Black Lives Still Matter: Freedom Schools as an Embodiment of Critical Literacy Through Reflection and Action

Elena M. Venegas

Lakia M. Scott

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Black Lives Still Matter: Freedom Schools as an Embodiment of Critical Literacy Through Reflection and Action

Elena Venegas¹ and Lakia Scott²

Abstract
The continuation of racial inequities in the United States has ignited the recent Black Lives Matter Movement, a protest of police brutality and gun violence. Black lives matter in public school classrooms, too—where students of color face barriers to equitable educational experiences. The Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School program is a major component in developing critical literacy skills through critique, inquiry, and transformation through social justice and action. Critical literacy is enacted through identity—mainly as difference, self, consciousness, narrative, and positionality. Historical and contemporary relevance of Freedom Schools connects to the urgency of the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Keywords
Black lives matter, Freedom Schools, critical literacy, identity, social action

¹University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, TX, USA
²Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA

Corresponding Author:
Elena Venegas, University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, TX 78539, USA.
Email: elena.venegas@utrgv.edu
Introduction

Today, the toxic cocktail of poverty, illiteracy, racial disparities, violence, and massive incarceration is sentencing millions of children to dead end, powerless, and hopeless lives and threatens to undermine the past half century of racial and social progress. This is the moment to act with urgency, vision, and courage to combat the growing racial and class segregation in America; to close the achievement gap; to reweave the fabric of family and community; and to build a loud and effective adult voice for children. Building a powerful intergenerational movement is crucial to protecting children and transforming our nation’s addiction to punishment and incarceration as a first rather than last resort. We must establish better child investment policies and stronger, more skilled and innovative advocates, community networks, and institutions to implement them. We must increase community capacity, sustainability of practices and programs that work, and create as many effective new servant leader voices for more just national choices as possible. There is not a moment—or child—to waste. (Edelman, 2011, n.p.)

Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), penned those words in 2011 as a call to action for the Black Community Crusade for Children. In the 1990s, Edelman and other stakeholders reinvigorated Freedom Schools after “conclud[ing] that the black child and family were in a crisis and that we had to take action” (Edelman, 2011, n.p.). Almost a decade later, the crises identified by Edelman still have a stranglehold in the Black community in many ways.

Racial disparities continue as evidenced by health outcomes, economic outcomes, violence, and brutality. Black Americans are 2.3 times more likely to die from COVID-19 than their White and Asian counterparts (American Public Media, 2019). Relatedly, while COVID-related unemployment among Whites fell in May 2020 almost 2 percentage points to 12.4%, unemployment among Black Americans rose slightly to 16.8% (Rattner & Higgins, 2020). In the midst of the pandemic, an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, was murdered while in police custody (Hill et al., 2020). Floyd’s death sparked outrage across the globe and garnered increased attention to the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network, founded by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, emerged in response to the senseless murder of Trayvon Martin and has continued to call for social justice in the face of the killings of Black people at the hands of police (Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, LaQuan McDonald, Michael Brown, and others), in attempts to make citizen’s arrests (Ahmaud Arbery, Trayvon Martin), among other injustices. The Black Lives Matter Global
Network (n.d.) is working “for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise” (“About,” para. 4). Howard (2016) argued that Black Lives Matter can also serve as a context for a focus on Black minds because the movement focuses on “engaging in actions that help to reclaim humanity and dignity for the education of Black children that is critical in today’s given context” (p. 102).

Indeed, racial disparities within education continue to impact children of color within the United States. Schott (2020) argued, “In many cases, the domestic divisions within the U.S., are so great as to render America’s various racial and ethnic groups as distinctly separate countries” (n.p.). Collectively, the literacy of U.S. students ranks 13th out of the 76 countries who participated in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Yet, the literacy of Black American students is on par with the country of Malta, which ranks 44th on the PISA literacy assessment (Schott, 2020). It should be noted that as a large-scale assessment, PISA allows for comparisons between students and their respective nation states.

However, the validity of PISA has come into question. Pokropek et al. (2021), for example, found that PISA achievement scores reflected student’s general cognitive ability, not domain specific (e.g., reading, math, and science) abilities. Nevertheless, to improve the literacy of Black children, Howard (2016) suggested that U.S. educators look to the CDF Freedom Schools as a model. Although all races, ethnicities, and cultural heritages are served through CDF Freedom Schools, Black youth comprised 73% (n = 8,860) of those who participated in 2019 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020).

In this article, we adopt the lens of critical literacy to argue that the culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014) infused with calls to social action that is inherent within CDF Freedom Schools can be used to address the mission of the Black Lives Matter Global Network to ameliorate the systemic oppression of Black people through literacy education. This article is significant in identifying the critical literacy skills that children gain as Freedom Schools participants and how those skills aid in affirming and/or recognizing Black identity through the nexus of five metaphors for identity within literacy and the tenets of The Black Lives Matter Global Network.

Additionally, though the CDF Freedom School model is nearing its third decade of impacting communities nationwide, it is still imperative to expand studies that highlight the historical and contemporary value and cultural capital that illuminates the model—this article is an attempt to exemplify the academically and culturally rich contributions of Freedom Schools through examining critical literacy skills. We chose examples from one CDF Freedom School program that addressed the question: How does the CDF Freedom School program enact critical literacy amongst Scholars?
Prior to doing so, it is important to understand the predecessors to the contemporary CDF Freedom Schools, those that operated during Freedom Summer.

**Freedom Schools: A History**

The Highlander Folk School, established by Myles Horton, worked with Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark to establish Citizenship Schools (Smith, 2019). Informed by conversations with Paulo Freire, Horton believed that education was a prerequisite to community organizing (Smith, 2019). Thus, Citizenship Schools were an adult education program focused on equipping Black adults with the literacy skills needed to exercise their right to vote (Hale, 2011b). Septima Clark, an adult literacy educator, was instrumental to the success of the Citizenship Schools (Smith, 2019).

In 1963, Charlie Cobb proposed schools as a student-driven force for social change akin to the Citizenship Schools (Hale, 2011b). The following summer, a network of 41 grassroots schools operated across the state of Mississippi (Hale, 2011a). The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee established Freedom Schools to provide a quality education to Black schoolchildren who attended substandard public schools as compared to their White counterparts (Clemons, 2014). Innovative educational practices such as the dramatization of Civil Rights leaders such as Medgar Evers starkly contrasted the rote memorization that students found in their traditional schools (Hale, 2011a).

Freedom Schools were designed to facilitate youth participation in the Civil Rights Movement (Watson, 2014). The over 2,000 secondary students who attended Freedom Schools learned how to peacefully protest as well as withstand the police brutality to which demonstrators were often subjected (Hale, 2011a). According to Hale (2011a), “Students debated, discussed, and challenged what it meant to be an American citizen in a country that denied them a right to an equal education and their parents a right to vote” (p. 260). Freedom Schools students canvassed their communities to encourage voter registration, sought to integrate public places, and participated in boycotts (Hale, 2011a). Clemons (2014) shared what Denise, a Black woman who served as a Freedom Schools teacher recounted: “It was an extraordinary experience in that it underscored my faith in the ability of people to take charge of their lives and to resist oppression in various ways” (p. 146).

Black literacy was integral to Freedom Schools. Students sang spirituals such as “We Shall Overcome,” and read Black authors such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Frederick Douglass (Hale, 2011a). Etienne (2012) noted that critical literacy radiated from the Freedom Schools curriculum as students discussed questions such as, “What alternatives does the
Freedom Movement offer us? What does the majority culture have that we want? What does the majority culture have that we don’t want? What do we have that we want to keep?” (p. 20). Given the centrality of critical literacy to the 1964 Freedom Schools, we too adopt the lens of critical literacy in framing our paper.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical literacy functioned as our theoretical framework. From this perspective, knowledge is socially constructed to serve specific economic, political, and social interests (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985). Comber (1993) wrote, “Critical literacy involves both consciousness-raising about the discourses of dominant cultures and taking action to resist, expose, and overturn these discourses” (p. 74). Thus, critical literacy is leveraged to not only analyze and critique but also transform the norms, rules, and practices governing everyday life (Luke, 2004). Paulo Freire, father of critical literacy, asserted that by problematizing their world, people could liberate themselves, and thereby change it (Janks et al., 2013). A commitment to social justice is inherent within critical literacy (Yoon & Sharif, 2015). Janks et al. (2013) described critical literacy as a “pedagogy of hope,” adding that critical literacy enables people “to transform the conditions in which [they] find [them] selves” (p. 145).

The interconnectivity between power, language, identity, and multimodality are studied within critical literacy (Yoon & Sharif, 2015). Critical literacy involves questioning representations of language, social practice, and identity across a variety of modalities (Rogers & Mosley-Wetzel, 2013). One’s various identities (e.g., race and/or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, faith) inform how they interpret the world (Giroux, 1993). According to Freire and Macedo (1987), critical literacy “defines through the concept of illiterate what can be termed ‘the experience of the other’” (p. 12).

For this article, we focused on Black identity through the lens of critical literacy. We specifically adopt the five metaphors that Moje et al. (2009) conceptualized to express the role that literacy plays in identity. The first metaphor, identity as difference, affirms that identity is a social construct informed by group membership, how one is positioned, and/or how others recognize the individual (Moje et al., 2009). Specific to literacy, Moje et al. (2009) suggested interrogating the metaphor of identity as difference by asking questions such as (a) How do students practice literacy in school?; (b) How do students (dis)identify with such practices?; and (c) What do these literacy practices mean for their learning?
Identity as self is the second metaphor. Through the identity as self-metaphor, literacy events situated within social contexts help the individual access valuable social networks as well as gain social and cultural capital while furthering understanding of their self (Moje et al., 2009). The third metaphor is identity as consciousness. According to Moje et al. (2009), “Because activity and consciousness exist in dialectical relationship, the changed consciousness in turn shapes new activity, which shapes reality (nature), which again, in turn, shapes consciousness (and, potentially, revolution in thought and activity)” (p. 425).

The fourth metaphor, identity as narrative, primarily concerns discourse—about one’s self and others (Moje et al., 2009). Identity permeates discourse (Moje et al., 2009). Discourse can be used as a medium for leveraging hate toward persons based on their identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and faith). Luke (2009) asserted, “Some discourses kill people, take away their livelihood, others humiliate, others marginalize and shame” (p. 293). The final metaphor is identity as position (Moje et al., 2009). One person can hold a multitude of identities. These identities often intersect to conflate marginalization as Crenshaw (1991) argued in writing of violence experienced by women of color based not only on their gender identities but also their racial/ethnic identities.

**Freedom Schools: Today**

Prior to unpacking the connection between CDF Freedom Schools, the Black Lives Matter movement, and critical literacy, it is imperative to first have an understanding of the modern iteration of Freedom Schools.

**Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools**

A civil rights lawyer inspired by the Freedom Schools of the 1960’s, Marian Wright Edelman (2007) founded the CDF Freedom Schools in 1995. According to Edelman (2007), the purpose of CDF Freedom Schools is “to provide safe, nurturing, literature-rich summer and after school environments where children can learn, bloom, and serve” (n.p.). CDF Freedom Schools are intended to help ameliorate “man-made disaster[s]” (Edelman, 2007, n.p.), such as poverty, inadequate education, and a host of other issues.

Visit any CDF Freedom School, and you will overhear references to the “Freedom Schools Way.” According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2020), “the Freedom School Way” is one of hope, education, and action. The “Freedom School Way” is encouraging, positive, and cultural affirming
As such, culturally sustaining pedagogy is prevalent in CDF Freedom Schools. Culturally sustaining pedagogy moves beyond culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy emerged from Ladson-Billings’ (1995) work. Positive conceptions of one’s self and others, positive social relationships, and a conception of knowledge and learning as dynamic are indicative of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Culturally sustaining pedagogy encompasses these tenets yet also moves beyond them. According to Paris and Alim (2014), culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to “perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (p. 88). Jackson (2011) identified six characteristics of CDF Freedom Schools (a) validating, (b) comprehensive, (c) multidimensional, (d) empowering, (e) transformative, and (f) emancipatory. These six characteristics, we argue, are indicative of culturally sustaining pedagogy. The children and adolescents enrolled in CDF Freedom Schools are referred to as Scholars (Watson, 2014). Each week of the 6-week program, the students are taught lessons featuring multicultural and developmentally appropriate children’s and young adult literature, which comprise the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC). Each week of the IRC is thematic: (a) self; (b) family; (c) community; (d) country; (e) world; and (f) hope, education, and action (Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools, 2016). The text selections for each week correlate to the weekly theme (e.g., the sixth week features books related to hope and social action). With its emphasis on literacy, social action, and culturally sustaining pedagogy, Freedom Schools have positively impacted students.

The Impact of Freedom Schools

Areyla Mitchell, who wrote political essays for her 1964 Freedom School’s paper, later became an editor of a Memphis newspaper (Hale, 2011a). Freedom Schools’ legacy of encouraging students to exercise their literacy continues today. Students enrolled in CDF Freedom Schools across the United States have made gains in terms of their reading. In 2014, the instructional reading level of 64% (n = 75) of Los Angeles-based Scholars improved by one or more grade levels as measured by Johns’ Basic Reading Inventory (Howard, 2016). Moreover, 85% (n = 99) of Scholars indicated positive attitudes toward reading by the end of their Freedom Schools participation (Howard, 2016). In 2018, 90% of parents reported
that they perceived an increase in their children’s confidence with reading (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020).

In terms of social action, Eddie James Carthan became mayor of his hometown and attributed his community involvement to his time as a 1964 Freedom School student (Hale, 2011a). Likewise, the contemporary CDF Freedom Schools continue to inspire students to participate in civic engagement and social action. As reported by Howard (2016), 92% \((n = 107)\) of the Los Angeles-based CDF Freedom Schools wanted to become more involved in their community. The Scholars’ social activism is contagious. As of 2018, 90% of their parents expressed a desire to engage in social action alongside their children (Children’s Defense Fund, 2020).

The 1964 Freedom Schools exemplified culturally sustaining pedagogy by centering Black history and literature (Hale, 2011a) along with civic education as its curriculum. Although CDF Freedom Schools Scholars represent an array of racial and ethnic identities, participation in the program has led to positive outcomes with regard to Black identity and community. Green (2014) argued that CDF Freedom Schools exemplify the community cultural wealth (as defined by Yosso, 2005) inherent within the Black community. Bethea’s (2012) study found that positive attitudes toward Black people and culture increased after Scholars’ participation in Oakland-based Freedom Schools. Bethea (2012) further attributed students’ “healthy racial identity development” to the Freedom Schools’ “culturally appropriate practices” (p. 450). Such practices include morning Harambee (Green, 2014) a Swahili term for “all pull together.” Harambee is a time of preparation for the day’s work and learning as well as a time to celebrate and affirm students (Etienne, 2012).

### Student Activism

In contextualizing Moje et al.’s (2009) notion of critical literacy as a formation of identity in difference, self, consciousness, narrative, and position, we connect this to the tenets of student activism because student-led demonstrations represent a type of knowing and growing into one’s formation of identity. The idea of articulating a positionality and defending it as such in a way that is public and assertive is a prime example of how youth can demonstrate levels of critical literacy formation. In addition to Black Lives Matter movement, it is also important to consider historical and more contemporary student-led movements.

One iconic demonstration in the U.S. public school system was in 1968, known famously as the Los Angeles student “walkouts.” This demonstration was aligned with the surrounding Chicano/a Rights Movement that sought
working equity for farm workers—led by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta (Covarrubias, 2011; Olivos & Quintana, 2011; Tejeda, 2011). In the mid-20th century, schools servicing Mexican American students were substandard to white schools. Similar to the conditions of African-Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, Mexican American students were also subject to unfair treatment and unequal learning conditions.

The Chicano/a students’ dissatisfaction with their education stemmed from both curricular and pedagogical treatment. In their classes, students were forbidden from speaking Spanish in their classrooms, which was their native language. In addition, students were denied access to cultural history of Chicano/Mexican history, and were restricted to mainstream history. Instead, students were encouraged to explore vocational skills—versus a traditional education—in order to perpetuate generations of farmers and labor-skilled jobs (Tejeda, 2011). In 1968, many students in the Los Angeles School District recognized this unfair treatment and organized a student protest or boycott (Covarrubias, 2011; Olivos & Quintana, 2011; Tejeda, 2011). Here, students purposefully protested their dire educational conditions and attempted to unite in solidarity in order to make a public statement. During the protest demonstrations, many students were arrested for attempting to “disturb the peace” (Tejeda, 2011). Their acts of civil disobedience were nonviolent and orderly; yet, law enforcement punished students for making a public critique of education. Students aimed to seek empowerment, but were instead characterized as “criminals” for their falsely type-casted “misconduct.”

Demonstrations such as this reveal that racial desegregation efforts—after the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education case—did not guarantee educational equality and equity. This transformational student-orchestrated movement demonstrates the formation of identity through Moje et al.’s (2009) critical literacy as identity tenets—identity is formed through difference, self, consciousness, narrative, and position. And while the Chicano movement stems from students of different ethnic group, the educational aim remains the same: equity, access, and opportunity. These aims are continuously reverberated in the CDF Freedom School model where scholars are empowered to learn about and collaboratively work through understandings of making a difference in themselves, their family, community, country, and world with hope, education, and action.

Nearly 50 years later, dozens of African-American male high school students from Douglass Academy were also reprimanded and suspended after deciding to protest against the conditions of their education (Dawsey, 2012). Located in Michigan, and the only all-male public school in Detroit, students walked out of classes—in the form of a boycott—because they felt that teacher and administrator absenteeism, as well as a host of other issues
at their school, were unacceptable in terms of receiving a quality education. Teachers of this local school were absent for up to 68 days, leaving students unattended and unaccounted for (Associated Press, 2012; Dawsey, 2012).

After hearing how students were directed to the gym, cafeteria, or library for weeks at a time due to lack of teachers, as well as receiving high grades simply based on attendance, parents helped to organize this walkout in fear that if they had remained silent, their children would suffer the greatest loss. In addition to teacher shortages, the founding administrator was also granted time to take leave and was eventually reassigned. Students also complained about being months behind in their classes, especially math, mainly because there was not a consistent set of math teachers. The sum of these issues forced students to take action, by way of protest, in hopes that the district would seek remedies for these injustices; however, to date—district representatives have done minimal changes.

These events are significant for several reasons. First, it uncovers true learning conditions in U.S. schools. Many urban schools, similar to the Douglass Academy in Detroit, serve increased numbers of African-American and Latinx students (Kozol, 2005). Because of many systemic policies in place, schools in these areas often do not receive equitable attention in comparison to more affluent schools (Children’s Defense Fund, 2012). Many schools in these areas have become breeding grounds for social inequality, and systematic steps toward the school-to-prison pipeline, which helps breed the increasingly lucrative prison-industrial complex (Kim et al., 2010; Kozol, 2005). Aside from unveiling the hidden ruptures in this seemingly “equal” system, these students also united in opposition to many misconceptions about African-American and Latinx youth. These students arguably recognized the agency of education as a tool for their social mobility. Thus, they demonstrate perseverance and zeal from a demographic group that is traditionally marginalized as “apathetic” and “delinquent” (Kunjufu, 2002).

However, what seems to be most troubling is the way in which the district minimized their attention to Douglass Academy students. Coincidentally, this all-male student population is majority African-American—and most come from middle-to-low socioeconomic backgrounds (Dawsey, 2012). The district’s refusal to address the pertinent issues in this school is arguably directly attributed to students’ social class and economic value in society (Balfanz, 2009). The fact that these students were suspended for civilly protesting their inalienable rights, suggests that there is compounding fear and mistreatment over certain demographic groups over others.

The criminalization and discrimination of African-American students, specifically African-American males, has been a topic long-researched in academia (Delpit, 2006; Kim et al., 2010; Kunjufu, 2002; Lewis et al., 2010); yet,
the unfair treatment still consistently manifests in schools today. Thus, while proponents may argue that the suspension of Douglass Academy students set precedence that demonstrations of rebellion—such as protests—will not be tolerated, supporters of Douglass Academy students may refute that these students were justified in their actions for demanding to receive a quality teaching force and caring administration.

The Intersection of Critical Literacy and Freedom Schools

We situate our connection between today’s CDF Freedom Schools, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and critical literacy within the context of one CDF Freedom School program. As critical literacy involves not only reflection but also social action (Freire, 2014), the examples of the Scholars’ social action stem from this particular CDF Freedom School program. Specifically, we sought examples that would address the following question: How does the CDF Freedom School program enact critical literacy amongst Scholars?

Context

Each year, 50 middle school students (grades 6–8) participated in the summer literacy enrichment program over the months of June and July. All students were enrolled in the largest school district in Central Texas. Milner (2012) would classify the locale as urban characteristic, where the city itself is not densely populated, but has experienced significant challenges that are often associated with urban contexts. The district has a majority of students (92.6%) considered economically disadvantaged and nearly 34% have limited English proficiency; the demonstrative growth in the city has also influenced the social and cultural student demographics of the district. For both years of the program, over 90% of students who participated in the program were children of color, representing Black and Brown ethnic backgrounds.

Social Action Projects

In this CDF Freedom School program, critical literacy was enacted through culturally sustaining pedagogy, the utilization of multicultural curriculum, and Scholar-led social action projects. Each day, Scholars begin the day with Harambee, a cultural activity involving singing, dancing, shouting, and gaining motivation toward reading. During Harambee, call and response
pedagogy allowed for students to remain engaged and display recall of information discussed. In addition, the guest read-aloud portion allowed for students to expand their minds and imagination about topics presented in the book, and provided opportunities for critical thinking and questioning about book contents and the reader. In addition, these techniques were used in classroom practice as a means to continually engage students in learning.

The utilization of multicultural literature also enacted critical literacy skills among students. Each week, a young-adult novel that centered on a particular topic about making a difference was read, and Scholars were able to make connections to the content. Some books centered on turbulent family situations, child poverty, homelessness, disabilities, and negative peer influences.

Social Issue: Child Homelessness. Scholars also worked diligently on social action projects. In each lesson, the curriculum contained a social action component where Scholars discussed an issue, examined root causes, and identified solutions. For example, in reading *Joseph* by Sheila P. Moses (2010), the issue of child homelessness arises. After reading parts of the novel, Scholars worked collaboratively and reviewed youth homelessness statistics, and current resources available to youth in the area. Freedom School teachers organized a panel of community leaders who worked on curbing youth homelessness in the area. Scholars were able to interview the leaders and then developed ways to support homeless students. Scholars shared the following list of ideas:

1. The city could create an afterschool center for youth to hang out so they are not exposed to criminal activities.
2. There could be a partnership between schools and community organizations like Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Boys and Girls Club to provide a safe space for homeless youth when they have nowhere to sleep at night.
3. Restaurants could take turns donating to shelters and homeless facilities because they deserve to eat nice food, too.

Some Scholars were compelled to write letters to local officials in order to garner support around youth homelessness. In addition to these daily iterations of social activity, Scholars participated in the National Day of Social Action (NDSA) each year. The following sections detail their experiences for two recent summers.

Social Issue: Child Hunger. In 2017, the issue of child hunger was the NDSA theme for Freedom Schools. At that time, national news coverage on the
proposed Congressional budget had child hunger welfare programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Children’s Health Insurance Program, and Women, Infants, and Children, on the chopping block for a reduction of federal support and funding or eliminated entirely.

As part of the afternoon activities segment, CDF leaders provided Scholars with educational materials and electronic resources to encourage critical thinking about the topic. Scholars were given time throughout the duration of the 6-week program to research issues related to child hunger and explore the devastating impact of child hunger and poverty in the United States. As most sites are situated in communities where children are from low socioeconomic backgrounds, some Scholars were able to make personal connections to child hunger. Others were familiar with some of the programs and remarked how their families or someone within their extended family had received such benefits.

During the research phase, Scholars examined root causes and outcomes of child hunger in the United States. They researched the correlation of child hunger to healthcare, education levels, occupation status, family size, and geographic location. They also investigated different federal assistance programs, free-and-reduced lunch programs, and United States Department of Agriculture summer feeding programs. From the information gathered, each class was able to develop arguments and articulate persuasive points for eradicating child hunger. The culmination of this research led to one spokesperson from each class presenting this information in the form of a speech for the planned demonstration.

As a site, Scholars organized a demonstration event that was held at City Hall. In preparation for the demonstration, some worked on creating poster illustrations and banner slogans, others practiced chants and led syncopated movements as artistic expression, and another group worked on their public speeches. Everyone had a role and a goal for the event: some wanted to encourage voters to contact politicians to reject the proposed congressional budget changes; others wanted the community members to know that programs such as these helped to support their families, and some just wanted their voices to be heard. On the day of the event, Scholars toured City Hall to better understand local government structures. Following, they walked across the street to begin their demonstration. With bullhorns and impromptu pedestals, select Scholars shared their speeches in front of family members, local officials, news reporters, and community supporters. The seated Scholars shouted chants to keep the crowd engaged while speakers transitioned. And when the final speech was shared, student leaders directed everyone to the street to begin the march.

Scholars marched three blocks forward of City Hall and completed a square route while chanting and holding signs and banners about ending
child hunger. Pedestrians and local business vendors joined in as students passed by, or stopped for oncoming traffic. People in cars honked their horns in solidarity for the cause—this further ignited students to shout louder and prouder. After the march, which lasted about 30 min, Scholars returned to the starting area where they had previously held the demonstration. Reporters were set up to interview them, while others joined their families.

As the event came to a close, Freedom School teachers asked Scholars to reflect on what they had learned from the demonstration. One Scholar shared, “I learned that even though we live in one of the richest countries in the world and over a million kids go hungry each day, removing these programs would mean that more kids would die from being hungry.” Another mentioned how she had learned more about how the government works in terms of enacting change. She remarked: “Local officials, we need to know who they are and what they stand for, because they will represent us at the White House. We are out here making sure they know how we feel about the Congressional budget. Even though we can’t vote, we can still be heard.”

In this activity, Scholars recognized various components of their identities and formation of their identities through the critical literacy lens. Moje et al.’s (2009) articulation of identity as difference was demonstrated when Scholars researched the devastating statistics of child hunger in the United States and found that children of color are the largest percentages of students in poverty. In examining how child hunger is politicized and how the information of social welfare is targeted to garner perceptions about a particular group of people who receive government assistance, students grew more conscious about the role of media and media influence.

Additionally, identity as self was also conceptualized as some Scholars were direct recipients of the type of programs that the Congressional budget sought to reduce in funding or eliminate. Students shared about how the perception of receiving such services impacted how they were treated and viewed by others. Scholars’ critical literacy lenses expanded in understanding how political acts, even federal ones, affected them locally and personally. And finally, identity as consciousness was realized in that Scholars understood that they must use their voices in order to enact change—in this regard, though they were not voters, they were citizens being dutiful in proclaiming to local officials about how the budget would affect them.

**Voter Registration.** In 2018, Voter Registration was the topic for the NDSA. Instructional emphasis was placed on Freedom School sites to help Scholars understand the voting process and the importance of being a
registered voter. In order to center the vitality of voter representation from minoritized communities, CDF utilized an historical approach by providing resources on the Jim Crow South and voter suppression, and the woman’s suffrage movement. To further their understanding of the NDSA topic, Scholars would partake in a Voting Rally with another site, participate in a mock voting process, tour the state capitol, and encourage local residents to register to vote.

In preparation for the trip to the state capitol, Scholars learned about how one becomes a registered voter. They participated in a mock voter registration activity and following, learned about the voting process. To elaborate, Scholars were introduced to local, state, and national election processes and learned about major political parties. During other afternoon sessions, Freedom School teachers discussed topics that impacted youth directly: education, youth justice, healthcare, gun violence, and poverty. These topics were provided by CDF, but each site was given research prompts and queries to guide Scholars in thinking critically about each topic. After researching the topics, student volunteers worked to develop persuasive essays that would be presented at a public assembly.

In addition to this work, the curriculum also empowered students to develop their civic identities through reading critical texts. One book used, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* written by Phillip Hoose (2009), exemplified themes of justice, perseverance, confrontation, nonviolence, humiliation, social status, taking a stand, and humility. Another text, *Sylvia & Aki* by Winifred Conkling (2011), addressed ways to push back against discrimination, finding solace during difficult times, and manifesting peace within oneself. And another, *Martin Rising: Requiem for a King*, by Andrea Davis Pinkney (2018), provided a creative outlet for Scholars to examine the lives of others who made a difference through addressing themes of discrimination, standing in adversity, leaving a legacy, and understanding one’s own power in making a difference. These books provided Scholars with an increased opportunity to not only examine the real-life circumstances of how others faced challenges, but also provided outlets for making a difference for the sake of justice and equality.

Although these are not the exhaustive list of all that happens in a daily Freedom School lesson, below, we have provided examples of some of the instructional activities that further informed, encouraged, and empowered Scholars about social action: role-playing the bus boycotts of the 1950s, identifying issues that plague the community and creating fact sheets to raise awareness; discussing conflict and resolution strategies; sharing how to address when someone or a group is being treated unfairly; researching segregation and integration as a social problem (historically and contemporary) and its effect on communities and neighborhoods of color; learning about experiences of other cultural groups that have experienced discrimination in the United
States; creating social media posts to correct stereotypes about themselves; and identifying groups that are fighting for causes of social justice.

Scholars traveled to Austin, Texas to visit another site that consisted mainly of elementary students. Together, the Scholars celebrated the importance of voting by participating in a special Harambee session themed around voting. In the session, a state political representative served as a guest reader and answered questions about becoming a politician. Next, selected Scholars took turns presenting their speeches on the selected topics. One Scholar discussed education equality in that students should have access to quality schools, teachers, and learning materials.

Next, another Scholar shared how the juvenile justice system should be reviewed in consideration that youth should be provided greater leniency in sentencing. An elementary-aged Scholars gave a riveting speech about children having access to healthcare providers despite income levels. Another discussed gun violence and the need for more protection laws against harm of children. Finally, a Scholar advocated for the elimination of children in poverty in the United States. After the speeches, Scholars were given voter registration cards, based on their completion of the previous activity, where they registered to vote. If Scholars were absent during this activity, they were given additional time to register to vote, and then rejoined their class members.

Outside the general assembly area, Scholars cast their votes in the voting booths provided. The ballots required the Scholars to list their name, their voter identification number, and to rank order (from 1 to 3, one being the highest) their preferred topics of importance. Afterward, they would cast their ballot in the ballot box and return to the general assembly. After each Scholars voted, the ballots were organized, tallied, and the top three issues were announced. When the top three topics were announced, Scholars were then divided into three groups based on their interests and strategized advocacy campaigns. For example, gun violence was a selected topic, and Scholars created signage that stated “Protect Kids, Not Guns” and “Gun-Free Schools” to heighten awareness about gun rights, access to guns, and the unintended consequences and correlation to gun violence in schools.

After the activity, middle school-aged Scholars traveled to the State Capitol. There, they toured the facility and learned more about state officials’ role in local, state, and federal government. Elementary-aged Scholars joined Freedom School leaders in small groups of 8 to 10 as they canvassed neighborhoods, walking door-to-door, encouraging community members to become registered voters. The signs that they had earlier created and the Voter Reenactment had given them a platform of ideas to discuss with constituents.

For all Scholars involved, the day proved to be an enriching experience. It should also be noted that this experience was exceptional for some Scholars—
they had not been outside of the city limits. And for others, it was a reminder of their “dreamer” status—their parents were not allowed to vote because they were undocumented. Despite this, students remarked that the sequence of events had been an incredible experience. In reflecting on the day, one Scholar exclaimed, “I learned so much about how to vote and why it matters. I can’t wait to turn 18 so I can become a voter!” Another Scholar shared, “I don’t understand why some people don’t vote and use their voice—that’s the only way change happens.”

In this activity, Scholars were enacting notions of critical literacy through identity. Identity as self was articulated through some Scholars—in recognizing citizenship status and how systemic inequities continue to force unfavorable outcomes on people from minoritized backgrounds. Also, Scholars connected with the identity as narrative construct, now having experienced travel to the state capitol, participating in the voting process, and learning from others about issues that matter to them.

Although the NDSA themes were not centered directly on the Black Lives Matter movement, it is important to remember that the historical and contemporary aims of the CDF are to make sure that children receive a healthy, head, fair, safe, and moral start in life. The organization was birthed out of recognition that children were pivotal in enacting change in our society. As earlier mentioned in the Summer of Freedom, Black people were seen as invaluable and expendable in the Jim Crow South. However, through literacy, their voices were heard. In this way, and more contemporarily, Freedom Schools has been a movement centered on reiterating the importance of Black lives, though never explicitly stated. Many Freedom School programs are in neighborhoods of urban sprawl, and students who attend this program are considered to be “forgotten.” The integral focus on lifting children out of poverty, abuse, neglect, and other situations of circumstance through literacy and social action is a powerful tool.

Identity as… Metaphors, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and Freedom Schools

We now revisit our theoretical framework of critical literacy, specifically from the five metaphors of literacy. Each metaphor with particular respect to Freedom Schools and the Black Lives Matter movement is explored below.

Identity as Difference

The creation of the Black Lives Matter Global Network stems from society’s differential treatment of Black people. This differential, often inhumane,
treatment is exemplified by the failure to recognize Black lives as worthwhile as evidenced by slavery, public lynchings, and the public murders of unarmed Black men and women. As exemplified by the racial disparities in terms of scores on standardized literacy assessments, Black youth experience differential treatment within U.S. schools.

The Freedom Schools of 1964 were created to ameliorate the inadequate literacy and civic instruction received by Black schoolchildren in Mississippi. Separate and unequal schooling served as means of continually subjugating Black people by obstructing social mobility through education and civic participation through exercising their rights to vote. Presently, CDF Freedom Schools celebrate identity as difference through the bountiful multicultural children’s literature inherent within its Integrated Reading Curriculum and practice of culturally responsive pedagogy.

To affirm identity as difference, Jeanette Winter’s (2014) *Malala, a brave girl from Pakistan/Iqbal, a brave boy from Pakistan: Two stories of bravery* could be utilized. In this children’s book, Winter (2014) informs readers of two Pakistani youth who sought to make a difference in their nation. Iqbal Masih was killed for his advocacy against child slavery whereas Malala Yousafzai won a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to secure the right for girls to receive a formal education (Winter, 2014). This piece of children’s literature helps to increase awareness of other cultures (e.g., Pakistani culture) as well as universal struggles for human rights in the face of differential treatment.

**Identity as Self**

Although a social movement empowered by communal participation, The Black Lives Matter Global Network (n.d.) acknowledges the importance of individuals by stating, “Every day, we recommit to healing ourselves and each other, and to co-creating alongside comrades, allies, and family a culture where each person feels seen, heard, and supported” (“What we believe,” para. 8). Indeed, the Black Lives Matter Global Network recognizes the heterogeneity within the Black community and does not value the intersections of certain identities (e.g., heterosexual and cisgender) over others (e.g., queer and transgender).

The Freedom Schools of 1964 encouraged the exploration of one’s self-identity through literacy. Clemons (2014) wrote what Denise, a Black teacher, recounted,

> The children who came to the school felt special because there was a school made just for them…When someone makes something just for you, it says, ‘I love you.’ I think sometimes when we talk about Freedom Schools we
sometimes miss that point. They were made, created, for those children and those children knew that. They knew that. And when you feel special, and when you feel loved, you begin to see yourself in a way that you would not perhaps see yourself...you begin to dream in a different way, you begin to believe in yourself. (p. 147)

In the sense that Denise described, the 1964 Freedom Schools helped to instill aspirational capital within its students. Yosso (2005) defined *aspirational capital* as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers” (p. 77). Despite state-sanctioned discrimination and violence, the Mississippi youth who attended Freedom Schools felt loved, which undoubtedly positively influenced their self-identities.

A book favored by many read-aloud guests during CDF Freedom Schools’ Harambee is Mychal Wynns’s (1993) *The eagles who thought they were chickens: A tale of discovery*. Wynns’s (1993) book is a retelling of what is believed to be a West African proverb. The story is one of proud, beautiful birds (i.e., Eagles/persons of African descent) who are kidnapped from their homeland, enslaved, and whose descendants are largely unaware of their rich cultural heritage. Over the course of the story, the Eagles’ descendants begin to realize their self-worth and take pride in their identity.

**Identity as Consciousness**

Identity as consciousness perhaps most closely resonates with the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement seeks to elevate the consciousness of society regarding its marginalization of and subsequent violence, degradation, and dehumanization toward Black people. The intent is to not only raise consciousness but also spur social action toward a more just, welcoming society for Black people. The Black Lives Matter Global Network (n.d.) is “committed to struggling together and to imagining and creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive” (“What we believe,” para. 2).

The 1964 Freedom Schools sought to not only increase the consciousness of the Black youth who attended them but also the consciousness of others so as to resist the oppression faced by Blacks in the American South. Hale (2011b) wrote of raising student consciousness, “The Freedom Schools provided a pedagogical space for students to interrogate racist myths and to articulate the meaning of citizenship under the existing Jim Crow system and under the terms of the U.S. Constitution” (p. 332). Freedom School students participated in school boycotts, led voter registration activities, and published
newspapers to encourage others to resist Jim Crow (Hale, 2011b). Students enrolled in the CDF Freedom Schools of today participate in a NDSA. In 2020, the focus of the (virtual) NDSA was, appropriately, voter registration given the U.S. presidential election. As with its historic counterpart, the CDF Freedom Schools are thereby seeking to increase consciousness by emphasizing the importance of exercising one’s civil liberties such as voting.

The importance of exercising one’s voting rights today coupled with the historic fight for those voting rights can be employed to affirm identity as consciousness. Granddaddy’s turn: A journey to the ballot box (Bandy & Stein, 2015) is a children’s book that revisits the disenfranchisement of Black Americans in the South. This book recounts a true story of a grandfather who was denied his right to vote (Bandy & Stein, 2015). His grandson, who accompanied him, vows to exercise this civil liberty when he reaches the legal voting age (Bandy & Stein, 2015). This children’s book exemplifies the metaphor of identity as consciousness by reminding youth of the fight that previous generations—as recently as their grandparents—undertook to ensure their access to the polls. Similarly, this text could raise consciousness regarding attempts to disenfranchise voters through suppression efforts such as Shelby v. Holder (2013) and gerrymandering.

Identity as Narrative


An individual’s story about his or herself can be used both to claim an identity (e.g., Black male or female) and enact his or her identity (e.g., intelligent). The children and adolescents who attend CDF Freedom Schools are encouraged to both claim and enact their intelligence as students of color, as they are referred to as Scholars. Undoubtedly, this influences their identities, because it affirms their power, will, and purpose in society. To elaborate, children of color, especially males, encounter negative experiences in traditional public school education through a myriad of deficit model teaching
approaches, biased assessments, harsh discipline policies, and policing movements in schools, just to name a few.

Freedom Schools serve as a safe haven and space where children can speak freely, and be free in an educational setting that is liberatory, self-enacting, and prophecy-fulfilling. Freedom School leaders affirm students’ cultural and social identities through informal interactions, but also through instructional decisions. Choosing to recognize cultural differences and embracing cultural identities in the classroom strengthened their self-development and image about their potential (Bethea, 2012).

Identity as narrative resonates within the children’s book Grandpa, is everything black bad? (Holman, 1998). In the book, a young Black boy questions whether the color of his skin is bad because so many societal associations with the color black (e.g., black sheep; black as a symbol of mourning) are negative (Holman, 1998). The boy’s grandfather responds by recounting their African heritage and helps him to identify the beauty in his racial identity and skin color (Holman, 1998). This text is illustrative of the identity as a narrative metaphor because it counters the narrative received by even young children that black is “bad.”

Identity as Position

The Black Lives Matter Global Network seeks to address the position of Black people in society, which is often one of marginalization and oppression. The Black Lives Matter Global Network (n.d.) aims to improve the position of Black people in society “by combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy [to win] immediate improvements in our lives” (“About, para. 1). In this sense, the Black Lives Matter movement resists societal attempts to position Black people as lesser than and instead seeks to enact change so that our society is one in which Black racial and cultural identity thrive.

The Freedom Schools of 1964 similarly challenged the way in which the American South positioned Black people. As Hale (2011b) wrote,

In order for the Jim Crow system to succeed, it required passive acceptance of the social norms and racial practices; however, in the Freedom Schools the students openly and actively challenged the bases for segregationist ideology and articulated egalitarian notions of citizenship. (p. 333)

Similarly, CDF Freedom Schools’ students are not only students but also agents of change in their communities.

¡Si, se puede!/Yes, we can!: Janitor strike in L.A. (Cohn, 2005) is a children’s book that can be used to address identity in position. Cohn’s (2005)
bilingual book is a fictional account of the Los Angeles janitor strike. Yet the book addresses economic inequality and marginalization. The characters in the book mobilize and peacefully protest to enact change and better their lives (Cohn, 2005). Coupled with a discussion of the real outcomes of the Los Angeles janitor strike, this text can reify the power of mobilizing for social justice.

**Conclusion**

The Black Lives Matter movement calls the world to attention in recognizing the importance and value of people of color. Similarly, the historical and contemporary aims of Freedom Schools have centered on the treatment of Black people in America. In the Jim Crow South, student organizers saw the vitality of literacy as a key to freedom. In this way, Freedom Schools have been a beacon of light, hope, and opportunity for people of color. The role of children has been integral in the Civil Rights era and continues on today as recent literature has highlighted how students have led protests in attempts to equitize education and practice.

Using the theoretical lens of Critical Literacy, identity frameworks connected the aims of Black Lives Matter and Freedom Schools. As revealed in this essay, identity as difference, self, consciousness, narrative, and positionality are conceptualized within the Freedom School model. When students develop critical literacy skills, they are able to raise consciousness about inequity by seeing these issues through different aspects of their identity in order to become activists in creating social change. The Freedom Schools model greatly influences critical literacy development through culturally sustaining teaching, multicultural literature, and social action projects. In this way, the program is helping to reiterate the message that Black Lives really do Matter, back then, today, and tomorrow.

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**Author Biographies**

**Elena Venegas** is an assistant professor in the Department of Bilingual and Literacy Studies. She is a former elementary school teacher. Her research focuses on social issues in education, particularly related to literacy and language.

**Lakia Scott** is an associate professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University. She is the executive director of a CDF Freedom School site.