and emotions that reinforced their desire to communicate feelings and ideas out loud.

Many members tended to be quite judicious about how much they spoke. This tended to stem from the desire to learn from the knowledge of others, and sometimes also extended from a hesitation to take up space as a white person. Ben reflected on his hesitancy to speak in the group space: “I still feel like there’s the weird tradition of being a white male, and not necessarily… adding to conversations… [So I did] a lot of listening and trying to learn” (Interview 2). Ben recognized his own racial and gender privilege, and struggled with knowing the appropriate amount to talk and contribute to the group space. To some extent, this strategy of rarely talking backfired on Ben. As it turned out, a few members of color observed that they felt that it was more difficult to form relationships and to build trust when white men like Ben and Josh hesitated to take up talk space within the group.

**Taking Action**

As time went on, members wanted to take action to bring their learning to wider audiences. But, taking action was complicated. People initially struggled to apply the collective sense-making to a single action. There were different opinions about what the goals of the action should be and what actions would most closely align with these goals.

Here is a segment from a discussion about how to apply learning from the group to a particular action. Prior to this discussion, group members had been sharing a broad range of ideas for actions, and I sought to focus the discussion through my role as facilitator:

**Rhiannon:** So I’m wondering if the question is, what is – what’s the goal? What’s the purpose of this action? And what I’m hearing is that it’s about trust building, it’s about
personal education also, and then potentially the idea of growing the membership. That—

**Josh:** I think the growing the membership is… secondary… if we do this work right, then the membership will grow.

**Corey:** Exactly, that’s what I’m talking—

**Ben:** Yeah, in fact, it shouldn’t be a main goal if we want to do genuine work in transforming how we’re viewing things and all that.

**Penelope:** I think one of our main goals is to begin dismantling the structural racism within the entire system.

**Corey:** Well, I think one of the things that we’re coming up with now is a starting place. Where is the starting place for that? And I don’t think you want to find the right one, I think you would just choose one.

**Penelope:** Yeah, I think it begins with setting aside a specific time during all of our membership meetings to address this issue…

The segment opens with me framing a question to the group: what is our goal in running the action? I then name a few goals identified within the preceding conversation. Josh interjects first, stating that concrete goals in the organization, such as growing the membership, should be secondary to centering a racial analysis at the core of the organization. Corey agrees with Josh’s statement, and then Ben reiterates that the goal should be internal transformation among the membership. Penelope states that she thinks the goal is bigger than one situated within a particular organization, and that our goal should be systemic change. Corey responds that identifying a particular action creates a starting place for achieving a broader mission of systemic change, and emphasizes that there might not be one particular action that is best suited for this broader goal, but that you just choose one action and start from there. Penelope responds that she agrees with Corey, and that she thinks the conversation should be woven through the entire organization, such that it is raised for discussion at every event and meeting held by the Caucus.

This segment reveals the sometimes-divergent opinions about how to frame the work of the group, appropriate goals, and desired realms for future action. Not only were there differences in how individual members came to conceptualize structural racism, but there were
also different ideas about appropriate realms for taking action within the organization and beyond. While there was no explicit conflict that took place while addressing these varied opinions (as I will discuss in Chapter 6, section 6.5), the different understandings led to difficulty in establishing a collectively agreed-upon approach in moving forward.

Once participants came to agree on a common action, then the action itself—a professional development workshop for teachers—had to be designed. We met over two planning meetings to design this workshop. And interestingly, during the process of engaging in action, I found that there was a degree of disengagement among the members that had not seemed to be present within the inquiry group sessions. About half of the participants were deeply engaged in the planning process, while the other half showed up to few or no planning meetings and did not participate actively in the professional development session. When asked why they did not participate, members expressed that the professional development was low on their list of priorities and that they had competing influences on their time and energy. As time passed, particular participants came to become strongly aligned with the professional development workshop and to present it in numerous contexts extending beyond the inquiry group actions. Over time, participants came to consider the action as part of their work within the Caucus organization and their professional life as teachers.

**Getting Real about Group Dynamics**

The final session of the inquiry group was held in June on a warm summer day. The inquiry group had not met as a whole complete group for over a month, and members were very pleased to see each other. In this final session, I organized an agenda that asked members to think deeply about their own and others’ contribution to the group, and to collectively share their experiences. I shared excerpts from two inquiry group meeting transcripts with the group, and ensured that the voice of each member was reflected within the transcripts. I also asked
members to think deeply about their own identity and the ways that this may have impacted
how they participated and communicated in the group, and for people to get personal about the
ways that they had experienced the group and what they took into their work in the world and
the Caucus organization. Kathy later reflected on this final debrief session:

I feel like the last session was really different than the other sessions we had, and
that’s when we’d started to really – I wouldn’t even say it’s touch upon, but began
to… acknowledge tension, or disagreement… I felt like that might have been where
the real work would start, but it would have meant a different type of work, I don’t
know, it was much deeper” (Interview 3).

Kathy identified that the collaborative learning in the group took a turn in the final session,
when participants were asked to reflect upon their own participation in the group and
communication patterns. She saw this turn as located in having “stopped thinking
academically and intellectually about racism as something that’s definable, it’s like we had to
look at ourselves and each other, and ourselves as individuals as well as collectively”
(Interview 3). Kathy says that this shift in direction asked members to deeply and critically
engage with themselves as participants in a group, and asked them to go beyond philosophical
and storied discussions about racism and structural racism, to instead think about the ways that
they approach conversations about race and racial justice. She identifies this personal learning
as “deeper” and as asking participants to think about themselves in relation to others in the
group.

The right moment for entrance into this territory of personal reflection in a group
space was thought unknown. Kathy expanded:

I feel like to go deeper would have forced us as individuals to learn things about
ourselves, would have questioned things about our assumptions that we have not. I
don’t know what those are because they are unquestioned. But it just felt like we were
right there, or I felt like I was right there. And then I don’t know what types of
reverberations or repercussions… that would have had for the Caucus as whole”
(Interview 3).
Kathy expresses how there is an unknown and unpredictable element in group members’ engagement in personal transformation. She expresses that she does not know what the “reverberations or repercussions” would be for the Caucus more broadly as people engaged in critical analysis of their own communication patterns and applied these to their movement and organizational participation. Kathy’s comment about the unknown outcomes of “risky learning” (see Chapter 8) reveals both a fear of the unknown effects of critically engaged personal learning and transformation, and the whole-hearted ways in which participants must commit themselves to the learning process.

5.3 Summary and Discussion

Janks (2010) asserts that processes of cultural (re)production might be altered through integrating critical pedagogies that center critical readings and thoughtful redesigns of text. She argues that these critical pedagogies foster questioning orientations and examinations within the classroom. Janks (2010) believes that critical literacy practices are rich and flexible, because they are open to a multitude of theoretical orientations. Her interest in the feasibility of translating “complex theory into viable classroom activities” (p. 12) speaks to the practical strand of critical literacy focused on informing classroom practice (see Gore, 1993).

In a similar way, participants in my study were open to experimenting with a range of critical pedagogies. Participants engaged an inquiry-based pedagogy in the “attempt to create respectful, intellectually challenging, and supportive relationships across race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, culture, sexual orientation, and other differences (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 109). They were committed to engaging a critical pedagogy within the inquiry group to open up space for criticality and a re-positioning of their own ideas about critical social justice issues, and particularly race.
Conway (2006) identifies knowledge production as an inherently pedagogical project. She says, “Pedagogy in this sense is a form of cultural politics, as a purposeful intervention in the shaping of knowledges and identities for a political project and as constitutive of a permanent process of ongoing cultural transformation” (p. 22). Similarly, I found that pedagogy created the space in which collaborative learning could occur. Socio-culturally situated literacy practices were intimately bound up in learning, as learners read texts, listened to each other’s stories and experiences, and reflected and processed their learning through writing and speaking. These personal literacy practices shaped how members interacted with each other and the potential for their learning and their relationships with each other. Time and space shaped how participants engaged with the pedagogical activities of the group and the realms in which they were deeply involved—and those that they resisted.
CHAPTER 6: Relationship-Building through Trust

[We kept coming back to the idea of ‘this is a relationship-building process’... So we’re going to have to create spaces for this (Ben, Interview 2).

[Corey, reflecting on a previous statement by Camille:] Organizing is organizing trust more than organizing anything else. So that when [Camille] was talking, through this process it allowed her to say, ‘All right, I can be a part of this movement because I know.’ I think that has a lot to do with the work and the actions that we take, that it is about trust and trusting, and that’s what creates the bond that is needed to organize (Corey, Final debrief).

Engaging in deep conversations about race and racial justice is often an emotionally charged venture that requires commitment among participants to engage with uncomfortable personal emotions that surface and the sometimes-intense emotions of others (Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Michael, 2015; Tatum, 1997). The opportunity to make meaningful and collaboratively-constructed sense of the nature and work of race and racism in society and in the personal lives and work of individuals requires that participants establish a sense of trust with each other and in the collaborative learning process. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how trust-building among multiracial members of a teacher organization can enhance the relationships between members, and how this work can open up a space of possibility for better mutual understanding and collaboration across racial identity lines.

Trust is fundamental to the collaborative learning process (see also section 1.3 for a definition of trust based on the scholarly literature). Professional learning is bound up in the relationships teachers establish with each other (Louis, 2006; Meier, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Tschannen-Moran (2004) argues, “Professional learning communities share three important features: the adults in them act and are treated as professionals, there is a focus on learning, and there is a strong sense of community” (p. 107). If trust is significant to any collaborative learning relationship, then we might understand it to be of particular salience for multiracial learning relationships centered on emotionally charged and historically and
politically fraught issues (Warren, 2010). Establishing trust was a particular challenge within my study, which brought together people with diverse socio-cultural experiences and racial identities.

Most of the participants did not enter the inquiry group with the explicit goal of building relationships through our work together. Rather, participants initially saw our inquiry group’s work as centered on improving the work of the Caucus through addressing racial justice within the organization. As time went on, and as Corey and Ben articulate in the quotations at the outset of this chapter, participants increasingly came to see the inquiry group as directly supporting personal relationship-building between individuals within our group. Participants understood relationship-building to hold great significance for their personal organizing work, for their work in schools, and for their personal lives. Participants saw trust between individual group members as centrally informing the growth of relationships and the work and operations of our inquiry group. In our time together, participants expressed that they valued the enhanced opportunity to build trusting relationships and to feel supported by fellow group members.

This chapter explores how participants understood trust both on its own and in relation to their organizing work. In so doing, I first present a significant moment within the group, in which Camille explicitly talks about her own growth of trust in the Caucus organization through her work in the inquiry group. Next, in section 6.2, I discuss how participants understood the Caucus’ relationship with African American teachers and community members, and how this is bound up in matters of trust. In section 6.3 I explore the role of trust in individual relationships, particularly across racial identity differences among the group members.

Section 6.4 identifies a framework of six factors that supported trust-building within the group. These are: the existence of previous relationships; a sense of common purpose; the
significance of witnessing personal work and acknowledgement of white privilege; the role of honesty and vulnerability; how listening and acceptance support trust; and, how feeling personally supported by group members supports trust-building in collaborative learning. I end the chapter with an examination of four complications in trust-building: racial divisions, humor and politeness, with particular attention to the complexities of conflict.

6.1 Pivotal Moment

Beverly Tatum (1997) argues that interrupting racism involves long-term commitment and ongoing energy and resilience. She points out that maintaining energy in the long struggle for racial equity is challenging, but frames establishing and maintaining a community of support as one solution to this difficulty. She states: “We all need community to give us energy, to strengthen our voices, and to offer constructive criticism when we stray off course” (p. 205). If community may be understood as a source of energy, strength and learning, how then might community be established when people enter with vastly different experiences and identities that limit their mutual trust from the start?

From the beginning stages of my research, I noticed that there was difficulty in establishing trust across racial lines. I strove to invite a racially diverse group of participants to take part in the study because I knew it was essential that people of color were driving the strategy and work of the broader organization toward racial justice perspectives and goals. I saw myself as an ally rather than the intellectual core of the racial justice work, and my role as centered on helping create space for the conversation, rather than developing the framing and the solutions generated from the group. I believed that people of color must drive the framing and solutions and that whites like myself should be there to support this work rather than to guide it. From the get-go, I knew that my identity and the fact that it was a racially diverse group of people posed a problematic framework for some Caucus members, and particularly
those who identified as racial minorities. For example, I learned through the grapevine that the real reason for why one Caucus member of color had declined to join my group was due to his hesitation over a white woman running the study. And, Camille voiced from my initial invitation for her participation in the study that she was very concerned about “honesty” and there being “honest conversations” within the group. She hesitated to join a group of people talking about race if the white people were not willing to think deeply about their own role in systems of white supremacy and power.

Furthermore, I knew from experience that the Caucus struggles to draw in new members from historically socially marginalized groups, perhaps most notably Latinos and African Americans. This struggle is likely situated within long racial divides marking the city’s history (Countryman, 2006) and historical tensions between unions and African American communities in the northeastern U.S.A. (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Golin, 2002; McAlevey, 2012). As an organization, one of its identified struggles was to problem-solve how to better support new members of color and how to establish and maintain a community of support across members’ varied identities and experiences.

Trust was evidently an important consideration for all people in the group, and particularly those who identified as of color. The issue of trust was raised directly and saliently by Camille in our fourth inquiry group meeting. She courageously initiated explicit conversation about her trust for the Caucus and its connection to her personal relationships with members of the organization. To provide some context, I opened this fourth inquiry group meeting by asking participants to engage in a go-around and to share what they believed they were learning and taking from the group thus far. Camille responded as follows:

I’m feeling good. I feel like it’s honest and we have objectives, things that we’re looking at, goals, trying to bring awareness and to bring more teachers of color into the Caucus. And ironically I had a conversation with… [the six other] Black teachers at [my] school… One of the teachers, the seasoned teacher, is kind of on the fence about
the Caucus. How is it different than any other white liberal organization that tries to change? I just told her about my experience and I feel like it's legit, and I feel like I can speak for it [i.e. the Caucus].

At the time Camille made this statement, Kathy was burning with questions. She asked Camille what had shifted such that she was willing to vouch for the Caucus with her Black colleagues.

**Kathy:** When you said, “I’m better now” can you describe that?

**Camille:** Emotionally feeling better. I was very apprehensive about doing this [inquiry group], because I didn’t want to be in a situation where people are saying, I don’t have these biases, and I just want everything to be equal, and I just teach these kids and it’s all good. I really, I do feel that it has been a genuine experience with everyone in here. I was very concerned about this, because it's something, you know, this is a personal thing, I am constantly dealing with this [racism], day in and day out at my school. I expressed these concerns to you [Rhiannon], I was very adamant, that I didn’t want to then come in to a situation where it wasn’t people that really wanted to talk about white privilege, or how these things affect everything that they do, in the Caucus, out of the Caucus, in your daily interactions with people in the classroom. I feel better, I do feel better...

**Kathy:** Thank you.

**Camille:** You’re welcome. Was it anything else, or?

**Kathy:** I feel like, that was really helpful, because one of the main things that I hear through that, you built trust through building relationships and having experiences…. I feel like, that is the action. It’s having these conversations that will enable us to change who we are and how we act. And it’s only through wrestling with these issues and building relationships with each other, which is about trust at the end.

The conversation between Kathy and Camille highlights a number of significant factors related to trust and trust-building in multiracial groups.

First, the conversation reveals that racism is a highly personal experience, and one that group members of color expressed having experienced in various ways. Here, Camille references experiencing racism in her workplace, where she felt consistently targeted by a white administrator. She talks about how building trust within the inquiry group, both with other members who are people of color as well as with white members, helped her feel a stronger sense of trust for the broader Caucus organization. In personal interviews following
this discussion, she articulated feeling confident that other group members would back her up during Caucus meetings. Camille felt safe through knowing that other members understood where she was coming from and would support her. And, it led her to feel more confident in talking about the work of the Caucus with African American friends and colleagues. She identifies genuine and honest conversations as the key to building this trust with individuals in the group and the Caucus broadly.

In response to her observations, Kathy reflects back to Camille some of what she says, saying that people—presumably white people—in the group don’t just need to blindly build trust, but need to engage in meaningful personal work. She says that part of the purpose is to “change who we are and how we act.” Kathy articulates that personal change is necessary for effecting broader organizational change and the city, through building relationships and trust across identity lines, and particularly across race.

This conversation became a pivotal reflection moment for many members of the inquiry group. In an interview, Kathy later reflected on Camille’s observations: “Being on the outside and then being brave enough to come on the inside of Caucus, checking out the waters and saying, ‘Okay, these white people they are okay.’ And what made her even have the desire to cross that line?… it’s like—her courage. But most people would probably be like, “Well, it’s just hippy white people”… That’s the divide, like she described it” (Interview 2). Here, Kathy points to the difficulties inherent in bridging racial divides between local African American communities and the Caucus. She points to the extraordinary courage that Camille exhibited in her assent to joining the inquiry group, but implies that most people of color would not make that leap of faith and that the Caucus needs to learn to better account for the needs and historically-situated experiences of communities and teachers of color.

Camille’s description of how she gained trust in the Caucus through her experience in the group acted as a pivotal moment for the group. Following this meeting, many participants
proceeded to reflect on the significance of trust meetings and in their personal interviews. This moment provided a grounding point for group members across varied racial identities to develop a deeper understanding of the strengths and needs of others in the group. It allowed participants to engage in an explicit conversation about trust and through this supported them in realizing Tatum’s (1997) recommendation for establishing a community of support in racial justice movements.

6.2 Barriers to Building Trust: African American Communities and WE

All participants shared a common concern for the continued future of public education in Philadelphia and saw the Caucus as a means to bridge gaps and protect local public education. They consistently articulated that one barrier to this goal was the perceived division between Caucus interests and those of local African American communities. It is interesting to note that the literature on social movement unionism rarely deeply interrogates the racial divides inherent in union organizing. Scholars tend to assert that strong unions require wide and deep connections between the union and local communities including parents and students. And, they tend to briefly acknowledge the necessity of accounting for racial divides within the social justice union’s organizing work (for example, see Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; McAlevey, 2012). However, much of the literature completely avoids the topic of race and its absence is particularly conspicuous within a field that claims to advance social justice causes through union renewal.

The absence of race in the literature on social movement unions is not unlike the paucity of historical scholarship on teachers of color. Foster (1990) points out, “Studies of teacher thinking do not consider the influence of the racial identity of teachers on their belief systems and teaching practice; likewise, they ignore the influence of particular classroom contexts, including the social identity of the students, in shaping teachers’ pedagogy” (p. 123).
Since the early 1990’s there has been increased scholarship in an effort to fill this gap (see Jackson & Kohli, 2016; Irvine, 2002; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Thomas & Warren, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009); however there is still much work to be done in documenting the professional lives and experiences of African American teachers in schools and unions.

The scarcity of scholarship on the relationship between racism and both the work of social justice unions and the lives of African American teachers is reflective of broader systemic trends surrounding race and racial oppression in education. In our third meeting, Zak described a pervasive distrust among African Americans for white unions and activist organizations: “I have teacher friends, black teacher friends who don’t trust the Caucus, don’t know a damn thing about the Caucus, but say… ‘you know all those white liberals around, I don’t trust them.’ And that’s the history there you know.” Corey responded, “Yea, that’s real,” and then later stated, “I think part of that story too about trust is historical narrative and how much power that plays into it. I think there’s… a skepticism that’s passed down generations upon generations, of ‘Nah, they talk a good game, but when shit hits the fan, it’s people go their separate way…”” (Inquiry Group 3). Zak and Corey identify the hesitation within African American communities to trust the Caucus as rooted in community-embedded historical experiences and legacies of having had trust broken numerous times by primarily white unions and activist organizations. The distrust felt by many teachers of color for the Caucus is identified as rooted in long histories of betrayal.

African American participants presented ideas for building trust between local African American communities and the Caucus. In our fourth meeting, Corey pointed out that in order to build trust sometimes you have to explicitly acknowledge that it isn’t there in the first place and then build a dialogue around this acknowledgement:
Corey: …to me it all comes back to that trust factor, the trusting relationships, and if there was a way to get at a true subjective thing, just put that in the air, and let people know that you have to really earn trust, it’s not just given.

Mary: How would the Caucus earn that trust? It’s easier said than done.

Corey: I think the first thing is acknowledge that it’s not there and then start to think about why is it not there. I think once you set up conversations in that way, I think it leads to conflict definitely, but through that conflict you can start to build a bond.

Here, Corey articulates the significance of a sustained commitment to building trusting relationships for organizational growth. He identifies trust-building across diverse racial identities as a long-term process that requires open dialogue and a common devotion to building understanding across difference. Without directly addressing white people, Corey implies that if primarily white organizations want to reverse their historically fraught relationships with communities of color, that their members must be committed to doing meaningful internal personal work.

Corey later points to the significance of maintaining a long-term focus on building trust. He says, “I would rather do a long-term focus… than trying to create this one moment that you have a rally, you talk about some things, you commit yourself to this thing, but you forgot about this long-term struggle… I think the trust is in building relationships, joining in. And through that dialogue it creates those moments” (Inquiry Group 4). Like hooks (2003), Corey states that building trust between communities doesn’t happen overnight and that it requires white activists to hold an ongoing and consistent commitment to nurturing relationship with African American communities. Both he and Zak articulate that the Caucus needs to hold a long-term and consistent commitment to building relationships over time that are rooted in honest dialogue about barriers to trust in an effort to account for the long histories of betrayal by primarily white social justice organizations.
6.3 Individual Relationships and Racial Identity Differences

In the U.S. and in many other places across the world, distrust for whites among racialized minorities are rooted in long histories of systemic and structural racism and violence (Alexander, 2010; Anderson, 1988; Countryman, 2006; Dubois, 1903/1994). Racism is deeply steeped within all aspects of society, including schools and education systems, and shapes not just the relationships between racialized people and social institutions (Alexander, 2010; hooks, 2003; powell, 2014), but also how people relate on an individual basis and the extent to which they are willing to trust one another (hooks, 2003; Tatum, 1997). Participants in my study initially came together to theorize structural racism and to think about how to (re)shape the Caucus’ organizing work in response to this emerging analysis, but it quickly became apparent that much of our work was also focused on building trust among individual participants in the group, and particularly across racial lines.

In the pivotal moment recounted in section 6.1, Camille articulates that one way to build trust is through nurturing individual relationships within the Caucus across racial divides. She implies that supporting the development of trusting relationships between white and African American members would support the work of the broader organization. Participants in our group similarly saw the nurturing of personal relationships as central to the broader organizational commitment of acknowledging and striving to overcome embedded racism within the organization and its individuals. They came to believe that nurturing strong personal relationships between individual participants would support the work of our group on multiple levels: relationships would bolster the social ties of members and benefit them personally, and relationships would also benefit individuals’ organizing efforts and the potency of the broader organization both along lines of addressing racial justice as well as through supporting the broader mission and goals of the organization. Trust-building between individual members was considered central to the work of our group.
Penelope clearly articulated the view that individual relationships are necessary for
effective organizing when she was asked in a personal interview about what she believed she
gained from her involvement in the inquiry group. She said that she felt she had developed
“closer bonds with people that I enjoy working with, and I find that as quintessential to
organizing, and feeling solidarity.” When I asked her to expand on this notion of the
connection between personal bonds and solidarity, she said: “you have to be able to trust the
people you’re working with in order to defeat your enemies” (Interview 3). Penelope situated
relational bonds and trust between people as a fundamental component in effective organizing
and achieving long-term organizational goals.

In order to build this trust between people, participants felt that it was beneficial to
establish structured opportunities for people to engage with each other and to build new bonds.
Structured opportunities to talk about racial justice were believed to support the initiation of
conversations between new groups of people, those who might not otherwise talk or share due
to their established social networks and positioning, which are sometimes connected with race.
Ben said: “It was very valuable, as far as building that trust within this organization, or at least
– between individuals within the organization. And I think there hasn’t been a structured venue
to have these conversations, like they might happen casually between people, so I think that
was really good” (Interview 2). Pointing to the limitations of casual conversations between
people, Ben draws attention to how structured venues for intellectual and personal engagement
with difficult subjects can bring people together, create stronger bonds, and support a broader
conversation than might otherwise happen between already-established social groups within
the organization. Talking about race across racialized identities holds potential for opening
dialogue in new and productive ways.

Participants tended to emphasize the significance of individual relationships when
working to trigger broad-based change. Corey sees change as located in the growth of
relationships and trust, such that people can share their feelings and experiences, and come to
deeper shared collective understanding. His perspective is profoundly revolutionary, in that he
sees change as located within individual relationships that trigger broader-based change in
people’s orientations toward each other. He says:

How do we take this connection and make it bigger? I think for me, that that’s the
goal, and that’s why I want to leave a legacy of that work. How do you begin to live
and truly live? And not advocate, or be an organization runner? But how do you live in
a way where we’re honest and it leaves others to honest conversations that build trust
and bonds, and really builds a collective? (Interview 2).

Corey connects his organizing work as connected to a broader project of living in a way that
aligns with his values and political ideals. He situates his daily living in this honest way as
being interconnected with his organizing work and his efforts to build bonds between people in
ways that strengthen collectivity and connection. Later, when talking about trusting
relationships, he says: “I think it gets back to the whole people part, instead of issue-based, or
thinking about organizations, organizational change; I think really focusing on people-change
is important” (Interview 2). Here, Corey situates change in relationships as fundamental to
achieving social change that aligns with values and world-views. His views on triggering
social change through individual work and relationships align with hooks (2003) and Tatum
(1997), who assert that individuals need to engage in self-work and dialogue across difference
in respectful and understanding ways in order to build trust and overcome systems of inequity.

Participants saw organizational change as rooted in personal relationships between
organizational members and saw trust-building as fundamental to building a culture of
antiracism. In the next section, I identify and analyze specific factors that supported this trust-
building at individual and collective levels.
6.4 Factors Supporting Trust-building

I found that six specific key factors supported the growth of trust-building within the group and among individual members. First, the existence of previous relationships was significant for trust-building with the group. Second, sharing individual goals for the group and identifying a common purpose across all individuals supported the growth of trust. Third, the open acknowledgement of privilege among whites was necessary for building bridges of trust with members of color, as was evidence that whites were actively engaged in personal work to disrupt this privilege. Fourth, honesty and vulnerability enabled participants to get to know each other, while acceptance of the words and experiences of others allowed for trust to grow. Fifth, participants grew trust when they felt heard by others in the group. Finally, participants grew trust in spaces beyond the inquiry group when they felt that other group members would back them up if they raised their voice about racial justice in Caucus meetings. In this section, I highlight in greater detail how each of these factors supported trust-building among members.

Previous Relationships

There was variation in the initial number and depth of relationships between participants. Some participants had prior relationships with a few others due to having worked with them on campaigns in the past, and/or were members of common social circles. This group included Ben, Kathy, Josh, Penelope, Miriam, and Zak. Corey knew many of the core participants by sight and name, but had not worked closely with others at the start of the study. Meanwhile, a few participants were largely new to the group and did not have prior relationships with others; this group included Camille and Mary.

The variation in the number and depth of relationships seemed to contribute to the level of trust participants felt for the group at the outset of the study. I found that participants
with a greater number of already-established relationships with others in the group tended to feel more trust for the inquiry group as a whole. Knowing and holding trust in fellow participants meant that individuals felt more comfortable sharing with the group. When asked about her trust, Penelope listed knowing myself and three of the participants as people she knew and trusted at the start of the group, stating: “that really made a difference. Because there was already that bond and that initial trust, because in other areas I’ve grown to know and trust these people” (Interview 3).

Ben also reiterated that holding previous relationships with group members and myself as facilitator strengthened his propensity to trust the group as a whole, including the members with whom he was less acquainted. He said:

I trusted most of [the people in the group] because I knew them previously, some more than others… it was just like, well, I trust Rhiannon, I trust [Kathy], and I know [Kathy] suggested people, so I trust you guys, so I’m going to trust them… I think my trust has stemmed from that and I have a great deal of respect for most of the people in the room (Interview 3).

Ben connects trust in individuals with feeling safe in the group. He identifies trusting myself as facilitator/researcher and Kathy in choosing other participants for participation in the group as fundamental for trusting the group space as a whole and the individuals who he was getting to know for the first time through the group.

**Common Purpose**

Trust-building was enabled through an initial alignment between group members of priorities and goals. Participants held a common purpose that connected with the explicit stated goals of the group (i.e. to conceptualize structural racism and to think about how it shapes the Caucus’ organizing work). And perhaps more significantly, participants shared common commitment to the work of the broader organization, and saw their inquiry group work as supporting the organization and the broader educational justice movement. Group members
consistently referred to this common purpose as they engaged with each other and talked about their view on the group’s significance.

Camille identified common networks as allowing her to initially trust the members in the group. She said, “I feel like I can trust because I know colleagues and people who were with the Writing Project who are also in the Caucus. So as soon as I saw that I said ‘okay, I’m good.’ Because I know from doing the experience it just was a safe place”. Camille connects her initial propensity to trust the Caucus as rooted in the involvement of many Caucus members with a common organization (PhilWP). She articulates that PhilWP had felt like a safe space, and implies that she assumes Caucus members who had been involved in PhilWP would hold similar values to her, and thus was initially inclined to trust both the Caucus and our inquiry group.

Participants saw the inquiry group as an opportunity to engage in deep thinking and action that would support the overall organization. The alignment of commitment to a common organization with a shared mission enabled for the initial building of trust among the members.

Josh stated:

I think just the fact that we’re going to talk about something real, and we don’t necessarily… have the answer. [T]here’s no pressure to solve structural racism, so just we’re just talking about this, we’re trying to figure it out together. So we had the sense of common purpose, and a sense of trust in each other that we do have it. In the common purpose created a sense of trust, and also to have a more positive group dynamic and saying, ‘Okay, well, we don’t know the answers but we’re working on this together and we have a common set of assumptions’ (Interview 3).

Josh shows that initial trust was established through identifying a common purpose in the inquiry group. Participants didn’t expect themselves or others to hold the ultimate answer to the problem at hand (i.e. racism and structural racism). However, they did feel that the inquiry group was a powerful space for constructing knowledge and shared purpose in moving forward. Participants felt the group was significant because it grappled with real issues that
held significance for the lives of themselves, others in the group, their students, and for the work of the Caucus and the future of public education in Philadelphia. Thus, the group was able to establish trust between members because everyone was committed to a common purpose.

Acknowledging Privilege

McIntosh (1990) lists fifty ways in which she experiences white privilege in her daily life, and through it explores how race acts as an invisible system conferring dominance on whites. Some social justice-oriented whites are committed to engaging in critical processes of recognizing and acknowledging white privilege, and seeking to dismantle white privilege through active critical engagement (see Castagno, 2014; hooks, 2003; Trepagnier, 2010). This approach to leading whites through a process of recognizing their privilege permeates social movements and college classrooms alike. Ali Michael built on this work, digging into the complexities involved in white people asking questions about race. At the outset of her book describing this work, Michael (2015) writes: “The work of this book is not to shame people for what they don’t know or for privileges they didn’t ask for. It’s about seeing how race is a part of all of us and understanding how we have all been broken by racism” (p. 3). In my own study, it was heartening to witness white participants taking up a similar critical yet compassionate approach to identifying their privilege and building a sense of responsibility for the harm this causes.

Among participants, there was a common sense that the collaborative learning process required personal learning and work. This personal work was thought particularly significant for whites in the group, both by the white participants themselves as well as by members of color. Trust-building was thought tied to white participants’ personal work, at least in part. Personal work was thought significant both for whites in our inquiry group as well as white
members of the Caucus broadly. Ben felt that the process of engaging whites in a personal process about racism was important, and that the group should bring this internal work to the broader Caucus. He wrote: “We really need to create space, workshops, etc… for our white members/union at large to begin/continue to educate ourselves” (Journal, March 23).

Josh concurred that personal work for white inquiry group and Caucus members was significant for organizational development, but expanded this to emphasize the significance of moving beyond mere surface admissions of privilege to enacting a radical anti-racist stance and approach in multiracial spaces:

I feel like a lot of these [antiracist activist] spaces sort of get bogged down in that place of calling each other out for conflict, or for privilege, or… just being, “I’m so privileged, I’m so privileged.”… [This is not] transforming anything. I’d be staying in this place of – I’m too busy… to actually listen to what other people have to say and think critically about what they think I can do about it (Interview 3).

Josh emphasizes the importance of not just naming privilege and talking about it, but also moving to act on personal learning in one’s life and work as a white person. He names critical self-reflection, listening and learning as significant components for meaningful antiracist organizing and thinking for whites.

For some African Americans in the group, it was a new experience to hear white people recognizing, naming and talking openly about their race privilege. This was the case for Camille, who in referencing white privilege, stated: I’ve never really been in a room with [white] people who actually admitted it” (Interview 3). She went on to say that prior to the group, “I didn’t really see white people as a part of the change, as a meaningful part of the change. And really… that’s the main part of the change, admitting it [i.e. white privilege]” (Interview 3). Trust-building between some people of color, including Camille, and whites in the group was partially bound up in white people engaging in explicit admissions and acknowledgements of white privilege. This admission signified to people of color that the
whites were doing personal work that allowed them to see the ways in which they participate in oppressive systems that harm people of color. The public admission and discussion of racial privilege allowed group members to build trust and to build a deepened collective understanding of structural racism.

And yet, at the same time I do not wish to overstate the case or imply that there was complete cohesion and trust-building as a result of whites undergoing a process of recognizing and talking critically about their privilege. It is true that all white participants in the group vocalized at numerous points in the meetings that they were critical of their own privilege, and they indicated that they were putting this critical thought into practice through their suggestions for actions and their participation in the pedagogical components of the group. Whites made themselves vulnerable through engaging in this process, but there was never a complete sense of trust built in the group, nor, I suspect, could people of color in the group feel that they could fully trust whites in the group as a result. However, even as it was an imperfect process and the trust-building was ultimately incomplete, substantial gains were made and at least some of these gains were connected with white people engaging in a process of thinking and critical self-reflection about their privilege in a white supremacist system.

**Honesty and Vulnerability**

Tschannen-Moran (2004) writes, “Trust is the extent to which one is willing to rely upon and make oneself vulnerable to another” (p. 17). Identifying vulnerability as underlying all aspects of trust, and honesty as a necessity in trust, Tschannen-Moran (2004) reminds us that interdependence is necessary both for the desire to build trust between people and within groups, as well as for the process of building trust. She writes, “honesty concerns a person’s character, their integrity, and authenticity. Trust means that one can expect that the word or
promise of another individual… can be relied upon” (p. 22). The perception of integrity and authenticity are fundamental to the sense that the other person is honest.

Freire (1970/2004) identifies humility as necessary for transformative learning and action. He writes, “dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance” (p. 90). Rather, Freire’s notion of dialogue requires that people drop their shields to the world, and approach the group as an open learner who is willing to make her/himself bare to others and engage in deep thinking about the self and the world. If we take Tschannen-Moran (2004) and Freire’s (1970/2004) notions of vulnerability, honesty and humility together, then we come to an understanding of trust-building that requires people to bring their whole selves to the group, lay bare both what they do and do not know, and be prepared for reassessment of one’s knowledge and preconceptions of the world. Similarly, participants framed honesty and vulnerability as interconnected within their trust-building. They saw their personal honesty as an indicator of their level of trust for the group, and believed that others’ honesty allowed for deep and truthful engagement. Honesty was seen to support learning and the design of effective and applicable organizational solutions. Vulnerability was believed to indicate honesty and to support sharing personal experiences that could drive group learning and the growth of personal relationships.

From our initial phone call prior to the start of the inquiry group, Camille expressed deep concern about honesty in the group. Prior to agreeing to take part in the group, she wanted to get a sense for my intentions for the group, as well as those of other participants. We had a long phone conversation at that time where I spoke about how I saw race as an important issue shaping the Caucus’ work, and yet I saw it as largely unacknowledged by the organization. I spoke about my commitment to nurturing an inquiry group environment in which participants were truthful with themselves and others, and I vocalized awareness that
there may be inherent problems in having a white woman run this study, but that I would do my utmost to engage in critical self-reflection of race and racial privilege alongside my participants. Camille in turn expressed her concern that she is only interested in participating in a group where people enter with their whole selves and are ready to share and self-reflect. She later reflected on this phone call, saying “I don’t want to be a part of something that’s kind of phony or fluffy” (Interview 1).

Prior to the start of our group, Camille reflected positively on her previous involvement in the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP): “What I liked was the honesty… what I did appreciate about the writing project is that it had very blunt discussion about race, and about how that affects people, how that affects what people are going through, how they see the world, and then how it affects the person that you are as an educator” (Interview 1). Camille felt inclined to join the inquiry group based on these prior positive experiences with an organization that engaged critical thinking about race. Camille expressed desiring a similar experience of honest conversation about race within the inquiry group.

Camille’s concerns consistently centered on the honesty of other members. She expressed that explicit expressions of racism don’t upset her, because she appreciates the honesty of the speaker. She said: “I appreciate honesty, I always have… even if someone would have said, “Oh, you know, I don’t like –” like, I never get upset when you know someone says that they don’t like black people, they can't stand us”. Camille contrasts this experience with our inquiry group, stating that she felt comfortable being honest herself in the group, and thus felt good about the group as a whole. She said: “I didn’t feel like saying, ‘Well, I’m not going to be honest, I’m going to lie, so I might as well just leave now.’ I didn’t feel – I didn’t feel that. I felt like once I said it then it was like I knew it for myself, okay, then this is a – this is a good space” (Interview 3). Camille bases her sense that our inquiry group
was a good space upon her sense that she felt comfortable being honest about her experiences and her feelings in the group, and that she didn’t feel she had to—or wanted to—lie.

In our first few meetings, I noticed that there was a range of comfort with the topic of structural racism among participants in the group. White members who were newer to the topic tended to express feeling discomfort as they were afraid they might inadvertently say something hurtful, particularly to people of color in the group. Meanwhile, people of color in the group tended to express discomfort at being too open, as they did not want to offend whites participants or myself as facilitator. And although comfort was never full, people did come to be more comfortable with the topic and with talking in the group over time.

Zak spoke about how honesty supported the growth of comfort among members, which enabled group development and pushed it forward over time. He said: “I felt… everybody felt more comfortable; you heard [Ben] talk more, you heard [Josh] talk more, the voices became much more – not authoritative, but much more confident in addressing these issues… and that’s how you actually engage in honest dialogue with people” (Interview 2). As a person of color, Zak links honesty among white people as linked to his greater sense of trust in the group as a whole. He states that whites grew confidence in speaking to the whole group over time, and that this public truth-telling supported trust-building.

At the same time, Zac expressed that there were limits to his own honesty and the extent to which he would make himself vulnerable with the group, particularly considering that there were white members. He links whiteness as bound up in broader systems of structural power and inequity, and expresses that these systems shape the extent to which he feels comfortable being honest with whites:

It’s hard to be honest when you’re in a situation where the foundation of the honesty is not even acknowledged overall in our society… And maybe that goes back to personal biases that people develop as a result of understanding structural biases. So as a result,
I don’t necessarily trust people who identify themselves as white on that level, as a collective group I don’t (Interview 3).

Here, Zak speaks about how whites benefit from a system of embedded social power and supremacy, and how this system is ultimately built upon the oppression of people of color. He says that the system itself, and white people’s positioning within it, leads to his own hesitation to trust white people broadly. He implies that even though he feels disinclined to trust whites as a group that he does allow for the building of trusting relationships with specific individual white people over time. He sees building trust as requiring long-term concerted effort. His honesty is built upon his level of trust for both whites as a group as well as the individuals with whom he has built relationships.

In interviews, Zak expressed that he felt comfortable in the group overall, but that he simultaneously experienced limits to his comfort. He talked about how he values hearing people talk openly and even vulnerably about themselves in relation to broader patterns of systemic racism. He felt that theory can help with making sense of patterns of racial oppression, but also hinted that personal reflection among whites is necessary to move targeted interventions to systemic and structural racism forward. He stated: “I still felt we got to a point where I don’t know what it would look like to move beyond that point… I think as long as we’re not bringing in other divergent – I think it’s easy to talk about deep things in the educated circles, but when it comes to the hard grey area of life…” (Interview 3). Here, Zak references group learning about racism as ongoing, one that brings people closer together in stages. But he also expresses that there were limits to the trust built between members in our group, and links these limits as connected to the personal work and learning of members. Zak expresses that the group was able to open up and talk about racism, but that he also felt white members need to engage in deep personal work that would allow them to move forward in recognizing their daily lived experiences of privilege.
White participants similarly expressed concern about the links between trust and honest and vulnerable conversation. Gaertner and Dovidio (1986) assert that white Americans with liberal/egalitarian values tend to enact a form of prejudice that they call “aversive racism,” which exists in subtle, more indirect and less overtly negative forms than in the past. Trepagnier (2010) builds on this work to argue, “all whites are infected” by silent racism, which infuses their “unspoken negative thoughts, emotions, and assumptions about black Americans” (p. 15). If we take seriously the assertion that whites in the group were likely grappling with their own internalized aversive racism, then it makes sense that they would carefully edit what they have to say before vocalizing thoughts about interpersonal and structural racism.

White participants feared offending others, and this informed when and how much they spoke. In reflecting on his involvement in the group, Josh said: “I would say things, would be worried, ‘Okay, am I saying this from a place of privilege? Are people going to be critical of me for that? Am I going to sound naïve?’ And I feel as we developed that dynamic, I felt more comfortable in saying, ‘this might sound naïve,’ but I felt less scared to try and say something and to try and take that group risk” (Interview 3). Josh links his inclination to be honest and vulnerable with the group with his sense of trust and purpose in the group. He identifies feeling more comfortable through publicly identifying his gaps in knowledge, such as through prefacing statements with phrases like, “this might sound naïve.” Josh sees himself as a learner, and that his honesty and vulnerability were wrapped up in growing a sense of trust for individual group members and the group over time.

Corey shared that he felt vulnerability is fundamental for trust-building with others: “When I think about trust, I always come back to like yo… if I say what I’m feeling and I know that what I’m feeling enough and put that out… I think it’s about transparency and being vulnerable enough to [say] this is how I feel in this moment, and sharing that” (Interview 3).
Here, Corey talks about the importance of sharing truthfully. He talks about the importance of being in touch with one’s feelings, sharing this with others in the group, and links trust-building to this sharing. Corey also links transformation with the sharing of personal truths. He said:

I think the transformation is when we just say, ‘This is how I feel,’ and we feel like we’re in a trusting circle enough to have those very subjective conversations, and we allow that to talk about well – how do we take this connection and make it bigger? I think for me, that that’s the goal… ‘How do you begin to live and truly live? How do you live in a way where we’re honest and it leaves others to honest conversations that like build trust and bond, and really build a collective?’” (Interview 2).

Corey sees vulnerability as wrapped up in the establishment of a “trusting circle,” a place where people can speak truthfully about their experiences in the world in a way that builds trust and bonds over time, and builds a sense of collectivity.

Corey articulates that honesty is foundational in vulnerability. He sees honesty as wrapped up in the self-confidence to tell one’s truth and to be vulnerable. He said: “I think that’s what we need to be doing more of, stop speaking to the good parts of the story and just – and tell the real parts… We’re all built in the same way, so we feel the same things, and if you just told the real story, I get it” (Interview 3). Corey articulates that trust-building is bound up in truth-telling. He says that individuals need to honestly share stories in order to know each other and build trust. Corey expands on this by articulating that people must participate in this honesty as part of a personal journey of learning: “I think it does take a vulnerability or a confidence in saying, ‘I’m saying this for me first and you all second.’ I think it’s a confidence in a way, ‘I’ve got to say it,’ and then put it out first. It’s a vulnerability, ‘Oh, I’ve got to let my whole self to go into the group’” (Interview 3). Corey links personal urgency to share with a confidence in vulnerability that is based on a personal learning. In this sense, trust-building relies on the honesty and vulnerability of members, and the confidence they feel in sharing experiences and emotions.
Learning about systems of racialization and race supremacy requires that participants bring their hearts and minds to the project with openness and a willingness to lay themselves bare. Findings indicate that this honesty is particularly important among white participants for building trust with participants of color. Data indicates that many people of color in the group had experienced years of personal injury as a result of racist systems and that they required white participants to lay themselves bare in a way that was vulnerable, open to learning, self-reflection and transformation. This vulnerability among whites could support the growth of trust across racial lines, and particularly for the people of color in the group to trust individual whites and the group as a whole.

Meanwhile, if we take seriously Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) and Trepagnier’s (2010) description of the significant ways in which racism infuses white liberal/egalitarian mentality, then we may also gain insight into the very difficult process of whites being vulnerable within multiracial groups. There is an inherent tension between vulnerability and sharing embodied and deeply embedded racism with a multiracial group, and this poses significant barriers to the development of trust across racial lines. The process of building trust, and requiring honesty and vulnerability within themselves and others was imperfect. However, participants seemed to grapple with challenges in ways that were real, vulnerable, and sought change both within themselves and the broader system. Collaborative learning relies upon trust-building that centers truth, honesty, and vulnerability, and allows participants to challenge themselves and to grow as they undergo a collective learning process in partnership with each other.

**Listening and Acceptance**

If we are to understand honesty and vulnerability as personal goals that people brought to the group, then it is also important to understand how people responded to the honesty and
vulnerability expressed by others. Within my study, I found that participants strove to listen to and accept others’ experiences and ideas. This listening and acceptance was a foundational part of building trust.

Freire (1970/2004) writes that dialogue must be rooted in “profound love for the world and for people.” He expands on the nature of this love:

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical (p. 89).

Freire’s description supports the notion that participants must bring love and acceptance to collaborative learning efforts about pervasive social issues. At base, this love requires not just that each person brings vulnerability and honesty to the learning experience, but also a commitment to listening for true understanding of the experiences of others and acceptance of their experiences and knowledge.

In my study, participants felt that the willingness to listen in order to hear the intended meaning of other speakers led to trust-building in the group. Josh articulated: “I think it really is that, a space where we were all interested in each other, and I… liked hearing each other’s experiences and stories, and sharing” (Interview 3). The experience of listening was meaningful both for those who were speaking and listening. Listeners appreciated the vulnerability wrapped up in sharing and experiences, while speakers felt gratitude for the sense of being heard and the faith invested in them by listeners.

Pedagogical processes were thought to support listening and feeling heard among members. As discussed in Chapter 5, specific facilitation techniques were employed in order to create space for conversation and inquiry. Ben alerts us to how pedagogical process is bound up in creating space for listening to others. He says, “There is something powerful about just sitting and just listening to someone talk for a few minutes… and setting up the ground rules
for the group, and group norms and goals” (Interview 3). Ben articulates that pedagogical processes supported people in engaging in a collaborative learning process, and that learning was fed by people listening to each other. He says that he found the experience of listening to present a powerful learning experience.

Reflecting upon the pivotal moment highlighted earlier in this chapter, Camille articulates how trust is bound up in feeling heard by others. She said: I think when [Kathy] asked me for clarification about trust… I felt that she was listening to what I had to say, and I think she was really vested in why I felt the way that I did and how that affected the group, and how it affected the organization. So I think that that was really one of the points [of trust-building]… I said, “Okay, it’s not like I’m just here talking, people are actually listening and it’s a vested interest” (Interview 3). Camille articulates that it was a significant trust-building moment when Kathy asked her to expand upon her statements in the inquiry group meeting and listened intently to what she had to say. She felt others were truly invested in her experiences and wanted to learn from her.

Participants felt that listening was wrapped up in openness to new ideas. Zak articulated: “I feel like it’s a real on conversation going on. I feel safe; I don’t feel like anybody in there is like a potential spy. I feel like I’m able to articulate clearer than I ever have before these ideas, and people are actually listening rather than thinking, ‘Oh, that’s just [Zak] talking’” (Interview 3). Zak links feeling heard with the sense that group members were truly engaged with his ideas and took him seriously. As a person who is highly passionate about racial justice, Zak builds much of his life around connecting racial justice to the world around him. He hints that he frequently feels dismissed by others, and that they don’t truly contemplate his ideas and insights. And, he indicates that he felt safety and trust in the group due to being able to articulate ideas and to feel that they were truly heard and considered by others.
White group members tended to express that hearing the stories and ideas of people of color in the group helped them in their personal learning about racial injustice. One member, Ben, came to the group in early stages of theorizing racism and racial justice. He expressed that the words and experiences of people of color in the group had profoundly shaped his understanding of the roots of racial divides and divisions affecting the Caucus’ relationship with local African American communities. He said: “I think the trust thing, it kept coming up or maybe seemed to keep coming up… in big ways. And it’s something I had never really thought of before. I never thought I’d get in the way of trust, like there is a lack of trust, you know, that could be had towards the – the majority white group” (Interview 2). Ben points to the significance of listening and hearing the stories of others and incorporating his learning into a new and altered worldview and his positioning as a white person.

Participants engaged in highly personal learning processes informed by the experiences, stories, and statements of other participants. For participants who came to the group having done more reading, thinking and theorizing about race, it sometimes felt difficult to encounter what they perceived as possible ignorance among others. In the second interview, Zak spoke about another participant of color in the group, who he initially perceived as aligned with racist assumptions and world views. He said: “I was skeptical, you know I thought [this person] co-signed certain racist ideas that structure our society. But I can see it was more just not knowing the context, and I saw that throughout time” (Interview 2). Here, Zak acknowledges that he initially misjudged another member early in the meetings, and admits that this assumption was proved faulty over time, as he came to realize that the person was initially unfamiliar with the conversation, discourse and language that the group used to talk about racism, rather than being aligned with racist ideas. It took time for the group to establish a common language and discourse to discuss ideas about structural racism and to learn from each other.
Across these different perspectives on the role of listening and acceptance in trust-building, we may identify Freire’s (1970/2004) notion of love and faith in others as fundamental to supporting the group’s collaborative learning process. There were barriers to understanding the experiences of others both across and within racial identity, and listening and acceptance supported the inclination and propensity of members to trust one another within the group.

**Feeling Supported**

Freire (1970/2004) argues: “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 79). This cyclical and interconnected process of action and reflection is bound up not just in learning, but also in the relationships supporting the learning process. Trusting others to back one up in ways that extend beyond the reflection component, and into the world or the “action,” requires ongoing commitment that extended beyond the inquiry group and into the participants’ activist and professional work.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) identifies reliability as a facet of trust, meaning that support and benevolence are consistent predictable. Similarly, participants in my study saw trust to mean that they could predict that others in the group would act in consistent and predictable ways beyond the inquiry group space. They wanted to be able to rely on each other in ways that extended into their action and work in the world. When taken together, Freire (1970/2004) and Tschannen-Moran (2004) show that learning is bound up in matters of trust shaping what happens both within and beyond the learning space.

Two members of color spoke explicitly about how the group led them to feel supported in their Caucus organizing work. They spoke about confidence in knowing that the learning and relationships developed in the group would extend into their organizational work, and knowing that others would back them up if they spoke out against racist logics or
statements. Toward the end of the meetings, Zak reflected, “I definitely felt like I have built deeper relationships with most of the people in the inquiry group. I feel… more safe speaking on these issues within the Caucus” (Interview 3). Camille similarly spoke about the significance of trust in organizing work, and particularly for people of color. She understood trust to mean that people will predictably stand up for you when you need them. In reference to building trust with WE, Camille said: “[W]hen people [of color] know that it’s a safe place, and if something happens to me… if I’m having difficulty, I know that somebody here will stand up for me” (Inquiry Group 4). Camille links having trust in the Caucus with knowing that Caucus members will have awareness of racist dynamics within the organization and will provide support and back up in response.

In her third interview, Camille identified a specific circumstance of racism recently experienced in a Caucus meeting, and spoke about how she felt supported in calling out the racism in that moment. This act of calling out was articulated as a direct result of her building trust with inquiry group participants. Camille explained that she had recently attended a meeting of a Caucus sub-committee, where the meeting host had made a pointed comment about how she should speak about all matters of race within the meeting. Camille directly responded to the comment and pointed out the harm inherent in the statement. She articulated feeling proud of her response, and that she took this active and explicit resistance based on having built up trust with Zak, who was also attending the meeting. She felt confident that Zak would back her up. She said, “I think I took less of a passive role because we all came together, we all [as an inquiry group] had kind of an understanding of each other, and I felt supported by them. I felt supported by the black men in the room… I don’t want to so often be nasty to someone in their own home, but really? So [Zak] really supported me in that” (Interview 3). Trust-building led members to feel confident that others would back them up if they expressed resistance to racist trends or conversations. This was a particular trend among
African American participants, who grew to know each other better through the meetings and came to feel that they could deeply rely on each other for support within the broader organization as a result.

It was interesting to notice that war references were not uncommon when participants were asked about the extent to which they trusted others in the group. War references were used to display both the potential and limits on trust built by members. Corey said: “I think if something broke out, I’m not sure that we’d all be in war together – I don’t think that we would all stand with each other. I think if it went down, I’m not sure that we would all be standing in the same battlefield together. But I think that we would definitely notice where other people are” (Interview 3). Here, Corey makes the concept of trust-building tangible through applying it to a war metaphor, pointing out the extent to which trust was built in the group. He perceives that members of the group are in a process of trust-building that is ongoing, and that is in its early stages. He says that he is not sure that all members of the group hold a deep trust in each other, or would stand with each other through difficult or explosive times. However, he acknowledges that participants do hold mutual concern, and would keep an eye on each other, even if they did not yet hold deep and established trust.

Miriam similarly spoke about backing others up through a war metaphor. She posed an extreme example of revolutionary action where people of color are taking a stand to protect their rights and resist racism, and then discussed the potential limits in her own willingness to back up radical action if she does not draw upon the same experiences of racism as people of color. She said: “[T]here are a lot of people in my life who I would like take a bullet for around race stuff… let’s say there was an uprising in Philadelphia, like there was in Baltimore, and my close relationships and friends who are people of color wanted to go set a car on fire, and they wanted me to come with them. I would need to really feel close to them… because what am I fighting for?” (Interview 3). Here, Miriam implies that she desires to support people of color in
the struggle to fight and resist racism. Yet at the same time, she points to the limits to which
she will engage in action herself and back up trusted people in her life who are of color, based
on her acknowledged limits in understanding the true meaning, feeling and experience of
racism.

Trust-building within the inquiry group required that members felt not just that their fellow participants took their learning seriously, engaged their whole selves, interrogated their privilege, made themselves vulnerable, and accepted the experiences of others. Trust-building also required that members felt supported in applying their learning to the world beyond the group. Members wanted to feel that they could rely on others to take their collaboratively-constructed knowledge into their lives in complete ways, and that others could be counted upon to act in predictable and consistent ways. In this sense, trust required a commitment to engaging in a continual process of action and reflection —Freire’s (2004) notion of praxis—that both allowed and required members to act upon their learning in the world beyond the group in ways that felt tangible and predictable. Participants wanted to feel “backed up” and that they could trust fellow participants to act in consistent ways based on collaboratively-constructed knowledge.

6.5 Bumps in the Road: Complications in Building Trust

“I did feel safe in the space. But certain levels of the conversation... you just can't get to. And also that's more of an individual, person-to-person side of things” (Zak, Interview 3)

Participants built an enhanced sense of mutual safety and trust over time. However, as Zak points out, this sense of trust and safety was relative. There were a number of difficulties in trust-building—or what I call “bumps in the road”—that appeared as members struggled to build trust within the group. In this section I identify and explicate four specific factors. First, I briefly touch upon the significance of racial tensions, which was also addressed in sections 6.2
and 6.3, and the ways that racial identity differences were seen to have impacted group trust-building. Second, I discuss the role of humor, and how it carried dual and sometimes conflicting roles in trust-building: at times it lightened the mood and improved relational elements to support collaborative learning, while at other times it acted as a means of avoidance and censorship. Third, I discuss how politeness similarly straddled positive and negative functions in trust-building; at times it allowed participants to establish a knowable and predictable range of group dynamics, while at others, politeness appeared to support relational distance and restricted the development of meaningful learning. Finally, I elaborate on the role of conflict in collaborative learning and the ways in which it posed both limitations on, and possibilities for, relational connections and collective growth.

**Trust and Racial Identity**

Warren (2010) shows that “multiracial collaboration is built upon a foundation of relationships” (p. 152) and argues that trust is a particularly salient issue for multiracial groups of activists who seek to think and learn about racial justice. Trust is complex and multifaceted, and this is particularly the case when people of color and whites strive to ally in struggles for racial justice. The question remains: How can whites come to truly work for racial justice when they benefit from the system of racial oppression? Freire (1970/2004) grapples with trust when he looks at people in oppressor roles who align themselves with freedom and transformation struggles. He writes that it is difficult for oppressors to truly trust oppressed people, because the oppressors see themselves as needing to be in a position of “generosity” in relation to the movement, where “because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of this transformation” (P. 60). Freire (1970/2004) contrasts this with a true humanist, who “can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust” (p. 60). When Freire’s
framing is applied to the inquiry group, trust relies on those holding positions of power to truly trust those experiencing social marginalization to guide their own movement for freedom and transformation.

From the start, there were difficulties in establishing trust across racial lines in our inquiry group. I found that white participants did not speak of difficulties in trusting members of color in the interviews. This does not mean that they did not experience internal conflict surrounding establishing trust across race, but rather they may not have been willing to speak of it. Participants of color spoke slightly more candidly about the difficulties in establishing trust across racial lines, and particularly for their own trust of white participants in the group.

This conversation took place in the second inquiry group meeting:

Corey: I don’t believe white people listen to me for two seconds.
Mary: Really?
Corey: No…. You might hear me, but I don’t think that you’re thinking that I’ve really — and when I say listening is like the both word and action, I’m not – I’m just not telling you this to tell you, I’m telling you this so that we can get something going and start something…
Mary: You said white people; is that specific people or just in general?
Corey: I think – specifically when you’re talking about structural inequity, I’m talking about white people…
Zak: I was always afraid when I was younger, [of] being a tolerable deviant, “You know that’s just [Zak] talking shit.”(Inquiry group 2)

Zak and Corey speak to their experiences of dismissal by others, and their subsequent hesitation to expose themselves in situations where they feel unacknowledged or not heard. Corey expresses that he hesitates to speak candidly with white people in particular because he does not want to experience a superficial engagement with his ideas, but rather wants to feel that others are taking seriously and grappling with his ideas. Zak similarly references experiences when younger, presumably at his mostly-white suburban K-12 schools, when others would listen but dismiss his basic assertions and arguments. Together, Corey and Zak imply that they require being taken seriously for their insights, experiences and knowledge
about racial oppression. They require a sense of trust from white people in order to feel trust in
return.

Ultimately, our inquiry group was short in duration. We were not able to get to the
point of deep engagement with the ideas about trust that Corey and Zak raise. Nor were we
able to directly discuss Freire’s notion of a true humanist, that of one from the oppressor class
who is able to trust the revolutionary work of people invested in the struggle. Trust across
racial identity divisions is surely complex, and deserves future scholarship to continue
exploring the complexities of trust in multiracial settings of collaborative learning.

Humor

The scholarly literature frames humor as complex. On the one hand, humor lubricates
and supports the growth of relationships between colleagues—such as through reducing stress
and enhancing leadership, group cohesiveness, creativity, and organizational culture (Duncan
& Feisal, 1989; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Yet on the other hand, humor can be used in ways
that are barbed, confrontational, competitive, and seek to disrupt dominant patterns in
interpersonal and group relationships (Dwyer, 1991; Holmes, 1999). Within the inquiry group,
humor served similarly varied—and sometimes contradictory—functions.

In the first two sessions, I observed that the intentional use of humor allowed for a
loosening up among participants, and created enhanced opportunity for the growth of initial
conversations and bonds. Humor was used with the intention of bringing participants closer.
Over time, humor came to signify collective growth and the establishment of a common
language and terrain of knowledge. Participants began cracking jokes and telling stories both
within the sessions and in the “between times” - the times when the meeting was not
technically in session, but when many participants were nonetheless in the room, such as prior
to the start of the meeting or after it had ended. Humor in these “in between times” was
sometimes lewd and provocative, sometimes at the expense of the self, and often based on a common experience within the inquiry group setting or in other Caucus times and spaces.

Humor also took place during group sessions, and as the meetings progressed over time, became looser and more playful. Josh observed, “the little back and forth stuff, I feel like we developed more the rapport as a group as far as people making jokes off each other’s experiences and past stories and things…I feel like that was opening up spaces” (Interview 3). Josh saw humor as opening new potential for the development of personal relationships between group participants.

Over time, it became apparent that humor did not always support relational bonding. Rather, on occasion participants expressed irritation and anger at the use of humor by others in the group, as it was seen to be motivated by or achieve a distancing and avoidance effect. For example, one participant used humor frequently within the group to lighten the mood, especially when things might feel serious or tense. A few participants identified a sense of unease with this, expressing that they saw this as an intentional means of distraction. Corey in particular spoke about the way that this participant would tell jokes at what he considered to be crucial points in the conversation. He said: “[W]hen things get tense, [unnamed participant] would go straight to humor and brings us right back, bring us right back down…. But I’ve always – because I’m trying to get to that discomforting level, I’m always a little just perturbed” (Interview 3). Corey felt “perturbed” because he would work hard to wind things up, to increase the tension in the group in order to see what would happen and what would be revealed, and then one specific participant would crack a joke that would quickly cut the thread he had worked so hard to tighten. The other participants would be distracted by the humor from the original stream of conversation and the moment he had worked hard to lead the group toward would be lost.
The function of humor in times like those identified by Corey was to distract the group from engaging in certain topics in specific kinds of ways. Thus, we might understand that humor was sometimes used as a means for participants to indirectly express discomfort and regain control in the conversation. From time to time, humor was seen to function as a means of controlling conversation, distracting fellow group members from specific conversations or certain depths in discussion. This use of humor aligns with the scholarship of Dwyer (1991) and Holmes (1999), who show that humor is sometimes used to disrupt and re-distribute power in groups. In this study, humor served the dual purpose of sometimes bringing people together and supporting relational bonding, while other times it served as a means of topic avoidance and power redistribution.

**Politeness**

Sociolinguists have long debated the linguistic form and social functions of politeness for human communication and social relations. Scholars tend to agree that politeness is “a phenomenon connected with (the relationship between) language and social reality” (Eelen, 2001, p.1). It is commonly recognized to take place through language, and to be found in greetings, tone of voice, emphasis in language and choice of words, as well as non-verbal and non-linguistic behavior, including bodily proximity, holding the door for another, etc. (Eelen, 2001). Politeness is thought to support largely diplomatic functions, and to contain opportunities for aggression (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Goffman (1971) writes, “politeness, like formal diplomatic protocol (for which it must surely be a model), presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties” (p. 1). In this sense, the central function of politeness, which operates through language and social relations, might be understood to allow for the bringing together of, and communication between, potentially aggressive parties.
Politeness operates as a tool and ritual for navigating relationships between individuals and groups of people. Durkheim (1926) identifies ritual as either positive or negative in function, with positive ritual involving affirmation or support and negative ritual seeking avoidance. In his essay titled “Supportive Interchanges,” Goffman (1971) builds upon Durkheim’s conception, describing how interpersonal rituals are deeply engrained as a “central organizational device of public order” (p. 63). Goffman writes that interpersonal rituals are dialogistic, involving an exchange between individuals and performers of rituals, and serve to establish the relationship between those involved in the social ritual. In this sense, politeness may be understood to compose a significant form of social ritual that establishes the nature and terrain of relationships between people on individual levels and in groups.

In the study, I found that politeness was employed in ways that sometimes supported and at other times restricted the growth of relationships and trust. As a relational tool, politeness allows people to navigate and control for conflict and disagreement. In the study, participants tended to display a great deal of civility toward each other. They would offer to get each other water and they would ask about each other’s children. And, they would give space in group conversations for others to express diverse or possibly disagreeable ideas and perspectives. However, I observed that even as politeness allowed members to establish initial bonds with each other, to express a sense of respect, and to achieve the democratic aspirations of the group, it also sometimes functioned to restrict bonding and trust-building. Politeness may have been a way of constraining possibilities of conflict. Kathy said: “[Y]ou know, [politeness] allowed us to be conflict-free which is usually how people like to be… it’s comfortable to not have conflict. And it helped preserve and deepen relationships” (Interview 3).

Mary similarly felt that politeness served to limit conflict in the group. In reference to the inquiry group meetings and those with particularly forceful opinions, she said: “I mean,
instead of saying you know, ‘Come on, enough, we heard this in the last meeting and the meeting before,’ you just listened again, so all right. And that is what I mean by politeness, and that’s part of that safety” (Interview 3). Mary articulates that politeness was employed to maintain civility. She contrasts this with the inclination a participant might feel to express irritation with other group members, such as in response to their frequent repetition of a specific viewpoint. She shows that politeness constrained conflict and reinforced a sense of safety among participants.

Zak points out that in conversations in general, including within our inquiry group, that he frequently censors himself in order to avoid offending others. He is deeply concerned with matters of race, and has learned that his perspectives often diverge sharply from those in his peer group. Thus, he has learned to censor himself around issues of race. He said: “I think that might offend people… To truly truly truly talk about race in the collective and in individual sense, and speak honestly about it from somebody who has a perspective like mine, there are some things involved in that thinking that deviate strongly from [the common perspective]” (Interview 3). As an antidote to the possibility of offending others through vocalizing a perspective that deviates sharply from the norm, Zak engages in ongoing self-editing. He censors himself when talking about race and racism and instead engages politeness. The effect is both that he is able to establish loose bonds with a wider variety of people, but meanwhile, these loose relationships tend to take a more shallow form.

Politeness may have allowed for initial bonds to form between group members, but it may have also constrained opportunities for getting to that deeper level with each other. If we are to take Goffman’s (1971) assertion that politeness constrains opportunities for aggression, then we may see that in this group politeness functioned support initial bonds and communication across difference, but came to hinder forming deeper relationships over time. Generally, people felt that in order to establish deeper relationships they would need more time
together to work through emotions, to talk explicitly about the assumptions people brought into the group, and to continue to build trust between participants, and particularly across racial identity differences. Overall, I observed that politeness allowed for the growth of initial trust and relationships between members but also acted as a restrictive means of distancing, and in this way may have inhibited the formation of deeper relationships over time.

**Conflict**

Social movement theorists tend to frame conflict as political contestation that drives change movements. Theorists della Porta and Diani (1999) conceptualize conflict as primarily located in dynamics between social movements and the political processes that they seek to change. They define conflict as “an oppositional relationship between actors who seek control of the same stake - be it political, economic, or cultural power - and in the process make negative claims on each other” (p. 21). Later, della Porta (2009a) reveals how politics have increasingly focused on deliberative democracy concerns which stress “in particular the importance of the quality of communication for reaching consensual definitions of the public good in democratic processes” (p. 74). As a result, there is increased tension between conflict and consensus, wherein individuals strive to reach common understanding but engage in democratic debate with disagreeing opinions and framings along the way. Conflict is in many ways bound up in processes of consensus.

Meanwhile, the teacher collaboration literature tends to conceptualize conflict as inherent to individual dynamics and relationships. Achinstein (2002) writes that conflict is central to the work of teachers’ learning communities, and that is a range of ways people engage conflict in professional settings, ranging from avoidant to embracing. Meier (2002) similarly highlights the potential of conflict and the necessity of trust when working through disagreement. She emphasizes the importance of “trial and error” and “extended experience
with each other” (p. 61) as people come to learn how to work together and work through conflict over time. Taking Achinstein and Meier together, we may see conflict as fundamental to moving groups forward, to forming and enhancing relationships, and to supporting the long-term commitment to working together for change.

Race and feminist scholar bell hooks (2003) asserts, “we cannot forge boundaries across the barriers that racism creates if we want always to be safe or to avoid conflict” (p. 63). This assertion might lead us to believe that conflict is necessary for learning and bonding while engaged in racial justice movements. However, while the inquiry group seemed to serve learning and relational growth purposes, I found that there were no explicit moments of conflict in the inquiry group. Kathy reflected, “I don’t think we pushed each other individually head-on as much as we could have… We didn’t go at each other” (Interview 3). While there were no moments of direct confrontation or explicit conflict, over time I came to notice that there were frequent moments of discomfort and subtle disagreement within meetings. Rather than engaging in explosive situations or head-on disagreements, participants would often avoid moments of conflict through employing relational tools like humor and politeness. I asked participants about this tendency toward conflict avoidance, both within interviews and in the final session, and through this came to identify a number of potential explanations for group dynamics surrounding conflict.

**Problems with Conflict**

Participants ranged in their comfort levels and tolerance for conflict. Some participants felt very comfortable with conflict, and indeed believed that conflict was necessary for moving to deeper relationships with each other and more meaningful learning. Meanwhile, other participants were less comfortable with conflict, believing that it could harm relationships and the agenda of the inquiry group and the broader organization. Three types of problems appeared in relation to conflict, and I will explore each of these in turn. First, there were varied
levels of comfort with intensity among participants. Second, there was fear of hurting feelings through engaging in conflict. And third, some participants saw conflict as contrary to the common goals of the group while others thought conflict was in line with goals.

Participants varied in their comfort with intensity. Some participants believed that emotional displays would make people vulnerable in ways that were productive for the group. Corey in particular felt that conflict would assist the group in moving forward. In reference to his desires for our group, he said, “I want tears to run,” and expressed seeking highly emotionally charged conversations with explicit conflict. He felt that emotional intensity would help move people forward in their thinking, analysis and in understanding each other. Corey was disappointed that this intensity did not happen, and saw this as a limiting factor for learning and relationship-building in the group.

Meanwhile, Mary expressed that sometimes the conflict that others in the group sought was more than she was comfortable with. In reflecting on the different styles toward conflict in the group, she said: “some wanted more militant ‘let me hit you over the head with it whether you like it or not’ [styles of communication]” (Interview 3). Mary felt uncomfortable with the ways in which some members sought emotionally charged conversations. She also expressed dissatisfaction due to what she saw as repetitive diatribes by specific members over multiple sessions. Other participants sometimes perceived Mary as disengaged from the inquiry group, and one might speculate that this disengagement may have connected to her sense of discomfort with the intensity sought by other group members.

It seems that one reason some group members sought to avoid conflict was out of concern for the feelings of others. Kathy said, “I think part of conflict comes, with that comes hard feelings, and I think that’s the whole thing everybody was trying to avoid” (Interview 3). People did not want to cause harm to others, nor did they want to alienate them from the
group. Politeness was employed as a means of navigating this potential harm and limiting hurt feelings.

Conflict was thought contrary to the trust-building efforts of the group, as well as contrary to the broader goals of the organization. Mary said: “[It] sounds so simple, but we’re all good people and we understand we’re all there for the same purpose, so why be upset or you know you realize everybody genuinely wants to resolve this or improve it. So, [even if] somebody disagrees on how to do it, the point is we still want to get to the same place” (Interview 3). Here, Mary situates conflict as unnecessary when put into perspective with the broader mission and goals of the inquiry group. She sees conflict as getting in the way of “getting to the same place” and achieving a common mission. In this sense, conflict between group members is seen as a threat to maintaining focus on the organization’s broader mission and the collective effort to reap tangible results aligned with the common group values.

While Mary situates conflict as unnecessary when looking at the bigger picture, Corey articulates that he is uncertain that group members hold similar goals. He says, “I don’t think that we’re all working from the same goal. I don’t know what our goals are, individually. I think that’s – I think that if we were to do that I think that’s where conflicts would arise” (Interview 2). Here, Corey states that he believes the group has not yet arrived at the point where people publicly voice their goals and are transparent about ideals and perspectives, and thus believes this poses limitations on establishing deeper relationships within the group. Corey sees trust-building as limited by lack of conflict, whereas Mary sees the struggle of members like Corey to wind up the tension and to provoke explicit conversations about assumptions and goals as unnecessary to what she sees as the broader goal of the group, which is to support the work of the Caucus.

Overall, it seems that members took different approaches to conflict that ranged along Achinstein’s (2002) continuum of approaches to conflict, from avoidant to embracing. Mary
may be seen as taking a primarily avoidant approach to conflict, whereas Corey articulates an orientation that embraces conflict. Wrapped up in personal orientations towards conflict was also variation in personal comfort with intensity, concern for the feelings of others in the group, and differing notions of conflict’s necessity in relation to the broader goals of the group.

**Positive Functions of Conflict**

Dialogue about important social justice issues commonly surfaces debate and disagreement. Disagreement may be purposefully engaged and centered within dialogue in order to create opportunities for democratic dialogue that interrupt tendencies toward disengagement from important social issues and serve to dismantle inequitable social patterns (Bickmore & Parker, 2014). In this sense, dialogue that directly engages with and explores conflict might allow for enhanced opportunity for teachers’ learning across professional, activist and personal domains. Achinstein (2002) finds that conflict supports learning in teacher communities:

> If conflict processes are a natural, inevitable, and at times fruitful part of teacher professional communities, then conflict talk, deliberation about ideology, border negotiations, dissent, and disagreements over practices can no longer only be relegated to the domain of unprofessional or dysfunctional (p. 450).

Pointing out that conflict is inherent to the collaborative learning process in teacher learning communities, Achinstein (2002) advocates for using conflict as opportunity to think through problems in personal ideology and practice. She centers conflict within the learning process. Similarly, this study finds that conflict holds positive aspects for shaping the work of the group and members’ learning.

This study finds that conflict can play three main positive functions. First, conflict can play a democratic function, through allowing members to work through problems and to collectively define a positive path forward. Second, conflict can allow for relationship development between members. And third, conflict can support the personal development and
learning of individuals within the group. Participants varied in which of these functions they identified as most significant and positive for the group, and this variation aligned also with their priorities and perceived mission of the group.

Some members framed conflict as playing a democratic function through allowing members to debate and weigh out different sides and ideas surrounding a particular issue. In this sense, conflict can help move people forward, open communication, and achieve the overall goals of the group. Camille highlights the necessity of airing concerns for accomplishing goals: “if you’re not willing to have those conflicts with people, then nothing will really get done” (Interview 3). Camille saw conflict as opening lines of communication and allowing people to air their concerns in order to get on the same page.

When asked about their personal experiences with conflict, participants named a variety of feelings that arose for them in relation to specific people and to the issues at hand. In naming these conflicts, many people voiced that they wish they had voiced their concerns surrounding specific topics in order to engage with those who disagreed and to work toward a common understanding. Penelope, for example, talked about a moment of intellectual disagreement with another participant. She said: “the more I went home thinking about it and the more and more I thought about it, the more and more uncomfortable it started to make me” (Interview 2). As it happened, Penelope chose to raise this concern in the meeting following this interview, and this gave her opportunity to engage directly about a topic that was meaningful to her, and allowed her to voice her concerns and to consider alternate viewpoints in relation to her initial viewpoint. Participants tended to agree that the democratic potential of raising conversation about latent intellectual tensions within the group held positive potential for the democratic functions of the group, providing people were able to engage with the topics in ways that were intellectual rather than infused with personal offense.
Only one participant spoke about how conflict could support relationship development and bonding. Corey strongly felt that conflict is necessary for getting to a deeper stage in relationships with others. He said, “the idea of we’re in a conflict together and we can’t get out creates the grounds for bonding.” Corey sees conflict as creating an opportunity for people to air concerns, share their emotions, and through this experience to come to know each other at a deeper level. Conflict in this sense allows for the building of trust between participants.

Many participants felt that conflict can create opportunity for personal growth and learning within the individual. Conflict in this sense allows for people to learn through being challenged on their assumptions or opinions. Ben said: “[C]onflict can produce growth or change, and I had a professor who always said, ‘If you’re feeling uncomfortable, you’re about to learn something’” (Interview 3). Miriam similarly echoed that she sees productive elements in disagreement. She states, “[disagreement is] just a rhetorical skill that we all need to have. And that for the person receiving it, it requires some identity–searching of like, ‘Is this actually what I believe?’” (Interview 3). Corey points out that identifying areas of growth through these instances of conflict allows the individual to identify areas for personal work and provides a path forward for future personal learning. He said: “[T]he only way you can deal with [conflict is] with other people who would draw it out…. Through the sharing, it becomes more you’re able to sort of feel on what it is that you’re really ignoring and then begin to work on it” (Interview 3).

6.6 Summary and Discussion

Collaborative learning in the group relied upon the development of strong and trusting relationships between group members. Trust-building supported both the personal relationships between group members and the collaborative learning experiences. Over time, group members came to build up relationships and grew a mutual sense of trust. As participants built
trust, they were increasingly able to learn from the strengths, knowledge, perspectives and experiences of other members.

Explicit learning goals for this group centered on racial justice concerns, and participants applied this framework to assess their relationships with each other and the broader organization. In section 6.1, Camille alerts us to how trust frequently shapes relationships between African American communities and the Caucus organization, and how the trust between communities and organizations is intimately bound up in, and reliant on, personal relationships. She talks about her personal growth in trust for the Caucus through building relationships with individual members of the inquiry group. As Camille came to trust others in the group to speak honestly, to listen and accept the experiences of others, and to support her in realms extending beyond the inquiry group space, she also came to trust the organization more broadly. Camille’s thoughtful analysis of her own building of trust framed many subsequent conversations about the salience of trust when learning about racial injustice and structural racism.

Participants identified significant barriers to building trust between the Caucus as an organization and local African American communities, and linked these barriers to their own work and experiences in the inquiry group. They identified that racism has been so deeply embedded into people, institutional structures, and society that it has resulted in longstanding divisions between African Americans and primarily white organizations. Organizations taking up a social justice unionist perspective explicitly identify striving to work in partnership with communities for social change but meanwhile fail to center the concerns of African American communities within their work. This failure to engage in a truly collaborative learning process alongside local racialized communities limits the collective mobilizing power, the collaborative learning possibilities and the potential partnerships across communities.
Trust-building was supported by a range of factors. At the outset of the group, participants who had already-established relationships with other members in the group tended to feel more at ease and trusting of the group than members who did not. Participants who did not have previous relationships with other group members tended to base their trust on sharing communities in common or their trust in an individual person who could vouch for the members with whom they were not acquainted. The group as a whole felt that it was beneficial to have a greater common purpose in mind that grounded the work of the group. Trust-building across racial lines was supported in part by white people acknowledging their privilege and showing evidence of working to dismantle personal racism. This personal work was also bound up in the collaborative learning of educators in the group. Participants identified honesty and vulnerability, listening and acceptance of others’ viewpoints and experiences, and feeling “backed up” by other members as supporting the trust-building and learning process. Trust also grew when members felt supported by others in the group in spaces that extended beyond the inquiry group. Together, these factors supported the growth of trust between group members and strengthened their resolve and commitment to the group learning process.

It is important to note that trust-building tended to vary in shape and form in ways that aligned with the racialized experiences and identities of participants. White members tended to explicitly value building trust across racial lines and learning from the wisdom, insights and personal experiences of people of color. Meanwhile, people of color in the group appeared to primarily value building relationships with each other and with white participants in order to feel greater trust in the organization broadly and in order to feel safe and supported in spaces that extended outside the inquiry group space.

Trust-building did not take place without some bumps along the way. Humor and politeness were social tools that sometimes enabled trust-building, while other times inhibited and restricted trust-building between participants. Conflict was particularly complex in that
participants held diverse levels of comfort with and desire for conflict. Some participants believed conflict supported relationship-building, while others saw it as inhibiting the growth of trust. The study shows that conflict holds great potential for working through differences and getting to a deeper level of learning in collaborative group spaces.
CHAPTER 7: Diffusion of Collaborative Learning

This [group is] proof that powerful things can come from people coming together and thinking and discussing, and learning from each other, and growing from our experiences (Penelope, Interview 3).

The [inquiry group] helped me re-center my analysis of the world through the lens of racial justice. And it allowed me to deepen my analysis and understanding of forces that shape my world: society as a whole, the school district, my school, and my personal relationships (Kathy, Writing, January 2016).

In the initial stages of group meetings, participants were primarily focused on getting to know one another in personal and intellectual ways. They strove to build a common language with which to talk about structural racism, and used pedagogy to support their development of deepened interpersonal relationships. As time passed and participants came to identify shared interests and common perspectives and to grow closer bonds, I found that the application of learning to contexts beyond the inquiry group became inseparable from the collaborative learning process.

Social scientists study “diffusion” within multiple subjects and contexts. Diffusion refers to the spread of an innovation through direct or indirect channels across members of a social system (Rogers, 1983). Social scientists employ diffusion for examining recognized channels of diffusion, such as the spread of a certain technology over time or the growth of support for specific policy measures. Social movement theorists are among those most deeply engaged with the concept, and apply it to thinking about how ideas, strategies, and ideologies spread across varied constituents and locations within and beyond the movement. Social movement theorists employ diffusion as a way for conceptualizing how ideas spread across time and space to shape the internal work of activists, organizations, and movements, as well as how they influence broader political, social, economic and policy contexts extending beyond the movement (see Givan, Roberts & Soule, 2010).
Rogers (1983) argues that diffusion operates through direct (i.e. interpersonal networks) and indirect (i.e. mass media or books) channels. In this study, participants engaged information and framings that were in many ways shaped by indirect channels of diffusion (such as influence from the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and ideas from books). Participants also wrote and published online blog posts reflecting on our work together and thus sought to indirectly diffuse ideas from our work together into the broader social movement. While this study acknowledges the influences and work of the indirect channels of diffusion in shaping both the inquiry group itself and its own diffusion of ideas, I am primarily concerned with how participants perceived the diffusion of their learning through direct channels to specific personal, work, and organizational contexts.

Freire (1970/2004) points out, “human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor” (p. 125). Freire points to transcendence as a uniquely human capability, and one which allows for personal transformation in views on the world, which in turn impacts worldly interactions, and in turn alters and shapes the world. In this study, participants engaged in a process of learning about racial justice that allowed them to collectively consider the nature of structural racism broadly, combined with how the concept connected with their personal actions and organization. Over time, teachers came to reconsider the nature of structural racism as well as how to put shifting views into practice within their activism and activist organization. Learning was intimately bound up in the praxis itself —as participants learned, they came to reflect on and alter their practice in new ways. Participants viewed their learning as seeping out to effect change in realms that extended well beyond the inquiry group space.

In this study I found that learning triggered shifts and changes not just in the teachers’ organization (i.e. the Caucus), but also within teachers’ professional work in classrooms and schools, and their personal lives. This chapter examines how learning diffused beyond the
borders of the inquiry group to effect change within these three realms: teachers’ personal lives, their professional work with students and in schools, and their broader teacher activist organization.

First, I examine how collaborative learning created shifts in participants’ personal lives, including within their minds and hearts, and how they thought about their relationships with family and friends. I pay attention to the ways in which participants framed inquiry as an ongoing process that allows them to stay accountable to themselves and others in dismantling racist structures in their personal lives and relationships. Second, I examine how participants conceptualized the significance of collaborative learning on their professional work in schools. I look at how participants perceived shifts in their perspective on students and colleagues, and how these perspective changes shaped their work in schools. I also address how participants perceived barriers to application of their learning within schools. And finally, I examine changes within the Caucus. I identify shifts in how participants came to see their role in the Caucus and changes in relationship dynamics within the organization. I also describe tangible organizational change that resulted from the inquiry group, and end with a description of how collaborative learning contributed to shifts in the perceived organizational mission and vision.

7.1 Personal Lives

The transformation of self involves a process of internal investigation, of reconsidering one’s personhood and the world outside. Through metaphor, Anzaldúa (2012) describes how personal transformation involves the slow development of a new perspective on self and other: “Coatlicue [sic] is a rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness” (p. 68). Anzaldúa’s (2012) poetic description of the Coatlicue archetype describes the process of internal change as “something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality”
Here, internal transformation is a highly personal experience of internal reassessment and learning.

As addressed at the outset of this chapter, Freire (1970/2004) theorizes the nature of internal shifts in worldview and perspective as located first in a new or heightened awareness of inequity and oppression, and a subsequent personal commitment to its transformation. The internal development required to support this awareness and work is located within praxis, in which one comes to learn about oppression through a cyclical and recursive commitment to action and reflection. Self-liberation is herein wrapped up in personal growth and the desire to transform and liberate the world.

Chappell et al (2003) build on Freire by arguing that personal transformation is the result not just of personal commitment to transformation and the development of heightened awareness of inequity through praxis, but is also deeply entwined with one’s long-term enduring knowledge of self combined with relationships with others. They write:

Reflexive identity is achieved when a person sees himself or herself as having a temporal unity, and relational identity is achieved when a person defines himself or herself in terms of a socially or discursively recognized identity. For narrative identity these two processes work together in the process of identity formation such that a reflexive identity, rather than being an essence, or innate and unchanging is only achieved through a process of relational identification with socially available narratives. A person’s identity is thus both centered and decentered (p. 49).

Advocating for a process of internal change through engagement in critical narrative on oneself and the world, Chappell et al (2003) thus argue that personal identity shifts are located within critical conversation and engagement with the enduring characteristics of one’s identity over time, and the social and cultural world beyond one’s self. Narrative identity involves a making and remaking of personal identity over time in ways that respond to who one is and the surrounding world.
When combined, we can see that Anzaldua (2012), Freire (1970/2004) and Chappell et al. (2003) build a notion of identity as an evolving and shifting phenomenon, one with flexibility in response to new awareness, relationships, and the personal commitment to liberation. In this sense, personal transformation is bound up in learning through engagement with the self and with the world.

Learning about systems and structures of racism poses a particular and often unsettling opportunity for personal transformation (for more on pedagogies of discomfort, see Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Tatum (2003) argues that “productive dialogue” is necessary to “raise consciousness and lead to effective action and social change” (p. 193). This dissertation has thus far sought to track what this dialogue looked like as participants strove to raise their own and others’ consciousness about structural racism. But, to what internal effect for those involved?

Participants found inquiry a powerful tool for supporting their personal learning. They felt that their learning about racial justice led them to enhanced personal commitment to act upon this learning. Miriam expressed: “I feel tasked—it’s big, a thing which is good, but it’s also—it just feels really overwhelming… there’s just so much to do. And I feel like I have to be continuing the work that just happened. That when you make a commitment to doing that work, you’re really making a life commitment” (Interview 2). Many participants in the study, and particularly white participants like Miriam, expressed that they felt a shift within their hearts and minds in how they conceptualized their role in maintaining racial inequities. They developed a new understanding of how they participated in inequitable racial hierarchical structures, and this led to a heightened sense of personal obligation and urgency to disrupt racist systems and structures.
One of the ways through which participants conceptualized disruption of racial inequity was through processes of personal reflection. Kathy described the reflective process as follows:

Revisiting me, myself, and my racial lens, and my… What’s my practice? I don’t like that word, but my practice around race… You know, it just forced me to look at myself in a deep way. Like not just within the school context with kids… but also the personal context within my friend group, personal context within the Caucus, personal context within my family, my romantic relationship, my deeper friendships. I mean, personally it forced me, or allowed me… to re-evaluate and really look at myself (Interview 2).

Collaborative learning allowed participants to come to new understandings about race that required them to engage in self-examination in light of their new learning. Kathy’s experience is reflective of that of many participants in the group, and particularly the white participants, who expressed that they feel a need to engage in a constant thought process about how they construct and replicate racial injustice through their relationships and their views.

Collaborative learning in the group extended beyond the completion of our inquiry group meetings. When asked to reflect on the inquiry group in January 2016, approximately one year after the group initially started, Ben reflected on how, since the inquiry group, he continues to center racial dynamics and structures in his thinking and analysis: “I’ve been thinking a lot lately about how I carry myself, my thoughts, and my perspectives around my privilege and such… I think this group did really help with making this change for me. I think having a space that I went to regularly and was challenged was helpful in creating this shift (Writing, January 2016). Ben connects his ongoing critical analysis about race with his participation in the inquiry group. The opportunity to meet regularly to reflect on racial justice led to a shift in how sees and assesses himself and the world, and how he chooses to act as a result.
Camille expressed that there is a sense of urgency and obligation for applying learning about race and systems of racism to one’s personal life and relationships. She said, “if we’re in this group and we’re saying that we’re going to do something, and that we’re committed to something, but yet if you can't go and talk to your parents about that, have that conversation with the people in your family, your uncle, your aunt, then what’s the point of even being here and saying something?” (Interview 2). Camille ties learning about systemic oppression to a personal obligation that extends throughout all facets of life. She implies that white participants have a particular obligation to take this learning into their lives and to disrupt and dismantle racism as a system of oppression at the local level.

White participants similarly felt this obligation, and struggled with developing an approach for talking about structural and systemic racism with family members. In a few meetings, Ben spoke about how the inquiry group had led him to grapple with the ways in which he applies his learning from the inquiry group to his family relationships. On the one hand, he felt an ethical imperative to explicitly identify racism within his family and to speak with them about the harm he believes this causes. Yet on the other hand, he felt hesitation to address the subject because he knows that he and his family come from very different sets of assumptions about and orientations toward race, and he struggles with knowing how to best talk with them. He reflected, “I feel like if I sit down and talk to my dad, it’s full of conflict because we’re nowhere near the same spot” (Final debrief). This sense of being in different philosophical places from his family made it difficult for Ben to decide upon how to address the harm he sees in racist lines of thinking, and in knowing how to speak with them in a way that would have the greatest effect.

White participants also reflected on width and breadth of their friendships, particularly across racial identity differences (see also Trepagnier, 2010). Miriam articulated that the group reminded her of the importance of seeking out friendships with people holding different race
identities and backgrounds. She saw these friendships as a way for widening her view on the world and for challenging herself to overcome blind spots. Miriam reflected, “over the course of the group, [I] have honored the experiences of people of color more than I ever have before. And have recognized that… friendships and connections with people who are not white are really important” (Interview 3). Through emphasizing the significance of personal networks, and not just professional networks, Miriam speaks to the significance of inquiry group learning for her personal life beyond the Caucus and her professional work as a teacher.

White participants in particular felt that the group supported a process of internal growth and transformation. As Camille articulates earlier in this section, participants of color observed these transformations in the white participants and felt that they were significant for supporting a racial justice movement that extends into personal and family lives. White participants echoed this commitment, and frequently spoke about the ways they sought to integrate their learning with family relationships and lives, and their friendships. White participants tended to express a profound commitment to bring their learning to bear on their relationships and outlooks. Warren (2010) discusses how personal transformation and the adoption of antiracist attitudes and worldviews among whites leads to a political break from dominant ideologies in white communities, and often “places them in tension with many other white people, often including their family, neighbors, and old friends” (p. 184). Similarly, white participants in this study expressed that they felt they straddled multiple communities as they adopted new worldviews and experienced shifts in their identities.

Thus, as white participants in this study engaged in personal transformation and liberation (Freire, 1970/2004), they simultaneously struggled to develop ways to effectively share their learning within their personal networks. They tended to feel that it was important to share their personal learning with significant familial and friend relationships in order to support their growth in antiracist worldviews. Personal transformation fed participants’ desires
to bring learning to wider audiences of personal relationships and communities extending beyond the inquiry group.

### 7.2 Professional Work

The previous section addressed how participants—and particularly white participants—engaged in highly personal processes of transformation through which they came to imagine new possibilities for the world and for their relationships with friends and family. Participants also brought their learning to bear on their work in schools. They were committed to Chappell et al.’s (2003) assertion: “By engaging with theorisations concerning the self and self-change, practitioners are better able to analyse their own assumptions, make explicit their theoretical position, and tailor their pedagogical practices accordingly” (p. 10). Participating teachers engaged in personal reflection that supported their reassessment, reconsideration and refinement of curricular and pedagogical practice in schools.

Leonardo (2009) asserts that positive transformation in schooling for racialized communities requires a re-imagining of the possibilities of urban schools and urban space. He advocates that this re-imagining involve “a dynamic and engaged cultural process” that is “a material act at its base and less a tinkering with ideas” (p. 164). Participants in this study abided by a similar notion of the central importance of re-imagining possibility, and applied this to their classrooms, relationships with students, and schools. They were committed to connecting learning from our group to their teaching practice.

During the study, there were shifts in how the teachers conceptualized their professional work with students and colleagues in schools. They engaged in many conversations about the impact of racist structures on the lives of their students, and were very committed to supporting students in navigating racist systems and structures, and to providing them with as many opportunities as possible. The teachers felt great responsibility for their
students and wanted to use teaching as a means of altering systems of power that harmed students of color in their schools.

Many white participants in the group experienced a shift in perspective on students holding racialized identities. They also came to see racial dynamics in their classrooms through a new lens. These white participants came to greater awareness of the ways that they participate in racialized dynamics and their students’ experiences of structural racism as a result of institutions of schooling. Participants of color often came to transformed views on how they felt about, dealt with, and confronted racial inequities in schools. They sometimes experienced a shifted view of their students, but most often came to think more deeply about how they would like to behave and what they would like to say in moments where racial prejudice or ignorance surfaces. The inquiry group allowed for all participants in the group, those holding both racialized and white identities, to think more deeply about how structures maintaining racial inequity shape their work as teachers in schools.

While the inquiry group was not explicitly dedicated to examining teachers’ work in schools, participants in the group frequently spoke about applying their inquiry and learning to their professional practice. In addressing activist organizing and teacher support work broadly, Miriam said to other participants in the group, “I feel like this inquiry group has helped me articulate what privilege and power and racism look like in school and in spaces that relate to school, outside of school” (Final debrief). Miriam also articulated privately to me: “I think it’s impacted how I’m reflecting on my classroom and why I – how I see what’s happening in my classroom and in my school as being part of this giant thing, and how all of the things that I might be doing that are racist or micro aggressions are contributing to a larger kind of thing” (Interview 3). Here, Miriam links her work in schools with her analysis of racism as a systemic structure of violence. She situates herself as “being part of this giant thing” (i.e. structural racism) and contributing to a system of racial violence and inequity through small actions of
which she previously was unaware. The inquiry group allowed teachers to build up an analysis of racial privilege and inequities that could be applied to their work in schools.

In our third interview, Zak spoke about how he saw changes in other participants over the course of meetings, and specific moments of enlightenment that held potential for shifting teachers’ work in schools and how they understood their students. He reported:

“[There was change in] how people construct how they view the students that they’re dealing with, how they treat them, and I think that there was a lot of revelatory of situations in our inquiry group where other people are like, ‘Oh,’ like [Ben] talking about, ‘I never thought about the fact that that kid ripped all that stuff [off the walls] was because, you know, he’s viewing me as like an oppressive authoritative figure trying to just control him’… I think having that essential analysis will produce those side conversations that need to happen, and that’s open now” (Interview 3).

Zac links a growing racial analysis to changes in how participants related with and understood the experiences of students and others in their schools. Through building up a strong foundation of critical analysis, teachers may grapple more concertedly and explicitly with professional patterns and problems.

Shifts in perspective on students and the work of schools also led to changes in how participants interacted with workplace colleagues. In section 4.3, Camille recounted her story about a personal shift in identifying and addressing white privilege within her workplace. She articulated that the inquiry group provided her with “a framework” that she could articulate to show her colleague “evidence” of white privilege. Learning new vocabulary through which to articulate her experiences to colleagues provided her with a mode through which she could “lay out facts” rather than becoming “more emotional and upset about things that were happening.” In this sense, Camille articulates the value of the inquiry group for enhancing her own sense of wellbeing and agency in her workplace.
Zak similarly mentioned a greater sense of ease in articulating the dynamics of white privilege to colleagues, and feeling enhanced agency in explicitly identifying and addressing implicit racism in his school. In the final debrief meeting, he tells the following story:

I was in the lunchroom with a white teacher who’s – she mentioned something about her white privilege, and she’s like, “so, I’ve always had a problem understanding what my culture is.” And I was like, “Well, because you normalize whiteness, you make whiteness normative.” And I was like, “so therefore, everything deviates from that,” I would have never done that in such a casual way? And I feel it was really casual! …and I stepped from it and I felt like “hells ya,” I mean that’s a victory… so that gave me more confidence. (Final debrief)

Zak entered the inquiry group with a highly theorized analysis of race and racism. He articulates the benefit of the group as primarily supporting his increased sense of confidence and empowerment in addressing racism within and beyond his workplace. Zak feels supported by fellow inquiry group members, knows that others are similarly willing to do the work in thinking through racism as a systemic structure of oppression, and feels more inclined to be vocal and forthright in the workplace about his racial analysis based on this sense of relational support from the group.

Zak’s increased sense of confidence and empowerment in addressing racist worldviews within his workplace is complicated, however, through having experienced a simultaneous growth in intolerance for those not engaged in a similar journey to learn about and critique structural racism. He said:

This group has made me feel a little bit more intolerant with people who aren’t willing to talk about this. I used to engage in arguments and now it’s like, “I’m not even going to waste my time.”…I definitely feel like I don’t have the patience to break down the historical context of structural racism to everybody… racism exists, okay let’s build off of that. (Final debrief)

Zak articulates that he feels increasing intolerance for the ignorance of others, and that he does not want to “break down the historical context of structural racism to everybody.” He wishes to engage with others starting from a similar set of assumptions, that “racism exists,” and feels
that once he can ascertain sharing this common basic assumption, then he is willing to commit himself to conversation. Camille agreed, saying that she felt “my energy is better spent elsewhere, because if you don’t even have that basic sort of human understanding of what I’m saying, then you know it just feels like it’s a waste, and then [I] just – [I] get upset, [I] get red, [my] blood pressure goes up and then [I] walk away pissed off” (Final debrief). Participants of color tended to articulate that the negative physical effects of spending energy addressing racism in the workplace sometimes outweighed the benefits. They tended to feel that energy should be strategically applied to building relationships with those holding a similar commitment to identifying and striving to dismantle structural racism.

Participants sometimes used the group space as an opportunity to discuss embedded barriers within schools to doing anti-racist work. They spoke about how addressing racism with colleagues in schools poses a particular challenge due to the emotional commitment teachers might feel for their students and the anger that racist attitudes among colleagues incites in them personally, which can negatively impact their relationships and the school climate. Miriam articulated, “I think it has become more difficult actually for me to engage with people I work with because it’s so personal” (Final debrief).

Corey expressed anger at feeling that he is expected to soothe white liberal egos within his predominantly white private school workplace: “talking about it [i.e. racism] at work feels such – I feel so taken advantage of. It’s like my emotional labor, which you choose to acknowledge so you can pat me on the back and say, ‘Thank you’.” Expressing increased hesitation to be vocal about issues surrounding racism in his workplace, Corey states that in his school white school leaders are ultimately the people who determine what is and isn’t deemed racist, and that he feels disheartened and angry at being asked to voice opinions on their command in order to soothe egos and support the school ethos of liberal white antiracism.
These varied experiences show that participants saw their professional lives as deeply entwined with both their personal lives and their work as education activists and organizers. They experienced shifts in how they understood the lives and experiences of students and colleagues through their learning in the inquiry group. Collaborative learning also triggered changes in how they understood their work in schools. These shifts did not always translate smoothly into their workplaces, and sometimes participants encountered workplace barriers that led to a sense of exclusion, or felt personal anger at how their schools uncritically engaged racist structures and practices.

Scholar bell hooks (2003) argues that love is fundamental to the work of teachers hoping to transform their classrooms, schools, and the lives of students. She writes: “Love in the classroom prepares teachers and students to open our minds and hearts. It is the foundation on which every learning community can be created… Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us” (p. 137). If we are to take hooks seriously, and put her assertion that love is necessary for transformed classrooms into conversation with Leonardo’s support for a radical re-imagining of the potential for schools and schooling, then we may come to see that a radical re-imagining of schooling requires teachers to enter with their hearts engaged in imaginative and loving practice that is rooted in a transformed critical perspective on the nature of hegemony and relations of power.

7.3 Organizing and the Organization

Han (2014) points out that mobilizing around specific issues frequently leads to unintended effects that shift the structure and work of the activist organization. These organizational shifts might be seen as bound up in both individual and organizational learning. The learning of people within an organization leads to shifts in organizational perspectives,
cultures, areas of emphasis, framing of issues, longevity, and boundaries (see Davis, McAdam, Scott & Zald, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

Robnett (2002) argues that meaning and structure in social movements are mutually constituted, in that the state and movements shape the production of meaning and structural contexts. This argument might also be extended to conceptualizing the role of learning within organizations, such that people and organizations mutually constitute the meaning and structural contexts of action (Wenger, 1998). This mutual constitution is also intimately connected to broader contextual and policy factors shaping the environment. Similarly, movement context intimately shaped the ways in which participants in my study came to understand structural racism (for example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement and histories of the civil rights movement had great impact on the knowledge and awareness of members), just as their perspectives were shaped by the organizational context (for example, the Caucus’ previous ignoring of racial issues impacted the initial comfort participants felt with applying the topic to the work of the broader organization). Participants were shaped by the policy, movement, and social contexts in which their inquiry and work was situated. However, their agentive work in shaping broader contexts is of particular interest and salience to this research.

Wenger (1998) asserts that organizations are both designed and emergent. Organizations are initially designed with explicit goals and purposes in mind, and their structures reflect these intentions. However, communities of practice within the organization determine their own meaning for the organization, and through this constitute their own areas of emphasis, aspirations, and purposes. This leads to shifts in the “fields of negotiability” in the organization, as things that were not previously negotiable are made newly negotiable (Wenger, 1998). Organizations thus remain both intact and flexible to the perspectives, values, and needs of members.
In the study, I found that participants reported diffusion into four main organizational realms. First, some participants experienced perspective change regarding their roles within the Caucus organization. Second, participants expressed that they came to engage in relationships with other members of the Caucus in new ways. Third, there appeared to be tangible organizational change that resulted from the work and thinking of the inquiry group. And finally, participants reported a shift in the broader organizational mission and vision of the Caucus as a result of collaborative learning in the group.

**Role Perspective Change**

Klatch (2002) indicates that several internal factors shape the political consciousness, commitment, and organizational lives of individual members of a social movement. She points out that peers play a key role in internal member education, through pushing forward each other’s beliefs and validating the critical interrogation and learning process. The inquiry group provided a space where members could think more deeply about their personal goals for the Caucus, and how they saw their role in the organization. For a few participants who came to the inquiry group with a sense that they were only peripherally involved, the group strengthened their commitment to the broader organization and helped them see how their strengths fit into the organization more broadly.

Miriam felt a shift in her relationship to the Caucus through her involvement in the inquiry group. Seven months after the meetings concluded, she wrote: “This inquiry group moved me to do a lot of things. One, get involved in the caucus deeply. This was my jumping in point… [it] impacted my personal life in that it impacted where I spend my time. In that respect, it has impacted how I perceive myself as an organizer (I take that identity on now, I had to…)” (Writing, Jan 2016). Her work in the inquiry group moved her from being a peripheral member of the organization to embedding herself deeply within its work over the
year following the completion of inquiry group meetings. Following the completion of the inquiry group, she chose to take on an explicit identity as an organizer.

The shift in allegiance to the Caucus and organizing identity was most extreme for Zak. He entered the inquiry group with a soft sense of alliance to the Caucus and commitment to its social justice unionist mission, and expressed a hesitation to fully embed himself within the organization. His hesitation stemmed from an observation that the Caucus was not explicitly grappling with issues around race, nor explicitly and consistently framing its work within the struggle for racial equity. His work in the inquiry group contributed to his feeling recognized within the organization: “I feel like I’m valued for my knowledge and my understanding of structural racism” (Interview 3). This, combined with his observation that others in the organization were similarly committed to the often difficult and uncomfortable work of taking up a racial justice analysis, led him to build a sense of trust for the other group members and for the organization more broadly. In this sense, the inquiry group supported him in building a stronger relationship with the Caucus, which he then could build upon in order to strengthen the relationship between the Caucus and local African American communities.

The inquiry group helped Zak identify his specific role as a Caucus organizer. He reflected, “I feel this has given me my space within the Caucus, that it’s defined my purpose within the Caucus, and I think that it has been highly effective because there’s an acknowledgment now [among] leadership too of the need to make this central to our analysis, and also an acknowledgement as the biggest barrier to our organization” (Interview 3). Zak learned through the group that his commitment to racial justice was shared by other members of the Caucus leadership, and he came to experience enhanced commitment both to framing the Caucus’ work as countering systems of racial oppression, and to partnering and building trust with local African American communities.
Organizational Relationships

Participants experienced shifts in perspectives on their relationships with other members of the organization while attending the inquiry group. For some, this involved building a more substantial understanding of how relationships in community settings can support equitable and democratic conversations, while for others the group helped strengthen their confidence in addressing racism in interpersonal organizational spaces. All members felt that the group allowed them to develop deeper relationships with other members of the organization that would support their organizing practice.

Miriam expressed that her involvement in the group taught her what equitable conversation in community settings looks and feels like, and informed a new perspective on how pedagogical elements might support equity in group relational dynamics. She wrote: “My understanding of facilitation and being in community mostly comes from this inquiry group. It was very powerful and I learned a lot about how to be in conversation with others around this work. It was a process and I appreciated that” (Writing, January, 2016). Miriam articulates that the group was formative for her in understanding how pedagogical elements like facilitation can support equity in conversation in groups. She expresses that these provided new insights into how the process of facilitating groups can support a democratic community space (for more on democracy in social movements, see della Porta, 2009b). Miriam articulates that the group taught her not just content knowledge about the topic itself, but also skills for how to approach relationships with others while in learning communities together.

For Josh, significant relational learning in the group centered on refining techniques for navigating conversations when others carry different assumptions and worldviews. He said, “I think the clarity in terms of the vision and the clarity in terms of the self-work allow me to be more strategic, and in thinking about how do I address these issues when they come up interpersonally” (Interview 3). Josh articulates that the group helped him engage in self-
reflection and the collaborative refinement of a common vision of racial justice that could inform his approach to conversations with others who might hold different grounding ideologies and assumptions. He found the group useful for thinking through how to navigate interpersonal problems with others in the organization.

The participants tended to agree that the group was useful for strengthening their relationships with each other, and saw this as supporting the growth of relationships within the broader organization. Zak said, “I definitely felt like I have built deeper relationships with most of the people in the inquiry group. I feel more - just more safe speaking on these issues within the Caucus” (Interview 3). Camille also shared Zak’s view that relationships were deepened through the inquiry group, and saw this deepening of the bonds and trust between individual group members as supporting her sense of confidence in explicitly identifying and pushing back against racist tones in the broader organization. She said, “I feel that being in this space has given me more of a voice and… not backing down if someone doesn’t quite agree with me, or doesn’t see the relevance of what I’m saying. And before this, I would have… been a little bit more passive if someone didn’t quite agree” (Final debrief). Camille follows this statement up with a powerful example of how she chose to respond to implicit racism from a white man during a Caucus meeting, and her confidence that other group members to back her up.

Relationships allowed for the building of a shared analysis and vision of racial justice alongside the development of significant relationships that could support members in applying their learning and analysis to the broader organization. This aligns with Tatum’s (2003) observation that “a genuine commitment to interrupting racism is a long-term commitment” (p. 205). She emphasizes the need for “a community of support. We all need community to give us energy, to strengthen our voices, and to offer constructive criticism when we stray off course” (p. 205). Participants in my study found that they were able to form a critical
community of support with other members of the inquiry group, and that this allowed them to continue bringing their work to the broader organization well beyond the official end of the inquiry group. As I write this, most participants (with the exception of Mary) continue to maintain close contact and to see each other as vital sources of support as they work within the Caucus to support the continued development of antiracist lenses and action.

Organizational Structure

Robnett (2002) comments, “there has been relatively little complex analysis of how, exactly, movements’ particular internal processes interact with external political opportunities, and even less analysis of the interaction with dominant cultural contexts” (p. 290). Here, Robnett points to the need for a deepened understanding of the relationship between internal movement processes, movement organizations, and discourses extending beyond the movement. While this project did not examine the effect of inquiry on contexts beyond the organization, I believe Robnett’s comment might also be applied to examining the influence of perspectival change on organizational work and practice. This section provides some insight into how inquiry group members perceived the effect of their work on the broader organization.

Learning within the group, both regarding relationships and constructing a shared analysis of structural racism, seeped out to create changes within the Caucus in a variety of ways. Kathy describes this diffusion of learning with excitement:

I feel like this is huge… this has shaped the Caucus’s work over the last six months. I really do, very very very much because it is reverberating in every Caucus space that I’ve been in. And I think we’ve – I mean it’s shaped book groups… it helped shape the TAG Conference, it shaped the Central PD thing, it shaped conversations that we have and meetings that we have nothing to do with. (Final debrief)
Kathy articulates that the work of the group was “reverberating in every Caucus space” that she had been in, through tangible events as well as a fundamental ideological perspective and vision shift that deeply shaped the organizational structure, strategy, framing, and vision.

Inquiry group ideas were sometimes made tangible through altering the formation of existing events and actions. For example, during an inquiry group meeting, Miriam raised the idea of focusing the yearly summer book clubs organized and sponsored by the Caucus on issues of race and racism. This idea was quickly applied to shaping the theme for the 2015 book club, and Miriam was quickly enlisted to help organize this event for the Caucus. Other tangible actions resulting from the inquiry group included running professional development workshops for teachers within and beyond the organization on structural racism, and designing social events with intentional thoughtfulness about how to make events accessible, inclusive and comfortable for people from varied cultural and racial backgrounds. Members put explicit thoughtfulness into factors such as event location, music, food, childcare, and décor, due to points raised and emphasized in inquiry group meetings.

The inquiry group also strongly supported the development of an explicit position paper outlining the Caucus’ stance on racial justice, and the possibility for forming a racial justice committee. Both ideas were made tangible by people who had not actually taken part in the inquiry group, but who strongly aligned with the work of the group. These individuals worked to support the formation of the racial justice committee and the position paper shortly after the inquiry group meetings ended. How might we understand the connections between the inquiry group and these organizational developments? It is impossible to claim that the formation of the statement and the committee were a direct result of the inquiry group. This is particularly the case because at the time of the group’s meetings there was substantial national discussion about racial justice largely centered on the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the increased national attention to the murder of young African Americans by white police
officers. In many ways, conversations about race were “in the air” at the time of our inquiry group. I believe, though, that we might also understand the work of the inquiry group as supporting the centering of a racial justice analysis and perspective within the organization, and that this created enhanced space and opportunity for actions supporting racial justice within the organization.

The inquiry group grappled with a range of questions about the connections between racial justice and educational organizing. Participants asked: How does racial justice connect with education organizing work? What is our vision and mission as it relates to racial justice? How can we engage in organizing that meets the needs of racially diverse communities? How can we better support teachers of color in the district? What are common goals that the organization shares with local communities of color? Fundamental to asking these questions was an orientation that centered racial justice within the analysis of problems facing the district and international trends toward austerity in education more broadly. Participants came to consensus that it was necessary for the Caucus to maintain a central focus on racial justice in order to strengthen the organization’s work internally and within the local community — and in order to “do the right thing.” Through engaging deeply with questions about the applicability of a critical race analysis to the Caucus’ work, participants created a framework for a driving vision for the broader organization, which seeped out to shape the organization through informal conversations between organization members, formal venues such as in meetings and events, strengthened relationships and approaches to working through interpersonal differences, and a common defined understanding of the real lived effects of racism on the lives of people of color such as families, students and teachers in the district.

In many ways, the group centered on developing a common analysis of racism and racial justice that could be applied to the Caucus’ long-term work and focus. Corey articulated, “I think that the growth of the people in this group anyway has been about expanding our lens,
to not just think about that immediate education protest movements, to think more about a
long-time strategy” (Interview 3). The idea that engagement in learning involves a shift in
conceptualization of a common issue, which diffuses out to inform long-term strategy, centers
learning as a means for triggering a shift in worldviews (for more on the significance of
worldview change, see Boler & Zembylas, 2003). This shift was believed to alter
organizational work in turn. In this sense, participants’ engagement in the group supported a
learning process that involved significant personal internal growth as well as support for the
longevity and strengthened analysis, vision, and organizing work of the organization.

7.4 Summary and Discussion

How [adult learners] come to define or refine definitions of self and how they
choose to take up literacy in their personal, work, and family lives are grounded in
and renegotiated against the backdrop of [their] roles and responsibilities; within
the places in which they learn and use literacy; and in their own sense of self, ability,
and possibility for learning (Gadsden, 2007, p. 278).

Teachers who engage in learning about systemic injustice, with the intent to trigger
change in particular realms —whether those realms include a teacher organization, the
classroom, or the school— find that learning cannot be isolated to any one particular location.
In this chapter, I have shown that participants who engaged in collaborative learning about
racial justice and inequity in an inquiry group space reported growing an enhanced sense of
power through the collective process of reflecting upon and making sense of structural racism.
They expressed experiencing deep shifts in their personal viewpoints and analysis, a sense of
support from other teacher activists, and their perspective on personal roles within the broader
organization as a result of this learning.

Both individually and together, participants described feeling a sense of urgency and a
call to act upon their learning within the different realms of their personal and professional
lives. This call to action appeared to shape participants’—and particularly white
participants’—relationships with family and friends. It also reportedly shaped the ways participants interacted with colleagues, students, and their workplace, including their curricular and pedagogical choices and their relational connections. Participants described striving to apply their learning to the broader activist organization in which their inquiry work was situated, and in so doing, having triggered changes that extended deeply into organizational structure, significant relationships between organization leaders, and their view of personal roles within the organization. Participant learning appeared to diffuse into the Caucus in ways that were both immediate and long-term. Diffusion was immediate through the design and implementation of campaigns that directly extended from the work of our inquiry group. And diffusion was long-term through its shaping of the relationships and knowledge of participating members, and the way that they approached their organizing work and relationships.

The opportunity to vocalize and deeply engage with assumptions and ideas about race, racism and racial justice appeared to nourish a sense of agency among participants. They seemed to grow a sense of agency in their intellectual and emotional journeys to understand structural injustice, as well as in their commitment to making real and lasting change within the organization. Participants expressed commitment to sustaining inquiry beyond the completion of the group— they initially came together to make sense of structural racism, but over time became increasingly committed to producing a sense of personal uncertainty through their antiracist inquiry work. Participants individually and together took up Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s (2009) notion of an inquiry stance, which “involves a continual process of making current arrangements problematic; questioning the ways knowledge and practice are constructed, evaluated, and used; and assuming that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change” (p. 121). Over time, participants appeared to come to the understanding that inquiry is not just a way to think,
but the development of a critical and relationally-grounded approach to confronting racism within their personal lives, workplaces, and their broader activist organization. This inquiry approach diffused out to shape the form, function, and perspective of their broader activist organization.
CHAPTER 8: Conclusion and Implications

It’s the conversation that we had in this room, and holding ourselves... myself, to that commitment to the people who are in this room, so that we may extend it on to others. So I’m thinking about that personal commitment and how much work that entails, and how I need to take that on with a loving spirit (Corey, Final debrief).

[This group has reinforced] this whole concept of social learning, and how learning is social activity, and just thinking deeper about group dynamics and how to ask those critical questions... that facilitate growth but not alienation... And that’s about leadership development too, so I need to think about that deeper. Plus, this inquiry group has just helped me stop, think, and reflect on so many different levels about myself, and my role, and my relationship with the other nine people, that was invaluable (Kathy, Interview 3).

My search for emancipatory knowledge over the years has made me realize that ideas are always communally wrought, not privately owned (Mohanty, 2003, p. 1)

Gadsden (2008) argues that it is important to uncover “the process by which emerging and practicing teachers come to know what they know about the content and nature of classroom interactions and the students, families, and communities whom they support” (p. 41). This study has responded to Gadsden’s call for research on teacher learning, and has built understanding about the role of collaborative inquiry in teachers’ learning and how learning can shape teachers’ perceptions of broader social dynamics, systems, and structures—including those that intimately shape the lives of their activist organizations, students, and local families and communities.

This dissertation has built on and brought together in a new way the scholarship on critical social theory in racism and feminism, teachers’ learning communities, social movement learning, and critical literacy studies. The study has shown that a collaborative and inquiry-based professional learning methodology enabled a racially and gender diverse group of teachers to make greater sense of their personal and collective experiences of racism; to connect their personal experiences and analysis of racism with broader social institutions,
structures and systems perpetuating racism; and to initiate strategies to challenge systemic racism in their social contexts in relationally-grounded, tangible and constructive ways. Teachers reported that engaging with other teachers, and especially those holding identities different from their own, in a context where they were supported, challenged and valued, enabled them to gain new perspectives on their social context and to see their encounters with others and with institutions as embedded within broader socio-political and economic systems.

This study has shown that alterations in teachers’ worldview can enable teachers to challenge discriminatory and prejudicial systems within their professional and activist work. Through dedicated and concerted collaboration and inquiry, participants were able to develop new and more elaborated worldviews over time on the issue of structural racism and its permeation into social institutions like schools and their social movement-embedded work within teacher-led activist organizations. These worldview shifts are nurtured and sustained by collaboration in the learning process with similar-minded others. Through coming together to make sense of structural racism and to design approaches for addressing this phenomenon within their activist organizing practice, participants were able to develop new constructive and effective strategies for addressing prejudice in collaborative—and, as Corey points out at the chapter outset, perhaps even loving—ways. This study has found that teachers’ social justice learning holds potential for guiding their work in multiple realms: their activist organizations, where they seek to promote an equitable and just education system; the classroom and teachers’ curricular and pedagogical work with students; and their collaborative work with other educators.

This study has found that teacher learning is dependent upon pedagogical processes and relationships within the learning process. Inquiry-based collaboration with others on projects where the goal is to build a common mission, vision and project, and where there is diversity among membership in race, gender and a range of experiences with prejudice and
discrimination, holds great potential for triggering teacher learning and addressing social justice issues within and beyond activist organizations and schools. Social justice learning that is primarily grounded in inquiry and in positive, supportive and nurturing relationships in learning organizations, provides opportunity for teachers to explore and become aware of their own prejudices and assumptions, of those in their social context, and to begin to develop strategies to address and challenge these prejudices in new, thoughtful and collaborative ways.


In Chapter 1, I presented a new theory of collaborative learning composed of four interconnected components: individual learning, pedagogy, relationships, and diffusion (see Figure 1.1). This dissertation argues that collaborative learning, defined as “the collective and social search for knowledge and transformation” (Chapter 1), is a process of collective sense-making rooted in concerted and committed social participation, and personal and collective transformation.

The four data analysis chapters have shown the following. Teachers engaged literacy “texts” such as reading and writing, and listening and speaking, to inform their own and others’ learning in the group. Through sharing and reflecting upon their experiences, histories, knowledge and outside resources, participants developed stronger, tighter and more trusting relationships with each other over time. Relationship development was complex, and relational tools like politeness, humor and conflict mediated relationships and simultaneously supported and limited the development of trust, which in turn shaped the nature and extent of the group’s collaborative learning experiences. The employment of diverse pedagogical techniques created opportunity for participants to grow relationships with each other and engage in personal and group learning.
As a result of these collective learning experiences, participants reported significant alteration in their practice in multiple realms that extended well beyond the group, including within their personal, professional, and organizational work and lives. In summary, collaborative learning involves a mutually reliant and interconnected relationship between learning, pedagogy, relationships and diffusion—these work together and are inseparable in producing learning and knowledge generation that triggers shifts in personal worldviews, approaches to relationships and communication, and the development of new practical techniques for sharing learning with wider audiences.

There are several recurring and significant themes within the data chapters. These themes draw attention to a number of inherent complexities within collaborative learning. First, the identity-based differences inherent within multiracial learning opportunities bring complexity and richness to collaborative learning. Second, inquiry and action are connected, recursive, and mutually supporting phenomena within collaborative learning opportunities. And third, collaborative learning involves some risk to participants, and thus they must be willing to engage in taking calculated risks in order to maximize the learning opportunities in and for the group.

**Identity-Based Complexities in Multiracial Learning**

Social movements require broad-based efforts to promote gradual social change when striving to create a world transformed towards greater equity and justice from one structured by socialized identities (Butler, 1990; Holt, 2000; Omi & Winant, 1994) and socio-political systems steeped in oppressive relationships across identity-based differences (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/Ability, etc.) (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hancock, 2016; Lorde, 1984; Mohanty, 2003). Historically, change agent groups have worked to achieve positive social progress from varied directions, with some advocating separatism and others advocating
alliance and partnership across identity differences. If we are to take seriously the proposition that long-term change rooted in equity and justice across identity lines is necessary and possible, then multiracial, collaborative and partnered learning spaces pose one solution for nurturing radical alliances, and equity, justice and care across distinct identities. However, great skill, humility and commitment is necessary for recognizing and responding to the sometimes very painful emotions and experiences raised among those who have experienced social marginalization within this collaborative work (see Bannerji, 1995).

The process of working and learning collaboratively across race and gender was not without difficulty. Participants sometimes felt anger at systems and structures in which others in the group were implicated through their identities, life experiences, and behaviors. They also sometimes felt anger and irritation at the behaviors and communication styles of others, and struggled with whether and how to communicate these feelings. Sometimes strong emotions were converted into academic and intellectual discourse, such as through long intellectual monologues about the harm caused by systems of racial oppression. Participants also engaged humor and politeness to navigate, dismiss or distract from certain trails of thinking and conversation. There were struggles in group dynamics, with some people taking up more space than others, and this space was frequently accepted or problematized based on the space-taker’s racial and gender identity. And, there were ongoing barriers to forming trusting relationships—and particularly across racial identity differences.

But participants, by their behavior, their continued attendance, and through their ongoing communications with each other and myself, demonstrated that they were committed to the group and strove to overcome these barriers and differences. They brought humility, patience, commitment, and even love, to their work together. These commitments supported their collective learning and work as a group, even when they encountered barriers posed by identity-based difference. From this, we can discern that fundamental to successful
collaborative learning across intersecting identities is a commitment to the core human value of each other and their commitment—or at least openness—to addressing a common cause. In every case, reports by group members indicated that whatever their starting point in understanding and wanting to challenge racism, they each grew in their commitment to growing understanding and empathy for others in the group; toward being able to place these experiences in their social, cultural and systemic context; and in their ability to strategize around their future engagements with racist systems and structures.

Equally necessary was self-reflection and humility, and especially among whites. Engaging in and communicating ongoing self-analysis about how one participates in and benefits from systems of oppression allowed whites to access the experiences, stories, and pain expressed by members of color. And, it also helped people of color in the group to build a sense of trust that whites were committed to racial justice work. Humility and commitment to critical self-examination among whites supported the group in using pedagogical processes to their advantage both in building deeper relationships and in learning from each other’s experience. It also supported the group in strategizing and implementing effective techniques for diffusing learning to formal organizational realms extending beyond the group. From this, we might learn that those holding identity-based privilege must bring humility and commitment to self-growth in order to support multiracial coalitions and collaborations.

**Inquiry and Action as Mutually Supporting**

Gadsden (2007) identifies the “literacy classroom” as a learning context that extends well beyond traditional notions of school and the learning space, taking form as “an open context, not bound by walls which shape and form thinking, but as spaces in which meaning is constructed and explored” (p. 293). Teachers’ collaboration and collective inquiry might be understood as a literacy practice through which new views on the world and new meanings are
grappled with, deconstructed and then reconstructed. In this space of literacy development and enactment, teachers collectively grapple with questions that hold significance to them, and come to new insights and views on themselves, their practice, and the world.

Here, inquiry and action are interconnected and mutually supporting. Dialogic inquiry supports reflection and allows for the humanizing work of taking experimental and reflective action (hooks, 1989). This praxis (Freire, 1970/2004), which is rooted in interconnected reflection and action, becomes a process of developing and honing new claims to knowledge. In this sense, new knowledge claims, which are generated through inquiry and action, are fundamentally based in collective dialogue and reflection (Collins, 2000). Or, as Mohanty (2003) points out at the outset of this chapter, emancipatory knowledge is bound up in processes of collective and collaborative knowledge generation.

This dissertation shows that the perceived tension between inquiry and action is rooted in a false dichotomy. Introspection, inquiry, and positive action to implement learning, work together to directly and tangibly support teachers’ work and practice within their teacher organization, workplaces, and lives. Intellectual inquiry cannot be separated from action and practice in the world. Learning is an integral part of creating change within teachers’ perspectives/outlooks on the possibilities of the work they do, the experiences of their students, and the work of their organizations.

**Risky Learning**

Robnett (2002) points out that members of social movements frequently hold divergent—and sometimes conflicting—perspectives and identities, and that flexibility is necessary for the sustainability of social movements over time. But, Robnett’s point raises a new question: What personal elements allow people and groups to reformulate their identities and perspectives when working together? Tatum (2003) offers some insight, stating that
meaningful dialogue and self-reflection require a “leap of faith” (p. 200). I argue that fundamental to this leap of faith in the reformulation of identity and perspective is the readiness and willingness to take risk.

Risk was woven throughout all aspects of the inquiry group experience. Teachers took risks in their learning, relationships, and their engagement in new pedagogical forms. They opened themselves to the viewpoints of others and in so doing risked their own identities—their worldviews, beliefs, and historical experiences. They took risks in relationships through choosing to trust one another, even when this was difficult, and often across frequently divisive identity lines—and particularly race. They trusted others to back them up in risky—and sometimes racially contentious—spaces that extended beyond the inquiry group.

The teachers also took pedagogical risks. They did their best to engage in reading, writing, listening and speaking that was not always comfortable, but that they saw as contributing to their personal and collective growth. They were sometimes uncomfortable with the loose facilitation of the group and the frequent lack of a specific and identified “leader.” However, they used pedagogical spaces of uncertainty to create space for relationship growth and learning. Teachers also took risks in diffusing their learning beyond the inquiry group context. Some participants applied their learning to establishing new modes of communication with family, others thought deeply about the application of their learning to their classroom practice and work with students, and all participants expressed commitment to applying group learning to new structural developments in the Caucus.

Underlying all of these examples is the notion that in order for groups to come together to engage in deep and meaningful collaboration and learning, group members must take risks within themselves and in extending their own levels and realms of comfort (for more on the pedagogical value of discomfort, see Boler & Zembylas, 2003; Gadsden, Jacobs, Peterman, Mostafa & Gioia, 2014).
8.2 Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Across educational research, policy and practice there is an enduring stated commitment to realizing social justice ideals. Common social justice ideals include equity of opportunity and outcomes, and the development of an intellectually engaged citizenry. However, there are embedded barriers to realizing these ideals both within the structures and processes governing education, and the perspectives and values of the citizens—including students—engaged in these structures and processes. Teachers have significant impact in the implementation of social justice values in education, through their pedagogical and curricular work; their work with students; their structured and casual encounters with each other; and their involvement in formal institutions such as their political and professional organizations. Teachers surely play a significant role in realizing social justice ideals within education. Based on the work in this study, I offer several implications for research, policy, and practice.

Implications for Research

The dissertation builds on scholarship in progressive social theories of racism and feminism, teachers’ learning communities, social movement learning, and critical literacy studies, and it holds implication for these areas and research on teacher education. Consistent with Gadsden (2008), further research is necessary into how teachers learn and what they already know about student, families and communities. This study has shown that teachers’ intentional engagement in collaborative inquiry can deepen their understandings of the impact of broader social structures on local communities, and support teachers in developing new communication, relational and pedagogical skills with students and families. Ladson-Billings (2009) points to the potential for teachers of all backgrounds, racial identities and cultural identities to learn to effectively teach students from diverse racial and economic identities and backgrounds. This study presents inquiry-based collaborative learning as holding great
possibility for supporting teachers in developing and enhancing critical skills for understanding what factors shape and influence the lives of their students, and for supporting the ongoing development of their practice. Future research is needed to examine how teachers take inquiry-based learning about social justice issues like structural racism into their work in schools. Furthermore, more research is needed to examine how inquiry-based collaborative learning about timely social justice issues can support teachers’ leadership development at all stages of the professional career and learning trajectory, and what structures can be embedded within schools, districts, and teacher organizations to support such professional learning.

This study has also shown that there is significant connection between the pedagogical structure of learning groups (i.e. professional development) for teachers, and the growth of relationships between participating teachers. Learning is wrapped up in the pedagogical processes and relationships of the group, and this finding indicates that more work needs to be done to examine the relationship between learning, pedagogy and participant relationships in diverse learning settings. In particular, the following questions might continue to be pursued: Which relational aspects support group learning, and how? Which pose barriers, and how? How does pedagogy inform relationship-development, and vice-versa? What pedagogical designs best support learning? What pedagogical designs best support relationship-development?

This study has examined a group of similar-minded teachers who came together to learn about structural racism. Although participants held different experiences with and understandings about the form and function of racism within society, all participants believed that racism and structural racism exist, and all participants displayed respect for the experiences and values of others. It will strengthen the theory of collaborative learning proposed in this dissertation to apply the model to participants who hold a more disparate set of beliefs at the outset of the study, to examine the strengths and gaps within the proposed
theory, and to account for wider variation in teacher identities, values and beliefs, and experiences.

**Implications for Policy**

National American education policies, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, have reinforced the notion that the best and most efficient measure of student learning and teacher quality is students’ performance on standardized tests, measured and compared over time. The trend toward prioritizing standardized testing within public schooling is deeply entrenched within many states, resulting in the tendency to primarily devote teachers’ professional development opportunities to concerns focused on raising students’ test scores, rather than what might be seen as more broad-based and/or locally responsive professional development designs and approaches (Hursh 2004; Ravitch, 2010, 2013).

This study joins a substantial body of already-existing research (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016; Ghiso, Campano & Simon, 2013; Lieberman, 2000) in recommending inquiry-based professional development as an effective literacy-based approach for supporting teacher learning and development. Inquiry-based professional development might be understood as a model of critical professional development (see Kohli, Picower, Martinez & Oritz, 2015) that provides opportunity for teachers to move beyond the current primary focus on student test scores and develop more critical and holistic approaches to curriculum and pedagogical design and measures of student success.

National, district and state policies can support inquiry-based collaborative learning and professional development ventures through providing attention, time, resources and space for such initiatives. This study has shown that collaborative learning provides significant opportunity for teachers to experiment with pedagogy, grow tighter and deeper relationships with colleagues, and engage in meaningful knowledge generation processes. Practitioner
learning in inquiry-based spaces is unique in that it is primarily dedicated to the queries and concerns generated by teachers themselves. This provides teachers with space to explore questions from their practice and to strengthen realms particular to individual teachers’ work and needs. Knowledge might be applied to strengthening the following realms: teachers’ work with students, curriculum and pedagogical design, relationships with colleagues in school, and, the design of new effective school structures to meet needs of students and local families and communities.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Implications for Organizational Practice}

The Caucus is an activist political organization with a strong constituent of teachers interested in thinking more deeply about the influence of racial dynamics and racist systems and structures. At the outset of this study, many teachers were ready and willing to engage in deep thought about structural racism and to apply this thinking to the work of the organization. However, not all teachers in the Caucus were open to such thinking and analysis, and there was initial push-back within some parts of the organization to running this inquiry group publicly. People were initially concerned that a group examining and sharing learning about structural racism and its significance for the organization’s practice was “airing dirty laundry” and they preferred that it was kept private and behind closed doors. Other people felt that it was important to make this thinking and labor public, both in order to show that the organization was engaged in critical antiracist work, and to directly engage with and address problems in the organization. Based on this experience as a facilitator of a somewhat initially contentious inquiry group, I recommend that organizations desiring to run a similar activity

\textsuperscript{15} The “success” of inquiry groups relies in part on the thoughtful and skilled design and facilitation of groups, and the voluntary participation of practitioners. I do not recommend that this is a mandated professional development opportunity (for more on the dangers of “contrived collegiality” generated through mandated professional development, see Hargreaves, 1991).
engage in thoughtful reflection on the desired level of publicity for this work, and gather a substantial group of strong supporters.

This study finds that concerted and focused inquiry into social justice issues such as structural racism among small groups of organization members holds potential for influencing the broader work of teachers’ organizations. The nine teachers in this study applied their learning to the broader organization, and this application was reported to lead to changes in the form, structure and work of the organization in ways that extended beyond the inquiry group (see also Chapter 7). More specifically, the teachers reported that following the end of the study, the Caucus began to shift its central framing of neoliberalism as the core problem facing public education to incorporate a new critical framing of legacies of racism and neoliberalism as mutually bound together in creating patterns of systemic inequity. In this sense, the Caucus was reported to shift its frame analysis (see Goffman, 1974; Snow & Soule, 2010) as a result of the intellectual work of this inquiry group. Based on participants’ reporting of changes in form, focus and structure in the broader organization, I recommend that organizations remain flexible in their framing of contextual problems and proposed organizational solutions in order to responsively incorporate and benefit from participants’ collective sense-making.

For a brief summary of recommendations for the Caucus based on findings from this study, please refer to Appendix D. This document was produced for the Caucus in August 2015, and provides a summary of major findings to guide the racial justice work of the organization. The document outlines recommendations for three realms within the organization: people and relationships; vision and mission; and, project and campaigns. Within each realm, I identify specific questions to ground ongoing organizational consideration—these might be use to shape formal inquiry, or they might be applied as a check-point within the organization to see if it is meeting racial justice goals. I also provide a list of suggested actions for each realm—these ideas were generated by the inquiry group, and may be applied
to strengthening organizational work in addressing, confronting, and dismantling racism within organizational and social systems and structures.
APPENDIX A: Reading List for Inquiry Group

Participants were assigned specific short texts to read prior to each of the first four meetings. They were provided with digital and sometimes also paper copies of the texts. In the first two sessions, the texts were intended to provide an introduction and overview of scholarly and activist definitions of race, racism and structural racism. Texts in the third and fourth sessions were chosen to complement the conversations, ideas and interests that had emerged in previous inquiry group meetings. When longer books were integrated into the reading list, participants were provided with a small portion of the text in order to keep the reading amount manageable.

Inquiry Group Meetings 1 and 2


Inquiry Group Meeting 3

Maya Wiley and Ai-jen Poo on strategy and caring, criteria for working toward racial justice. (2012). In Critical issues forum: Mobilizing community power to address structural racism. Washington, DC.


Talking about structural racialization and community organizing with Deepak Bhargava and john powell. (2012). In Critical issues forum: Mobilizing community power to address structural racism (Vol. 4, pp. 26–30). Washington, DC.

Inquiry Group Meeting 4


APPENDIX B: Writing Reflection Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assigned</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Responses Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| March 14, 2015 (Emailed) | • What is "racism?"  
• What is "structural racism?"  
• What are some questions that you have about these ideas? What questions do you have for our inquiry group?  
• What personal experiences have you had that are connected to these ideas, and that you feel comfortable sharing with our group? | Ben Camille         |
| March 28, 2015 (Emailed) | • What do you think our group can do to help support the Caucus of Working Educators in addressing structural racism?  
• How is this inquiry group going for you so far?  
• How are you feeling about the dynamics of the group and what we are talking about? | Ben               |
| April 19, 2015 (Emailed) | • What is structural racism? How does it connect with the Caucus? How have your ideas about it changed over time?  
• What are some questions that this inquiry group has raised for you?  
• What personal experiences can you connect to what this group is talking about?  
• How have you felt about the dynamics of this group? What have you noticed?  
• What are some key issues that this group has addressed? What are the various perspectives on the issue? How do you think the group should move forward in addressing these issues? | Camille            |
| May 19, 2015 (Emailed) | • [Referencing the May 19th professional development session action]: Could you reply to this email with your thoughts about how it went today? Include reflections on any moments that stood out to you, things that felt good, things that felt like they could maybe be improved, or anything else that comes to mind. | Ben Kathy          |
Jan 15, 2016  
(Email)

- What are the major things that you would say you took from our inquiry group?
- Upon reflection, how do you perceive the effects of our inquiry group...
  - On your personal life?
  - On your work as a teacher?
- After our inquiry group ended, did you see any lasting effects of our work within the Caucus? If so, how? If not, what do you think got in the way?
- How did our experiences as a group shape your relationships with others in the inquiry group? Do you remain in contact with the other participants?
- Do you have any final reflections or questions as you think back to our time together as a group?

Ben  
Camille  
Corey  
Kathy  
Mary  
Miriam  
Penelope
APPENDIX C: 2015 Inquiry to Action Group (itAG) Application

NOTE: This project description was submitted to Teacher Action Group in order to register the inquiry group as an official part of their annual Inquiry to Action Group (itAG) series of sponsored workshops for local educators.

itAG Title

Fighting Racism from Within: Inquiring into Structural Racism in the Caucus of Working Educators

Two essential questions the itAG will explore:

1. How does the Caucus of Working Educators currently understand and address issues of race and racism?
2. How can we (re)imagine the Caucus as an anti-racist organizing space?

Description for participants

In the wake of the recent state-sanctioned violence in Ferguson Missouri, this itAG takes seriously the idea that whiteness and racism deeply shape the way political organizations work and are structured. In this itAG, we will form an inquiry group to examine and address structural racism in the Caucus of Working Educators. In the first part of this inquiry group, we will read texts and think deeply about how legacies of racism might currently shape the work of the Caucus of Working Educators. Then, in the second part of the inquiry group, we will develop and implement an action with the goal of beginning to address structural racism in the Caucus. This itAG involves approximately 16 hours of time, spread out between February to June, and will be conducted as research for Rhiannon Maton’s PhD dissertation. Participation in this research is voluntary, and participants must consent to be part of the research study.

Location

TBA

Facilitator Bio

Rhiannon Maton is a public high school teacher from Toronto and is currently a PhD candidate at University of Pennsylvania. Rhiannon is also a member of the Caucus of Working Educators and has been actively involved in helping build the organization and wage campaigns since April 2014.
APPENDIX D: Memorandum to Caucus: Formative Report of a Study in Progress

Rhiannon Maton
August 17, 2015

This informal memorandum is compiled in response to a request by Caucus of Working Educators group leaders and is intended to support the ongoing development of the organization.

KEY QUESTIONS

Three key questions framed the inquiry group:

- What is structural racism?
- How does the concept of structural racism connect with our education organizing work?
- How can we (re)imagine our organization as an anti-racist organizing space?

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Growing the Individual: People and Relationships

Reflecting on the meaning and significance of racism and structural racism can be a fruitful process for organization members and their relationships.

Key Questions for Ongoing Consideration:

- *Organization members may ask themselves:* What does racism look like? Are there ways that I might be unintentionally perpetuating racial injustice in my daily life and work? What can I do to strengthen my relationships with people across racial identity differences? Are there ways I can better support people who are experiencing racism through my work or in my daily life?

Action Suggestions:

- *Discussion groups:* Book and discussion groups may be centrally oriented around questions of race and racial justice to help build member knowledge and education.
- *Professional development:* As part of this project, a professional development workshop was designed by participants in order to educate peers on the nature and function of structural racism. This workshop may continue to be run and sponsored by the organization.
- *Emphasizing one-on-ones:* Members particularly emphasized conducting one-on-ones with other organization members as an explicit strategy for educating and organizing around issues of racial justice.
2. **Vision and Mission: Framing the Organization’s Work**

A central focus on racial justice holds potential to strengthen the organization’s work internally and within the local community.

**Key Questions for Ongoing Consideration:**
- How does racial justice connect with education organizing work? What is our vision and mission as it relates to racial justice? How can we engage in organizing that meets the needs of racially diverse communities? How can we better support teachers of color in the district? What are common goals that the organization shares with local communities of color?

**Action Suggestions:**
- *Published racial impact statement:* Members strongly suggested the development of a statement about racial justice to be published on the main website.
- *Organizing strategies:* The organization should maintain central thoughtfulness about how its organizing strategies connect with and respond to goals of racial justice.
- *Power analysis:* While conducting power analysis, the organization should engage in explicit conversations about racial dynamics and power structures.

3. **Getting Specific: Projects and Campaigns**

The organization may use specific campaigns and projects as a means of supporting and centralizing racial justice in its organizing work.

**Key Questions for Ongoing Consideration:**
- How does racial justice connect with the group’s projects and campaigns? In what ways does the organization need to engage ideas about racial justice in its organizing? Who should the organization partner with while planning for and waging campaigns? How can the group be sure to maintain accountability to local communities, families and students? How can the organization become more inclusive across racial differences? How can the group better help people of color feel comfortable in organization spaces, even when the spaces are predominantly white?

**Action Suggestions:**
- *Racial justice “committee”:* The inquiry group engaged in substantial debate about whether the organization should implement a formal structure to address racial equity. There were varied opinions on the topic, so future consideration may be warranted.
- *Event planning:* Participants consistently emphasized the importance of thoughtfulness about where and how events are held. Particular emphasis was placed on holding events in multiracial spaces. Furthermore, it was thought that consideration should be paid to music, food, childcare, decor and accessibility, all of which were thought to contribute to feelings of comfort and inclusivity within the membership body.
- *Newsletter column:* One member suggested that a racial justice column within the organization’s newsletter could be used to elicit deeper conversation within the membership about connections between the organization, education and racial justice.
• *Curriculum development support*: A few members felt that the organization could provide enhanced opportunities for teachers to come together to engage in curriculum development concerned with racial justice.

• *Strengthening networks and alliances*: The group should continue to form and strengthen networks and alliances with area organizations that take up a racial justice analysis, with a particular emphasis on deepening relationships with local African American and Latino community and family organizations.
REFERENCES


Maya Wiley and Ai-jen Poo on strategy and caring, criteria for working toward racial justice. (2012). In *Critical issues forum: Mobilizing community power to address structural racism*. Washington, DC.


Talking about structural racialization and community organizing with Deepak Bhargava and John Powell. (2012). In Critical issues forum: Mobilizing community power to address structural racism (Vol. 4, pp. 26–30). Washington, DC.


