

Until the Revolution: Analyzing the Politics, Pedagogy, and Curriculum of the Oakland Community School

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Abstract: In United States conversations about progressive pedagogy and alternative forms of education, the longstanding models that scholars used were predominantly white. African-American historians of education have problematized this narrative. More recently, the interdisciplinary field of Black Power studies has increased investigation into Afrocentric pedagogy and Black politically-engaged education after World War II (Rickford, 2016). While much attention has been paid to the freedom schools, educational sites run by Black revolutionary nationalists have received less attention. One particular site is the Oakland Community School (OCS), the Black Panther Party's full-time day school. Initially a combined day-care and home school known as the Children's House in 1970, the school changed to become the Intercommunal Youth Institute in 1971. It then operated as the Oakland Community School from 1974 until 1982, earning acclaim from the California Department of Education and the governor of California (Gore, Theoharis & Woodard, 2009). While multiple historical studies detail the pedagogical contours of the school and its community engagement, very few elicit the voices of former students. This work incorporates such voices, in conjunction with traditional archives and digital archival material, as a means of contextualizing the OCS within the Black Panther Party's politics of the period and the school's implications for contemporary education.

Keywords: Black Power; Black Panthers; Cultural Relevance; Culturally Responsive.

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1. Introduction

In many of the canonical texts used in the history of US education, a number of the investigations on schools that deployed progressive pedagogical methods focus on white children in the era of entrenched segregation. Texts like Carl Kaestle's *Pillars of the Republic* (Kaestle, 1983) or Larry Cuban's *How Teachers Taught* (Cuban, 1993) have been seminal works in the conversation of education, but they largely miss the narratives about Black contributions to education. African American scholars, including the prolific VP Franklin (Franklin, 1992, 1995) and Vanessa Siddle Walker

(Siddle Walker, 1996; Walker & Byas, 2009) are among a group who have celebrated the educational contributions of Black educational institutions and movements (Williamson-Lott, Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2012). African Americans returned from World War I with a renewed fervor for egalitarian education. The New Negro of the 1920s more aggressively agitated for equal rights, exalted African American culture, and demanded self-determination. Such sentiment evidenced itself in both attitude and organization through Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Harlem Renaissance, the growth of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This article seeks to build on the work of such scholars, highlighting the story of a predominantly Black school that re-envisioned education for economically underserved Black communities.

1969 was a significant year for the United States. The Vietnam War protests reached new heights, curriculum studies shifted its parameters, and a significant number of Black activists grew weary of non-violent direct action. In this same year, as NASA sent astronauts to the moon, Black Power fought the gravity of racism, classism, sexism, and imperialism on earth's surface. The Black Panther Party (BPP), in particular, saw education as a critical space to combat these institutional forces, and thus formed a number of liberation schools throughout the nation. As both the contemporary and successor of what Bayard Rustin and Aldon Morris outline as the *classical* Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power era produced advocates engaged in militant politics as a means to reclaim physical and social space in a racially unjust society (Hall, 2005; Morris, 1986). Like many movements, however, Black Power did not assume a static, monolithic identity. From organization to organization, ideological camps of Black nationalism and pluralism articulated their respective visions for a more liberated Black America (Joseph, 2006, 2009; Van Deburg, 1992). The gradations of these visions also manifested themselves within individual groups; the BPP's trajectory is testament to this assertion (Joseph, 2006; Murch, 2010; Spencer, 2016). As the Panthers developed over time and more of the leaders became political prisoners, the leadership shifts also changed the pedagogical contours of their schools (Perlstein, 2002). The most pronounced of these examples is revealed in the history of the flagship full-time school of the organization: the Oakland Community School.

The Panthers' breakfast program, political education courses, liberation schools, and now the full-time day school were considered «survival programs». The name came from the BPP leader's initiative known as «survival pending revolution». The language was meant to quell fears that the BPP turned to reform by reassuring the party's commitment to the long-haul of political revolution (Peck, 2001, p. 15). In this article I will trace the development of the Oakland Community School from its Black Panther Party Liberation School roots in 1969 until its official closing in 1982. Primarily focused on curriculum and instruction, I will examine the structure and educational philosophies that undergirded each phase of the childhood education program. Finally, I will explore the relationship between the shifting party ideologies, the school iterations, and their resonances with contemporary pedagogical theory. Drawing from memoir, oral history, a recorded panel proceeding, secondary resources, BPP newspaper articles, and archival data, the investigation will consider the following: How was the school's curricular and pedagogical framework consistent

with or different from the overall organization's ideological leanings? How did the Oakland Community School differ from earlier Panther children education efforts? In what ways did the OCS prefigure critical pedagogies that came of age in subsequent decades? What lessons can this school teach educators in the present with regards curriculum and teaching practices (Apple, 1979)? The purpose is to examine the dynamics of teaching and learning at OCS in hopes of uncovering its relationship to educational theory over time.

2. The Black Panther Party Liberation Schools

We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.

Point 5 of the Black Panther Party 10 Point Platform («Black Panther Party Platform», 1969).

Long before the Oakland Community School became an academic space, the Party had to establish a vision. When founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale initially introduced their 10-Point Platform, they articulated a broad educational plan. They developed incrementally – starting with adults. While political education classes began earlier in the party's career, the liberation schools for children did not become a reality until the early summer of 1969. From San Francisco, California to Staten Island, New York, Panther chapters boasted the development of liberation schools that engaged youth in the process of political advocacy with an anti-oppressive conceptual framework. Most liberation schools that operated during the summer lasted half of the day. Those schools that started earlier in the day began with a Panther provided breakfast, which depending on location, ranged from donuts and juice to eggs and bacon. Students would transition to study at roughly 10 am. In Queens, NY, students began at 11am and had lunch before they continued with the rest of their instructional period that ended at 3pm. Some sites operated as adjuncts or extra-curricular spaces to schools during the academic year («Liberation School», 1969, p. 14). In places like Omaha, Nebraska and Brownsville (in Brooklyn), New York, students would attend liberation school at the end of their regular school day or as Brooklyn Branch member Frankye Adams would say, «after returning from the capitalist institutions» («Brownsville Liberation School», 1969, p. 8). Regardless of the set-up, liberation schools were intended to be a part-time education in the principles and politics of the Black Panther Party.

2.1. Content and Curriculum Schedule

In terms of learning content, liberation school students would engage in their studies of class struggle over a fairly consistent routine. They learned about important Panther leaders, read about the 10-Point Platform, and took field trips around the neighborhood to learn about the importance of the «Big Family» and

its oppositional relationship to state sponsored capitalism. Depending on the site, students would write letters to political prisoners, shout out responses during class to demonstrate their recall of Panther leaders, and/or engage in reinforcement of basic skills («Mother's POV», 1969, p. 3). The Berkeley and San Francisco sites organized theme days including Revolutionary Culture, Movie Day, Revolutionary History, and Field Trip Day (Val Douglass, 1969)¹. Students also had time to express themselves through art, which most often focused on drawings or paintings related to the concepts they had been taught. When asked about her drawing, one student replied, «It's a big grocery store where they rob the people» («Mother's POV», 1969, p. 3). From these recollections, one can gather that the summer versions of liberation schools were nearly a secular-yet-political equivalent to Vacation Bible Schools in a Black church; the idea was to transmit revolutionary content in terms children could understand².

2.2. Location: The Political Struggles of Space

Liberation schools were housed in a variety of facilities, including church buildings, recreation centers, or open rooms in schools. Finding locations was often difficult. Sometimes, it had to do with finances or availability. Other times, because of the explicit political orientation of the liberation schools, the places that housed them were wary of their stakeholders' responses to a militant organization's presence. The San Jose school, for example, had to close and relocate twice because they were kicked out of a church and a local elementary school. While the church's reason had more to do with space and the start of their summer Head Start Program, the elementary school was concerned about the teachings. The liberation school leaders reported about their confrontation with the superintendent: «Lewis came in and asked why we had poster[s] of Huey, Eldridge and Bobby up. We had been told to take down the posters, and we had not so he told us we would have to leave at once» («San Jose Liberation School», 1969, p. 19). After a showdown at the school board meeting and a promise to stay if they paid a mandatory \$80 fee, they eventually moved to their third location: a church. While this might be on the extreme end of liberation school displacement, it still reveals the complex results of the party's ideology and its interaction with public or religious spaces.

¹ Note that the «Revolutionary History» mentioned is not referring to the US Revolutionary war in the latter 18th century, but rather the history of Black radicalism in the United States.

² Willie R. Beaty, «VBS: A Historical Perspective», *Mississippi Link; Jackson, Miss.*, June 7, 2012, sec. Reigning News, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1023240966/abstract/1BC7B83C2BDC4B30PQ/1>. Note that the Panthers never made the comparison to Vacation Bible Schools. Nevertheless, their openings over the summer, part-time schedule, instruction by laymembers, and focus on inculcation on organizational beliefs and leaders mirrored those of VBS structures. Other scholars compare the liberation schools to their earlier SNCC counterparts: the Freedom Schools. For more, see, Charles M. Payne, Charles E. Cobb, and Carol Sills Strickland, *The World Is a Child's Classroom: An Analysis of the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, Maxine Greene Collection (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 101; Perlstein, «Minds Stayed on Freedom», 262.

2.3. Party Ideology as Pedagogical Practice

These complex relationships between the BPP and institutions were not new. More specifically, the party had a conflicted relationship with the church in the earlier years. In fact, Huey P. Newton had to publicly address a more nuanced view towards *The Church* as a potential ally – a strategic political move that contrasted with the earlier newspaper articles from members who decried churches that turned away free breakfast programs or liberation schools (Newton & Morrison, 2009). One particular article in *The Black Panther* entitled, «Feeding Hungry Children Vs. Men of the Cloth», argued «For the men of the cloth who refused hungry children and endorsed the deceiving torture and thieving of this fascist colony, can only be termed as prostitutes of Alloto [sic], waiting for more of their virginity to be swept away by corruption» («Feeding Hungry Children», 1969, p. 8). It was often this strand of ideology that marked the early liberation schools. The focus mixed some Marxist-Leninist-Maoist interpretations of capitalism with a Fanonian discourse on colonialism. In short, the argument was that Oakland, like the rest of the United States, was a site of colonial struggle. The BPP, as the vanguard of the revolution, was tasked with awakening a political consciousness in the poor Black and Brown communities of Oakland, so that they could reach liberation through force. This approach established the geography of Oakland through the lens of revolutionary opportunity, and this framework undergirded the teachers' dispositions (Self, 2003).

Moreover, the militant anti-capitalist and anti-colonial discourse and delivery that critiqued local institutions as corroborators with larger oppressive institutions is what prompted the liberation schools. Instructors who had not been formally trained but who were well versed in Third World politics utilized direct instruction and basic recall to shape the revolutionaries-in-training. The schools did what they intended: orient the students to the party philosophy and forge a sense of political self-efficacy through community interaction. The students' writings were testament to this. Upon his release from Prison, Huey P. Newton returned to a number of support letters from young comrades. While he was still incarcerated, one 8 ½ year old budding revolutionary addressed the party.

Dear Black Panthers

I think it isn't right for you to be in jail. Well, you and I know there are bad people in the world, and the cops and the judge are the same. You didn't think for one minute I believed all this hogwash did you? About bombing Macy's etc. I'm giving 10¢ and I'll contribute more too. They'll keep you in jail for life over my dead body. I'll raise over \$10,000 someday, somehow but don't you worry I'll do it...

P.S. I'll be a Panther when I grow up. Please write me (Watts, 1970, p. 10).

This letter was signed by a young Elizabeth Watts. Before fourth grade, young Elizabeth was already a committed contributor who conceptualized the judicial and enforcement arms of the state as «the same» enemy. Less than six months after Elizabeth's letter, Newton was released, and the San Francisco cubs were eager to show their support. «Free political prisoners. Free Ericka. All power to the people...

Death to the pigs!» wrote one student. Another less militant, more endearing, but equally loyal message reads, «Dear Huey, I love you! Huey, I love Huey because you are beautiful. I am glad our leader is home» («Letters to Huey», 1970, p. 13). The youth had internalized the party teachings, equating the police, judicial systems, capitalism, and big business within a conceptual pig pen. As they named their enemies, they stretched their concept of family: Ericka Huggins, Bobby Seale, Stokely Carmichael, and other political prisoners were kinfolk who had been unjustly persecuted by the same umbrella of pigs who refused to donate to their daily meals. From these accounts, it appears that the liberation schools had succeeded in their purpose to alert students to the Party's politics and political leaders. These were the concepts that stuck with students, and it was under this political ethos that the first full-time day school was born.

3. Children's House & Intercommunal Youth Institute

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else.

Point 5 of the Black Panther Party 10 Point Platform («Black Panther Party Platform», 1969).

3.1. *The Beginning: The First Full-Time School*

Though many scholars trace the Oakland Community School's roots to the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI) in 1971, Ericka Huggins dates the school back to The Children's House in 1970 (Gore et al., 2009; Payne, Cobb & Strickland, 2008; Wong, Casey, 2012). By January 1971 of the 1970-1971 academic year, the school shifted names. While early notes and memos date the first full start of the IYI to September of 1971, in a March 1971 printed letter to Ericka Huggins, one of the early attendees referred to it as «The Huey P. Newton Youth School» (J. Herman Blake, 1970; «Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. B). Another student in the letter referred to it as «The Huey P. Newton Intercommunal Youth Institute» («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. B). By August of 1971, students referred to the school as the Samuel L. Napier Intercommunal Youth Institute («Messages for George from the People», 1971, p. D)³. Regardless of these origin specifics, the consistent idea is that the Children's House/IYI was primarily composed of BPP offspring. The collective home school was a refuge for children whose parents feared reprisals from public school educators and for families that were disillusioned by the criminalizing effects of public schools.

In its earlier stages—the transition from the Children's House to the Intercommunal Youth Institute—the Panthers' school had a small staff. According to planning documents, the 25 or so students were served by eight staff members. The small cubs from ages three to five were with Brenda Bay, director of the Intercommunal

³ The school was named after Napier who was murdered in the office of *The Black Panther*.

Youth Institute. With a background in social welfare, Bay handled logistics of the school with other staff members, including Gloria Smith who was designated to teach/supervise the six to fourteen-year-olds. Smith had a background in politics, history, and the social sciences. After college, she received a teaching credential and took some additional coursework, including a semester of law school. The other six members included a staff of Panther members who handled everything from transportation, food, and clothing to living accommodations and expensive telephone bills. This staff of eight women directed and maintained the school for approximately two years and set some of the ideology and structure that would survive in the Oakland Community School years. Within this window of time, the staff would grow and change. Sometime during the second year as the IYI, Ericka Huggins, future school director, would join the teaching staff (Ericka Huggins conducted by Fiona Thompson, 2007).

The initial plans for the institute were built on a heavily communal vibe that simultaneously accounted for educational needs. The school plan drafted for the committee included nine bunk beds, clothing and uniforms, two pool tables, basic supplies, a ditto machine, and other administrative/living needs. The general drafts for this plan came from their knowledge of the school operations earlier in the year (J. Herman Blake, 1970, p. 9). The school had been residential for quite some time. Young «comrades» would live at the Institute during the week and return home on the weekends. This set-up allowed for a steady flow of ideas from courses to engagements with party members.

3.2. IYI Curriculum: «What Did You Learn Today, Children?»

While the young students of the school might have had access to one of two official teachers in the earlier years, they were by no means deprived of educators. Incorporated into the instructional staff plan was a tutorial component with college students to remedy math and reading struggles. In addition, Professor J. Herman Blake co-author of Huey P. Newton's memoir – and Newton – the party founding leader – coordinated staff development opportunities with teachers at similar institutions. In terms of course work, the subjects of their curriculum, for the most part, mirrored that of a traditional student's. These included science, math, English, and health. One of the elements that separated IYI curriculum from the mainstream was a course on the ideology of the party (J. Herman Blake, 1970, 1971). In handwritten planning notes, one person discusses the philosophy: «In order to educate our youth we must stud[y] them and ourselves in a very critical manner». On that same page, they discuss a «frame work of a revolutionary intercommunalist philosophy» with the intent to «enable the youth to think in a d.m. manner» (J. Herman Blake, 1970, p. 1). The «d.m.» here most likely refers to the concept of dialectical materialism. Panthers adopted this idea from Marxist thought, and their interpretation here meant having students examine the world through a series of opposing forces in order to find a solution. So while they emphasized subjects like «English, Math, Science...» their purpose was «not only to help the individuals deal with his everyday life in the world, but also to develop his ability to think, reason in a d.m. manner». The eventual goal was to «give the youth [a] way of thinking out of their problem on their own».

This appeared to be an idea that persisted throughout the IYI and the latter OCS (J. Herman Blake, 1970, p. 3; Newton, 1978).

As a day-to-day practice, this philosophy played out through a largely predictable schedule. A typical Monday, Wednesday, or Friday for any student, regardless of age began at 7:30am and lasted until the early evening. For the first 45 minutes of the day, students exercised and then had breakfast. Shortly after, students performed assigned chores and began their coursework by 10am. Math and Science were usually the first subjects of the day. Students had a one hour lunch, history, and then «Field work and Special Projects». Field work mainly consisted of distributing *The Black Panther* newspaper, visiting prisons, speaking with youth in the neighborhood, or attending court cases of fellow Panthers. These hours were essentially spent in service to the party. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, students had health, ideology of the party, lunch, ideology of the party again, art, and then field work. Their art hours were quite student driven, and they had the option to take up fine arts and practical arts projects. These might include visual arts, «sewing, cooking, writing, or any other things that are of interest to them» («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. E).

The course schedule reveals that even as the school fashioned the minds of the next generation of revolutionaries, they simultaneously espoused a focus on students' understanding of core skills. Children ages three through five were the first to participate in a holistic approach to education. Heavy emphasis was placed on learning through engagement in the community. A walk through the neighborhood was an exercise in phonics and decoding to build literacy. To reinforce «primary» math skills, teachers had students count off in a line or practice numeracy in local grocery stores through transactions. To reinforce literacy, students also read food labels and store signs. It appears that the local store was a consistent educational space for students. In addition to the math and literacy practice at the store, they also learned about writing and grammar through trips to the courthouse or reading of the *Black Panther* newspaper.

Older students engaged in these activities as well, but they received more explicit instruction that mirrored the approach of their previous mainstream institutions. Newton's reasoning behind this coincided with the idea that they had already been socialized to traditional schooling. Pedagogically, this also made sense to do since Gloria Smith was credentialed for K through 12 education, and thus was familiar with California teaching standards. As the curriculum «architect», Smith coordinated learning opportunities for three age-group designations: 6-8, 9-11, and 12+ (J. Herman Blake, 1970, 1971; Payne et al., 2008, p. 103; Wong, Casey, 2012, p. 23). The students who had not gained strong literacy skills at their previous public institutions would undergo reading instruction before being placed in general sciences, so that they could establish literacy skills needed to comprehend the general science material (J. Herman Blake, 1971).

3.3. *Lingering Ideologies*

While the course on party ideology did not survive in the latter stages of the school, it is indicative of the IYI's early resemblance to the liberation schools of the

party. Like students at the liberation schools, students at the IYI also wrote letters to political prisoners. One student wrote,

Dear Ericka, All Power to The People,

I have learned a lot in the Huey P. Newton Youth School. We looks nice like little revolutionary should look like. We go sale papers like little revolutionary but some of the little revolutionary get out of hand and have to be dealt with after being in the field («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. B).

Later in this letter, the student also uses much of the party jargon. Words like «comrade», «pigs», and «political prisoners» appear in similar student letters. Letters of this sort reveal that the students were fluent in the party's ideology, and one might safely assume that their specific course in the party philosophy facilitated the students' paradigms. Matching uniforms replete with berets provided an aesthetic akin to the adult party members who donned bold black leather coats with berets. The clothing, then, was a symbolic passing of the torch. The youth were following in the elders' footsteps. Although the communal dynamic was rich: students and educators working, teaching, and learning together daily – there was obviously a need to recalibrate expectations of all stakeholders in this educational space.

3.4. *Trouble in Paradise*

Perhaps the ideas to cast a specific vision for the 1971-1972 school year were built on the previous year's trial and error. For instance, the earlier cited letter discussed how the students who «get out of hand» had to «be dealt with» («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. B). This was just four months before the August plans for the IYI were sent to the central committee. Handwritten planning notes reveal that discipline was not just about students who were in the field; some notes discuss general interactions between students and teachers and students and other teachers. With regards to students' interactions with each other, there is a note about the «Sexual behavior of children». In addition to this cryptic message there is a note about students destroying property and the need to involve parents in the institute. Adults, too, are mentioned among discipline. Apparently, the school had received some complaints about teachers who were unable to receive criticism, the «Panthers' low rating staff», and «children hearing criticisms». There was also a «lack of constructive criticisms», a concern about «pejorative expressions», and perhaps a need for «Males At Institute» (J. Herman Blake, 1970, pp. 11-14). There was even discussion of the pettiness of gossip at the institute. While the typed vision that Newton casts is of a potential educational utopia, the sketched notes that precede the vision also reveal a preliminary murky terrain in the oasis of liberation (J. Herman Blake, 1970, 1971). This is not to suggest that the institute was ineffective, but rather that school staff faced real logistical and social difficulties in their first year of operation that had to be addressed when the first full school year began.

Perhaps mindful of these challenges, Herman Blake sent the staff development proposition to the members of the Black Panther Party's Central Committee, and the staff of the IYI. The hope was to see models of educators who have been successful

in similar educational environments. Undergirding this suggestion was the philosophy that «all of the staff will perform administrative and instructional tasks». Moreover, the school sought to «operate on the assumption that there is something they can teach the youth». They believed that «With careful staff development we hope to see all staff offering some area of instruction» (J. Herman Blake, 1970, 1971, p. IYI-6). These earlier staff philosophies suggest that there was an element of practice to their preaching. The «Big Family» they spoke to students about in the liberation schools translated to their educational approach at the IYI.

The Intercommunal Youth Institute served as a microcosm of the party's changes. Like their liberation school predecessors, the IYI also reinforced the political ideas of the party in their teaching. At the same time, they were interested in other forms of knowledge that demonstrated an engagement in the community and discovery through outdoor interactions with nature, literally playing with the idea of discovery in their own backyard. One gathers that camaraderie and unity were high on the values list of the school. Regardless of tasks, «Everything is done together, in order to learn solidarity and socialism in a practical way» («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971). This might have very well been the impetus of maintaining a residential educational space five days out of the week. Though it might be true that the party philosophy only constituted one of the subjects, one could also argue the lens with which they approached everyday encounters solidified the transmission of party biases. Between the four hours of instruction in party ideology, ten hours of weekly field work, events over the weekends, and daily engagement with party members, one can easily deduce that the inculcation strategies that were a heavy-handed dynamic of the liberation schools found a much more experiential approach in the IYI. To what extent did the language of everyday action speak volumes to the students about *what they should think*?

4. Tracing the Trajectory: The Birth of the Oakland Community School

In her book *Living For the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*, scholar Donna Murch asserts that «Social movements and grassroots efforts that mobilize large numbers of people often flounder when they expand beyond their point of origin into broader geographic or social terrain» (Murch, 2010, p. 235). Her focus is on the party as a whole, but the implications are just as applicable to the iterations of the BPP School. As the school developed, it too transformed in ways that were much different than the early years. In their respective analyses of the OCS, scholars Craig Peck and Daniel Perlstein recognize the school's shift away from Black Panther ideology. Building on Peck's claim, Perlstein asserts, «the very opening of the IYI school reflected a profound shift away from revolutionary aspirations toward reformist electoral politics» (Perlstein, 2002, p. 265). Other sources on the school support this shift. In their history of the Oakland Community School, Angela LeBlanc-Ernest and Ericka Huggins mark the time of the Children's House formation with the exact same year Huey P. Newton was released from Soledad State correctional facility (Gore et al., 2009; Newton, 2009). The progression to the Intercommunal Youth Institute coincided with Newton's public announcements about the party's new focus on the survival programs within

Oakland as part of a loosely-structured collective of revolutionary communities worldwide (Newton, 1971). The Oakland Community School (OCS), born at the height of the IYI's enrollment, signaled a pedagogical shift as well. Part of this was due to new leadership. After director Brenda Bay left the party and the West Coast altogether, Huey P. Newton asked Ericka Huggins to serve as the new director with the help of Donna Howell. With the changing of the guard came a pedagogical and philosophical shift in education. The most dramatic shifts, perhaps, happened after the first year.

4.1. *OCS Philosophy*

After the OCS completed one full year, Huey P. Newton left the country for Cuba to escape charges for murder in one case and assault in another. Unable to maintain his leadership position from a distance, he appointed Elaine Brown as the party chair. Scholars argue that Brown and the OCS staff shifted the school away from a strict BPP ideological focus and even closer to a semi-traditional curriculum paradigm (Gore et al., 2009; Perlstein, 2002; Williamson, 2005; Wong, Casey, 2012). In a *Jet* magazine feature on the school, Brown is quoted asserting, «We try to teach the children, in essence, how to think as opposed to what to think. So therefore we don't try to impose Panther thinking, or anybody else's on the board or in the classroom» (Lucas, 1976, p. np). This explicit concern is consistent with some of the claims in the earlier iterations of the school to the degree that student autonomy was valued. In 1971, the language the school deployed was «The youth are regarded as people, whose ideas and opinions are respected». At the same time, the institute, just a sentence prior confirms «we based its teaching concepts on teaching the skills necessary for survival in racist, fascist America» («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971, p. E). The explicit mention of fascism signals the rhetorical shifts that took place in the party. Panther scholar Robyn C. Spencer argues that in 1973, approximately the same general period that Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale run for office, the language of the party changed more radically (Joseph, 2009; Spencer, 2016; Williamson, 2005). Moreover, she asserts, «calls to overthrow the "fascist pig power structure" were muted. The focus on mobilizing the community was replaced by a commitment to long-term organizing» (Spencer, 2016, p. 121). Just as sub-structures reflect the changes in the larger institutions, the OCS followed the trends of the greater party. The explicit anti-pig language that revealed itself in the students' writing was no longer at the forefront of the party's overt political discourse, nor was it in the language regarding the school.

Along the same lines, the language of the philosophy also began to show some of the break away from strong politicization and greater attention to student curiosity. A 1978 copy of the school's handbook quotes Khalil Gibran: «You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries for yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth» (Oakland Community School, 1978). Through this epigraph, the school administrators flesh out the rationale for the «How to think» reasoning that Brown shares in her *Jet* interview. Moreover, the «Approach to Learning» section asserts «We attempt to take every precaution that our children do not receive one-sided,

biased or inaccurate information» (Oakland Community School, 1978). The role of educators, then, was to create opportunities for students to find themselves. In order to nurture such open-ended learning opportunities, the school emphasized a «highly structured learning environment» combined with «self-chosen tasks». The only limit of the learning space was «the collective interest». In short, the OCS aspired to create a learning environment that fostered collaboration and self/collective accountability, not purely teacher-imposed standards. The focus on the collective and on critical thinking was not new. Keep in mind that the early focus on dialectics as a means for problem-solving were a part of the IYI, and language that indicated discipline also accompanied a written commitment to provide students with «extensive freedom to explore and experience their environment» (J. Herman Blake, 1970, p. 1). Perhaps the transition away from express BPP ideology was the beginning of that larger change.

4.2. *OCS Environment and Structure*

Like the Intercommunal Youth Institute, the Oakland Community School also divided students into levels instead of grades. According to the handbook, «The 12 levels of instruction are grouped as follows: Levels 1-3: Primary Skills/Levels 4-9: Intermediates/Levels 10-12: Secondary...The children are placed into groups» (Oakland Community School, 1978). The levels coincide with the school's philosophy about creating ample opportunities for students to learn. Rather than restrict students to traditional grade levels, these levels organized students according to their strengths. They continually evaluated students' performance, so they could place them with the appropriate level. Staff members were also clear about ensuring that students always learned from each other. The «Each One Teach One» model is reminiscent of the constructivist model, wherein students build each other's learning. Because students are divided in levels and are more closely aligned within each other's zone of proximal development, they are better able to assist each other. They co-construct learning experiences through active engagement, particularly with peers (Vygotskii, n.d.)⁴. In his memoir, former student Gregory A. Lewis discusses the dynamics of the levels that also reveal the culture of the school: «Placing children in accordance with their ability, and aptitude, not their age. And it was done without shaming the kid. For years I had no idea some of the kids in my class were older» (Gregory B. Lewis, 1995, p. 82). Lewis' account communicates how the levels system helped students to exist in community without the threat of teasing or belittling. Former cub Zachary Killoran, whose mother taught English at the school, shared a similar sentiment as Greg. When asked about traditional grades, he said «...they didn't move kids on by grade. They moved kids on by capability...See, I didn't know about grades until I got to public school and was in the 5th grade at 9 years old» (Zachary Killoran, 2018). The practice of levels that began in the IYI really took shape at the OCS.

⁴ Zone of Proximal Development is the concept developed by Vygotsky that asserts learning best takes place when the concept is just outside of a student's reach. It is based on the premise that students' abilities are not simply based on what they can conjure on their own, but how they construct meaning in conjunction with teachers, students, or scaffolds.

In terms of schedule, the day was equally as lengthy as the IYI schedule. Students rolled out of bed at 5:30 am, rode the bus – driven by one of the Panther males – to school between 6:30am and 7am, and began their official school day with exercises. According to Gregory, exercises were often led by Panther parents in the play area. He confesses, «Sometimes one of the parents would let me lead» (Gregory B. Lewis, 1995, p. 84). His statement is indicative of the types of opportunities students had in their learning community. After morning P.E. was breakfast; the menu variation was anything from cold cereal to eggs and bacon. Students were encouraged to take responsibility, so they would often help cook, wash dishes, or clean the kitchen. They were often supervised by the chief cook, Melvin Dickson, who just recently passed over the summer of 2018. Kesha, an OCS student remembers working with Melvin in the kitchen: «somebody had to dry the dishes...or put things away in the cabinet or whatever. Then you get a treat» (Kesha Hackett-Belcher, 2018). In short, responsibility and care for the learning/living environment were reinforced with an additional reward.

On a typical day, students would have «Math, English, and History» in their homeroom. Some of the content teachers would switch between student classrooms to provide instruction (Steve McCutchen, 2018). Math teacher and former Panther, Steve McCutchen, recalls moving rooms for a few of his periods (Steve McCutchen, 2018). Students themselves, «switched rooms for Spanish, Science, Music and Art classes» (Gregory B. Lewis, 1995, p. 90)⁵. In a 1979 copy of the schedule, students' course times differed by grouping. Primary skills students had an earlier lunch and break than their intermediate counterparts. Students ended their courses by 3:30, enjoyed free-time, a 4pm dinner, and then a 4:30 close of the day (Oakland Community School, 1978). Just as the levels determined the difference in scheduling, they also had an effect on the elements of the curriculum.

4.3. *Curriculum & Instruction at OCS*

Similar to how the shift away from party doctrine was significant during the transition from IYI to the Oakland Community School, the practice of diverse learning experiences became increasingly explicit in the OCS. The curriculum guides of the OCS in the late 1970s attest to Elaine Brown's *Jet* confession. The school held a robust course offering, including science, social science, environmental studies, Spanish, language arts, performing arts, visual arts, physical education, mathematics, and «Specific Curriculum Areas» (Oakland Community School, 1976). In a 1978 paper he wrote during his PhD program entitled «New Educational Models» Huey P. Newton praised the school and outlined how the social science curriculum encompassed five categories: historical, political, economic, geographic, and social (Newton, 1978, n.p.). These curricular areas, presumably, were taught through the school's philosophy. A question to consider before unpacking the curriculum is, «to what extent does the curriculum reflect the ideology of the party? How is curriculum

⁵ Music teachers were advised and credentialed by the UC Berkeley school of music, which is consistent with the earlier school plans of reaching out to local universities for educational support.

selection itself a form of guiding students' thinking? How does what one excludes or includes shape what the students learn?».

Anyone looking through the math or language arts sections of the curriculum design would see something typical of core subjects. In math, students in the early levels learned counting, basic geometric shapes, and addition/subtraction. By levels six and seven, students were practicing decimals, complex fraction problems, and early algebraic expressions (Oakland Community School, n.d.-a). Language courses were a combination of spelling, handwriting, composition, and reading. Early levels practiced basic motor skills associated with using a writing instrument while the older students practiced the structure of paragraphs in order to compose narrative, descriptive, and expository essays (Oakland Community School, n.d.-b).

Panther cub Zack also remembers how the students learned to edit work. In a recollection about classes, he says «My mom was one of my teachers...she was a copyeditor out...in New York back in the '60s. One day, she came in the class...and she wrote out an entire paragraph that had a bunch of mistakes. And then she wrote out the copyright notations – the editor's notations. How to notify and fix mistakes». This was just one way students learned to «fix mistakes» (Killoran, 2018).

Teachers at the school used a variety of methods to enhance students' grasp of important concepts. At the BPP's 50th Reunion, several former students and educators spoke on a panel about the Oakland Community School. Former student Kesha Hackett reminisced about a rhythmic version of the order of operations (PEMDAS) that she deployed in her double-dutch play time. She chanted «Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally» as she mimicked popping up in a jump rope session (Huggins, Dickson, Brooks, Hackett-Belcher, & Luis, 2016). In conversation with the author, Kesha also expressed that she «didn't really know» they were «doing algebra until I got to public school, and they said, "We're going to do Algebra"». And I was like, "Oh, I know this"» (Kesha Hackett-Belcher, 2018). Gregory Lewis remembers something similar. In his recollections over his favorite math teacher, Steve McCutchen, Lewis states «I feel like he did a lot of incorporating – what we call in the legal field – “demonstratives”. Tangible exhibits of chess pieces, domino pieces. I'm more of a visual learner – hand textiles. That means more to me than writing a formula» (Gregory A. Lewis, 2017). That he can recall these math exercises forty years later is impressive. Greg also remembers how McCutchen translated concepts across spaces. McCutchen also taught the martial arts class, and Greg reminisces on how Steve reinforced math skills in martial arts and martial arts concepts in math. In an interview with the author, McCutchen confesses that this strategy of connecting ideas and teaching opportunities across contexts was a practice he began after a few years of teaching at the school. Moreover, he asserts,

It wasn't until '77/'78 that I realized that each subject is still interconnected, whether it's in natural science, social science, or any other discipline...There's a geometry and physics to martial arts that when you reduce everything to its simplest form, it's all transferrable – it's all interpreted through math... If I could explain the martial arts technique – the demonstration and show angle, curves, lines, points, arcs that are explainable through geometry, students who may be more analytically oriented could transfer that understanding into their martial

arts learning. You can't call the student a nerd, and you can't call the martial artist a jock because they're interconnected (McCutchen, 2018).

McCutchen's recollection and explanation allude to a larger pedagogical approach. In short, his argument is that knowledge is never truly reduced to a singular discipline. At the same time all disciplines carry a connection to math; mindful of this, he saw the interconnectedness of these ideas and taught students concepts by integrating ideas across physical education, mathematics, and science. McCutchen's courses were not the only dynamic courses, though.

At the OCS, social science and natural science were also meaningful subject areas. Science was a mixture of difficulty levels while history was a subtle introduction into rebellion. According to the curriculum guide, science units encompassed studies of electric energy, density, temperature, biology, and matter across the levels. All sciences provided tangible experimental design (Oakland Community School, n.d.-b). Of the students interviewed, all remember having science with teacher Chris Doherty. Keshia discussed growing plants; Amber, one of the few white students, talked about microscopic investigations; Ronnie remembers science projects and petting a snake; Greg remembers building a garden/greenhouse at the school. Ironically, one of the few white teachers carried immense social capital in this elementary school founded by the Black panther Party, so much so that he is a thread in all of the students' accounts (Landis-Reedy, 2018; Lewis, 2017; Hackett-Belcher, 2018; Brooks, 2018; Killoran, 2018)

In social science and history, students also had vivid memories of the connections to a strong sense of racial pride. In history, lower levels began with an understanding of themselves, their families, and their neighborhood. According to the curriculum guide, one lesson asks students to interview parents to learn the story of their own birth and early years. By level five, the curriculum listed an extensive investigation into colonization. Multimodal uses of music, toy soldiers, the album *Confessions of Nat Turner* and copies of the Declaration of Independence were all included at level five (Oakland Community School, n.d.-c). In level six, students were engaged in a mock constitutional convention – by level seven, holding mock debates about the Civil War, and writing «a research paper on Black politicians during the Reconstruction period» (Oakland Community School, n.d.-c). These lessons translated clearly for the students – well, at least for the few who have been asked to remember their experiences.

Gregory recalls learning about the history of revolutions. While the curriculum guide explains how students would learn about Nat Turner's rebellion, Gregory also remembers how Turner's rebellion and the American Revolution were juxtaposed with Toussaint L'Ouverture's contributions to the Haitian Revolution. When Greg wanted to learn about what it was like to travel on the slave ships, the teacher Amar Casey had all the students lie on the floor in close proximity. Student Amber recalls,

And he closed up all the windows and made it real dark, and he put on a recording of uh seagulls and ships creaking...There were chains clanking, and oh my goodness. It was, it just transported us there. And he was...talking us through the experience of being on this ship for, you know, months, months on

end—chained to the person next to you. And he got real kind of graphic...’now imagine that you eat here, you sleep here, you, you pee here, you poop here. The lady next to you just had a baby here’...It was just very vivid for me...and taking us there basically in our imagination (Landis-Reedy, 2018).

Greg, too, remembers how «sobering» it was for a teacher to have a group full of elementary aged children – or «rambunctious kids» all lie on the floor in the full weight of the experience. Overall, Black history was embedded throughout each level of the social studies curriculum, and as Gregory attests, «We knew the map of Africa just as well as we knew the United States» (Lewis, 2017) Kesha’s recollections about history curriculum were similar. She walked away with «a sense of purpose, a sense of pride... knowledge of self because we had a lot of history and a lot more history of African kings and queens, and just people who made a difference». Zack Killoran also recalls how the students learned the local names, English, names and pronunciation and spelling of each capital. When tested, he asked the teacher, «Do you want the American versions or the local versions?» (Killoran, 2018).

Perhaps the history course is the most revelatory of how the school adhered to the principles of Point 5 of the Platform. They sought to teach children knowledge of their pasts and of themselves, and this is evident in both the curriculum guides and the recollections of teachers and students. At the same time, some of the existing tenor of conversation also found itself in the history curriculum guides. Students read a magazine entitled «The Underhanded History of the U.S.». One of the level seven learning objectives was «To know about the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and other White terrorist groups». Level four students read a chapter from Huey P. Newton’s *Revolutionary Suicide* and Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Newton, 2009; Oakland Community School, n.d.-c). Panther Cub Ronnie Brooks, who was a rapper with the group the Digital Underground in the late 1980s and early 1990s, remembers his peers reading the Haley text in their first years of undergrad. In an interview he confessed, «Wow, we were learning a lot at a really young age. And I didn’t realize until I was out of school...these college students were just learning» what he had learned as an elementary school student (Brooks, 2018). Ronnie’s memory confirms Kesha’s earlier assertion; it also attests to the reality that teachers were enacting the suggested curriculum in their classrooms. More importantly, Ronnie’s account conveys how teachers’ selection of texts in the curriculum is part of «what» they wanted students to think, or at least what they wanted them to think about.

This is not to suggest that the content was ineffective or less meaningful. On the contrary, situating the curriculum within phases of the Black experience as it intersects with the rest of history is powerful. It is culturally relevant, especially when the majority of the student population is Black (Ladson-Billings, 1995a; Paris, 2012)⁶.

⁶ Ladson-Billings argues that pedagogy of this sort affirms African American students’ sense of heritage and cultural understandings, even as it builds students’ ability to think critically about the content of the lessons and their larger connection to systemic inequality. The strategy also places a value on student academic engagement and success. Django Paris maintains the basic premise of this pedagogical approach, but extends the notion of relevance to sustaining, asserting that students should connect their popular cultural competence and traditional cultural competence to mainstream knowledge systems. Both of these appear to be operating in some capacity at the Oakland Community School.

Nevertheless, when we return to the conversation of a curriculum and instruction approach based on «how to think, not what to think», we divorce ourselves from the inherently political nature of curriculum. What educators and curriculum writers choose is always the result of values, expectations, culture, and politics. The «what» of teaching is often embedded in the curriculum, and from the existing accounts about the school, this «what» of a Black radical consciousness was an important part of the students' academic development.

4.4. *The Students Speak*

As both the philosophy of the IYI and of the OCS both state, the Panthers' school was dedicated to honoring student voice. Students sat on governing committees and planning committees, and they had the freedom to express their inquiries, fears, concerns, and suggestions («Our Hope is Placed on You», 1971; Payne et al., 2008). One of the areas where students' voice was most pronounced was the «Justice Court». In a public access video with LeVar Burton, students are shown completely facilitating the Justice Court. If a student misbehaved or behaved in a way that worked against the collectivist idea of the school family, they had to appear before the Justice Court, which is composed of a committee of their peers who ask questions to determine the root of the problem. Students Socratically inquired about their peers' behaviors and repeated back the details of the unfavorable behavior. Active listening, critical thinking, and reflective questioning were required to negotiate with the student whose behavior was in question and with the members of the court. After this careful questioning and deliberation, the court would suggest a «method of correction», which essentially was the consequence or intervention for the behavior («Oakland Community Learning Center [founded by the Black Panther Party] 1977 - YouTube», 2015). This type of responsibility and sophisticated social engagement reflects the dialectical relationship and student-driven accountability expressed in the handbook. While this process is by no means perfect, it pulls away from the traditional notion that teachers act as the arbiters of truth; students, instead, hold each other accountable. One staff member noted that the students would make mistakes in the process, but that this, too, was a part of the learning experience (Payne et al., 2008). Former OCS teacher Rodney Gilead says that whenever a student made an allegation or had a problem, the first question was «Did you investigate?». He says that such a system put the «onus on the kids», as they were considered to be «fully participatory human beings in the process» (Rodney Gilead, 2018). Gregory also appreciated the Justice Court and remembers it fondly. He said it was mainly composed of older kids. When recalling the experiences, he said, «You kinda have to explain your actions, and it actually made you think, “Why DID I do that?” We were taught at an early age that there's rules. Panther rules, and it's important to adhere to them. About being accountable – self-accountable». Gregory further recalls that there wasn't a «gotcha» embedded in the spirit of the school. From this, one can see how the staff worked with students to co-construct the learning environment in the classroom and beyond (Lewis, 2017). This reflection is important as knowledge of self and collective respect are deeply embedded in the school philosophy.

5. Conclusion

The Oakland Community School has much to teach us about the need for curriculum and instruction that allow students to critically question their realities and negotiate their educative experiences. At its height, it was recognized by the Governor of California—Jerry Brown Jr.— and the California Department of Education as a «model elementary school» (Gore et al., 2009, p. 177). Using the lenses of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies is important to the degree that they explain the contours of the school's work. While some scholars have already opened the door for pedagogical theory analysis via transformative pedagogy or progressive pedagogy, the hope is that continued analysis of the school will show the presence and significance of culturally sustaining approaches (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014; Payne et al., 2008; Perlstein, 2002). The notion of cultural relevance contextualizes the racial, political, and cultural dynamics of the OCS' teaching strategies. The relationship between the school's social science curriculum that explored the range of Black intellectual thought along U.S. history – coupled with explicit teaching about economic systems – engaged the students in what Gloria Ladson-Billings refers to as cultural competence and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b). Mindful of this, we as educators must continue to excavate the school's history in order to better understand its potential educational merits. At the same time, we must also analyze how the problematic political inculcation of its earlier years can inform educational theorists as we refine our approaches to social justice and cultural responsiveness in the present.

Triangulating the Oakland Community School's oral histories with the existing archival data and secondary sources will enrich the conversation of the past's lessons for the present. This current investigation is the beginning of a lengthier engagement that involves further inquiry into the language arts, social studies, social science, environmental studies, and geography curriculum guides in order to further juxtapose the party's philosophy with the pragmatic teaching implications of the school. Future research will involve attention to archival documents along with oral histories of former students, teachers, and parents whose children attended the school. Unearthing this content is an attempt to respond to Arthur Schomburg's imperative in the 20th century: «The negro must remake his past in order to make his future» (Grant, Brown & Brown, 2016). The process of remaking requires the researcher to return to the past with new eyes. Such a process will mean stepping outside of the traditional canon of educational history and into marginalized histories – literally and figuratively capturing the voices of those mainstream scholarship has repeatedly silenced.

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