

Oracle: The History Journal of Boston College

Volume V | Issue I

Article 5

The Oppressed Teaching the Oppressed: The Black Panthers' Oakland Community School as a "Pedagogy of Hope"

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THE OPPRESSED TEACHING THE OPPRESSED: THE BLACK PANTHERS' OAKLAND COMMUNITY SCHOOL AS A “PEDAGOGY OF HOPE”

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Abstract: The Oakland Community School (OCS), founded by the Black Panther Party, emerged as a pioneering institution in the 1970s, providing comprehensive and revolutionary education for Black and underprivileged students in Oakland, California. This paper explores how the OCS embodied Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of hope” and served as a catalyst for culturally responsive education models. Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, the paper examines the OCS’s unique approach to education, including the teaching of Black Panther Party ideology within classrooms. Drawing upon Freire’s concepts of liberatory education and pedagogy of the oppressed, the paper highlights the alignment between OCS experiences and Freire’s framework. The three components of liberatory education and pedagogy of hope are considered in relation to the OCS, and the paper concludes with a discussion of transformative education and the use of the dialectic at the OCS. By connecting the OCS model and Freire’s inspirations, the paper sheds light on the relevance of culturally responsive education in contemporary contexts.

“... The kinship formed of the children and the staff and the teachers and the parents through the Oakland Community School, there was nothing like it,” said school director Ericka Huggins. “It really was like this gigantic family and I’ve never experienced anything quite like that since in a school setting.”² The Oakland Community School—the longest-standing survival program of the Black Panther Party—was a remarkable place, operating under the principle: “We serve the people everyday. We serve the people, body and soul.”³ Born from a dire need for comprehensive, revolutionary education for Black and underprivileged students in Oakland, California in the 1970s, the Oakland Community School embodied a liberatory education. In this paper, I will

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² University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 82.

³ Shani Ealey, “Black Panthers' Oakland Community School: A Model for Liberation,” Black Organizing Project, November 16, 2021, <https://blackorganizingproject.org/black-panthers-oakland-community-school-a-model-for-liberation/>.

demonstrate how the Oakland Community School personified Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of hope” and inspired the call toward culturally responsive education models. I will begin by introducing the Black Panther Party’s Oakland Community School, followed by an overview of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I will then discuss the practice of teaching Black Panther Party Ideology in OCS classrooms to begin a pedagogical analysis of the Oakland Community School. The main sections of my paper will connect Oakland Community School experiences and teaching philosophies to the three components of Paulo Freire’s “liberatory education” and “pedagogy of hope.” My analysis will conclude with a discussion of transformative education and the use of the dialectic at the Oakland Community School, connecting the model and Freire’s inspirations to contemporary calls for culturally responsive education.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was founded in October 1966 in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The organization was revolutionary; from 1966 to 1982, its ideologies of Black nationalism, socialism, and armed self-defense (particularly in response to police brutality) manifested in a number of ways, including their survival programs. The Black Panther Party developed several survival programs aimed to meet many of the immediate needs of their communities, which included food assistance, drug awareness, health care access, police patrols, teen councils, and more.⁴ But the particular focus of this paper is the Black Panther Party’s liberation schools. For the party, education was seen as a key to liberation and progression. In fact, Dr. Saturu Ned, a Black Panther Party alum, is known for the following quote, “Let’s circulate to educate, and educate to liberate!”⁵

Russell Rickford’s *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* sheds light on the Black Panthers as the leaders of the most influential liberation schools. He positions the liberation schools as projects consistent with the Panthers’ other radical enterprises, asserting they were “designed to infuse youngsters with revolutionary fervor and enable them to survive this corrupt system and build a new one that serves the people.”⁶ However, Ericka Huggins, a member of the Black Panther Party, distinguishes the Oakland

⁴ “Black Panther Party Community Survival Programs @ Bppaln.org,” Black Panther Party Alumni Legacy Network, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://bppaln.org/programs>.

⁵ Shani Ealey, “Black Panthers’ Oakland Community School: A Model for Liberation,” Black Organizing Project, November 16, 2021, <https://blackorganizingproject.org/black-panthers-oakland-community-school-a-model-for-liberation/>.

⁶ Russell John Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 89.

Community School, stating that “there was no other school like Oakland Community School that the party ran.”⁷ For that reason, I have chosen the Oakland Community School as a specific representation of the Black Panther Party’s liberation education, which I argue is a living model of Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of hope” as outlined in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

The precursor to the Oakland Community School, called the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI), opened in 1971 with a mission to challenge the concept of “uneducable youth” battered and underserved by Oakland’s public school system. The initial IYI had minimal enrollment, teaching staff, and it was supported financially by the Black Panther Party. In the beginning, the IYI actually functioned as a home-school, where instructors and students lived together because the students were primarily Panther party children. During the year 1973, the IYI was growing and ready to serve the broader community. As such, the Party changed its name to the Oakland Community School (OCS).⁸ But the tenets of innovative and radical education that began at the IYI continued to serve as the basis for the pedagogical practices of the Oakland Community School. On the transition from the IYI to OCS, former director Ericka Huggins says:

When we opened the doors, we had 90 students, five-year-olds through twelve-year-olds, and we had a child development center already for two to four-and-a-half year olds. Then within a couple months we had 150 students, which was our cap. We always had a huge waiting list and unborn children on that waiting list. People loved this school so much.⁹

From 1973 to 1982, the Oakland Community School functioned as a ten-year institution that instructed students in math, science, language arts (Spanish and English), history, art, physical education, choir, and environmental studies. However, through the core of student instruction, the school maintained its commitment to teaching students “how to think, not what to think.”¹⁰ The Oakland Community School was tuition-free, serving students from a variety of different geographic locations and economic backgrounds. Particularly prophetic about the Oakland Community School was its untraditional level system, where students were divided into seven

⁷ Cline, David, Ericka C. Huggins oral history interview conducted by David P. Cline in Oakland, California, 2016 June 30, Other, Accessed 2016, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2016655435/>.

⁸ Gore, Dayo F. et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 170.

⁹ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 90.

¹⁰ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 170.

groups, each according to their ability and their need.¹¹ This format allowed each student at OCS to receive a customized curriculum fit for their learning style and level. It is also worth noting that the Oakland Community School paid special attention to students with learning differences. Special education consultants frequently visited OCS to identify students with learning challenges, and their individual learning plans were then adjusted accordingly.¹² This was remarkable, given the history that, in the 1970s, U.S. schools educated only one in five children with disabilities. Many states had laws excluding certain students, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or had an intellectual disability.¹³ According to school director Ericka Huggins, a typical day at the Oakland Community School went as follows:

The students remember starting the day with a ten minute exercise program. Breakfast, followed by a short, school wide interactive check-in preceded the morning classes. A nutritious lunch at midday and ten minutes of meditation in the early afternoon was followed by classes for the older children and rest for the smaller ones. Dinner concluded the day and the school vans transported the children who could not walk to their homes.¹⁴

Throughout OCS' nine years of operation, the school and learning models attracted the attention of other educators as a viable and powerful educational program. OCS head administrators Huggins, Howell, Newton, and Brown had a goal to make the Oakland Community School a replicable model, which was reflected in their careful and conscientious employee selection processes. At OCS, educators had to be patient and dedicated to successfully and effectively "educate the whole child."¹⁵ In fact, in August 1977, the California State Department of Education gave its approval to the school as a *model* elementary school—an incredible testament to the success of OCS. The Oakland Community School was a legend in its time, with

¹¹ Gore et al., "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education," Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 170.

¹² Gore et al., "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education," Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 173.

¹³ "A History of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act," Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, November 18, 2022, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History>.

¹⁴ Shani Ealey, "Black Panthers' Oakland Community School: A Model for Liberation," Black Organizing Project, November 16, 2021.

¹⁵ Gore et al., "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education," Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 174.

director Ericka Huggins stating that: “We were the great-great-great-grandma of charter schools.”¹⁶ She continues:

It was the most phenomenal teaching experience I’ve ever had and to be able to facilitate parents from poor communities especially communities of color without blame, shame, or judgment was a wonderful experience also. It was just entirely unique and I would like to see it happen again because it was a model that could be replicated anywhere, anytime, by anybody. It wasn’t that you had to be black or you had to be connected with an organization.¹⁷

The Oakland Community School’s remarkable flexibility and replicability extends the conversation far beyond Oakland California, the Black Panther Party, or the years 1973 to 1982. OCS’ educational philosophy embodies conversations about the role of education in social movements and in dismantling systems of oppression, as well as the case for culturally responsive education—which is particularly relevant in the present moment.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed, written by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in 1967 and 1968, is Freire’s attempt to, through pedagogical practice, help the oppressed fight back to regain their lost humanity, thus dismantling systems of oppression. His book, like the Oakland Community School, was born in the shadows of important historical moments. Latin America underwent significant political turmoil during the Cold War as the conflicting interests of the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union caused widespread tension and social unrest. In the 1960s and 1970s, military coups took place in Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, and other South American nations, occasionally with support from the United States. The new authoritarian administrations in these nations were frequently openly hostile to communist ideologies. The 1964 military takeover of Brazil, which began with the removal of the left-leaning president João Goulart, had a special impact on Freire’s viewpoint in his works (including Freire and his literacy efforts). Freire wrote the book while exiled from his native country as it experienced an anti-communist regime change. As a result, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* emphasizes the role of education in social movements, critiquing the rise of authoritarianism and right-wing policies in Latin America at the time.

¹⁶ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 87.

¹⁷ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 87.

Many revolutionary organizations like the Black Panthers in the late twentieth century also saw education as a key to not only liberation, but also to dismantling institutions of the dominant culture. Those educators found inspiration and theoretical bases in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—and Russell Rickford affirms this in his *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*. He writes, “Some read Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire, whose 1970 treatise, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argued that the reconstruction of subject peoples required the cultivation of critical consciousness.”¹⁸ Though we cannot say definitively whether any instructors at OCS read Freire’s work, this lens provides an interesting way to analyze the pedagogical practices of the Oakland Community School as a living model of the philosophies outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

At the core of Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” is the task for oppressed people to liberate themselves from an unjust system of oppression. According to Freire, any movement to defeat oppression must be led by oppressed people, so that they may play an active role in their own liberation. He writes:

Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people. Or to put it another way, the solution of the contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor, no longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom.¹⁹

Before presenting liberation as a “childbirth,” Freire introduces the role of education in his “pedagogy of the oppressed,” posing the question: How can education serve in helping oppressed people dismantle oppression and reach liberation? Central to his argument here is the idea that education can help people—the oppressors and the oppressed—realize their roles in oppressive systems, abandon them, and begin to define new roles independent of the systems that the dominant cultures depend upon. This notion of the oppressed leading—or educating—the oppressed manifests itself in the Oakland Community School, specifically through its practice of teaching Black Panther Party ideology to its students.

¹⁸ Russell John Rickford, *We Are an African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 11.

¹⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 49.

The Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Program first emphasized the importance of liberation education in the Party, and many of those tenets were exercised through education at the Oakland Community School. The fifth tenet of the Ten-Point Program states:

We want decent 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. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of the self and your position in society and the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else.²⁰

In many ways, the Oakland Community School was a working, living model of this tenet.

Research conducted by Robert P. Robinson, titled “Until the Revolution: Analyzing the Politics, Pedagogy, and Curriculum of the Oakland Community School,” examines how OCS used Black Panther Party ideology as a pedagogical practice in its early stages. On the ideological focus of OCS, Robinson writes, “This focus mixed some Marxist-Leninist-Maoist interpretations of capitalism with a Fanonian discourse on colonialism.”²¹ This perspective also provides insight into the role that Oakland, California—a politically charged location at the time—played in shaping education at OCS. OCS was located at the very center of a community-wide education crisis, where “Oakland was one of the lowest-scoring school districts in California ... where other troubling issues for OUSD included school violence, the use of security guards on school campuses, and the highly contested plan to reduce the number of teachers in the district, resulting in larger class size and high student-teacher ratios.”²² Thus, we can argue that Oakland was a site of colonial struggle, tasking the Black Panther Party with awakening a political consciousness in the poor Black and Brown communities of Oakland, so they could reach liberation through force. Understanding liberation education as an important task for the Black Panther Party highlights the way they used BPP ideology to shape the minds and belief systems of its students, the next generation of revolutionaries.

²⁰ October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want, What We Believe, (1969, August 2), The Black Panther, p. 22, Retrieved from <http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu>.

²¹ Robert P Robinson, “Until the Revolution: Analyzing the Politics, Pedagogy, and Curriculum of the Oakland Community School,” *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): pp. 181-203, <https://doi.org/10.14516/ete.273>, 185.

²² Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard, *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 163.

The students at OCS engaged most closely with BPP ideology in their writing classes and assignments. Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, had been charged with murdering Oakland police officer John Frey in 1967²³, and, while he was in prison, a number of young comrades wrote him letters:

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 cents 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.²⁴

In addition, the early Oakland Community School (then the Intercommunal Youth Institute) taught students about Panther activism, revolutionary philosophy, and Black history. They also took routine field trips to Panther trials.²⁵ A specific example of BPP ideology used as a pedagogical practice was the infusion of BPP rhetoric in the classroom. The following exchange indicates this:

Teacher: What is a pig?

Student: A pig is a low-down person who can be any color who beats us up and tells lies.

Teacher: How many types of pigs are there?

Student: Four types.

Teacher: Name them.

Student: The avaricious businessman pig (who may be a landowner or a store owner, the teacher interjected), the police pig, the president pig, and the National Guard pig.²⁶

²³ "Arrest of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale," Arrest of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale - Bay Area Television Archive, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/206879>.

²⁴ Elizabeth Watts, (1970, March 15), A Letter From the Youth, The Black Panther, p. 10, Retrieved from: <http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S16520#DIV27>.

²⁵ Jones, C., & Gayles, J. (2008). "The world is a child's classroom: An analysis of the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School," in C. Payne & C. Strickland (Eds.), *Teach freedom: Education for liberation in the African-American tradition*, (Teachers College Press), 110-116.

²⁶ Jones, C., & Gayles, J. (2008). "The world is a child's classroom: An analysis of the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School," in C. Payne & C. Strickland (Eds.), *Teach freedom: Education for liberation in the African-American tradition*, (Teachers College Press), 110-116.

Oakland Community School Students were also vocal in and familiar with the political atmosphere of Oakland, California. Between 1973 and 1975, Panthers leaders Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale ran for political office in Oakland. The below photo shows how Oakland Community School students were embedded in liberation education and how the political processes that surrounded them amplified their classroom lessons.



Gregory Lewis, front, followed by Ericka Brown and Geromino Clark hold signs as they attend the Oakland Community School, the Black Panther liberation school in 1973. (Courtesy of Gregory Lewis)

Through the letter, the exchange between student and teacher, and the above photo, we see how the youth had internalized the party teachings, equating the police, judicial systems, capitalism, and big business with a conceptual pig pen.²⁷ This encapsulates Black Panther Party Ideology, illustrating its place as the vanguard of the revolution, responsible for educating the future leaders that were students at the Oakland Community School.

Another important aspect of OCS that resonates with Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the idea that the OCS administrators followed a tradition of revolutionary educators. “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education” in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, written by OCS founding members Ericka Huggins and Angela Leblanc-Ernest, expands on this further:

In line with this great tradition of resistance, the OCS administrators saw the dire need for *quality* education and stepped forward to change educational conditions

²⁷ Robert P Robinson, “Until the Revolution: Analyzing the Politics, Pedagogy, and Curriculum of the Oakland Community School,” *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): pp. 181-203, <https://doi.org/10.14516/ete.273>, 185.

for youth of color. Each administrator was a BPP member at the time she became a school leader ... OCS administrators were able to apply lessons from their experience as BPP members to their teaching and community outreach.²⁸

These firsthand accounts from OCS, coupled with the idea of a continuation of revolutionary education embodies Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, specifically the mandate that the oppressed must teach, and, thus, liberate the oppressed. The text states, "This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves."²⁹ This quote takes the stance that oppressed people must liberate themselves and their oppressors at the same time. It also resonates with and addresses the "banking" concept of education mentioned earlier. Freire writes, "Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in 'changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them': for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated."³⁰ Here, Freire argues that the Western, dominant education system shapes the consciousness of its students, placing oppressed people further into systemic oppression. When this idea is matched to education, the "banking" concept of education plays a role in leading students to adapt to an oppressive society, rather than mobilize to fight it. As long as this process of adaptation continues, the oppressed cannot liberate themselves, and this underscores Freire's idea that the oppressed must teach the oppressed. This is because, while a revolutionary education can liberate, a "banking" system of education can serve as a tool for maintaining oppression. At the Oakland Community School, administrators and teachers confronted the dominant educational system, through letter-writing to figures like Huey P. Newton, spouting BPP rhetoric, and continuing a tradition of liberatory education. It is clear that OCS administrators understood the gravity of liberatory education, using it to dismantle systemic oppression rather than maintain it.

The powerful presence of Black educators was another positive, distinguishing factor of the Oakland Community School and its many successes, underscoring Freire's idea that the "oppressed must teach the oppressed." According to OCS alumni Gregory Lewis and Kesha

²⁸ Gore et al., "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education," Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 163.

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 44.

³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 74.

Hackett, “having teachers who were mostly Black created an atmosphere of pride, confidence, and understanding that was infectious.”³¹ In an interview, Hackett remembers a song that OCS teachers used to sing called “We Can Do Anything,”; she sang:

We can do anything
Because anything is possible you see
We can live forever and make peace like it should be
We can turn the tide and the wind
And even make life begin again³²

This example shows how OCS instructors used their own Blackness to inspire a sense of boundless potential in their students, which taught Hackett that “[she] came from kings and queens.”³³ And a growing body of academic research supports this idea that Black students benefit enormously from having Black teachers. A 2015 study at Johns Hopkins found that Black teachers are 40 percent more likely to believe a Black student will graduate high school than non-Black teachers who evaluate the same student, and these expectations can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies that influence student behavior and performance.³⁴ This conclusion is not new, but it supports the validity of OCS’ educational model, as well as Freire’s task for the oppressed: “to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.”³⁵ In this context, we see how the Oakland Community School was a living example of Freire’s educational philosophies.

The Oakland Community School and Freire’s “Liberatory Education”

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paul Freire introduces three components of a “liberatory education,” which embody his “pedagogy of hope.” For Freire, liberatory education has three components: “(1) it fosters critical awareness, (2) it includes dialogue (rather than narration), and

³¹ Cassady Rosenblum, “At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success,” Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

³² Cassady Rosenblum, “At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success,” Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

³³ Cassady Rosenblum, “At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success,” Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

³⁴ Seth Gershenson, Stephen B. Holt, and Nicholas W. Papageorge, “Who Believes in Me? the Effect of Student-Teacher Demographic Match on Teacher Expectations,” January 2015, <https://doi.org/10.17848/wp15-231>.

³⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 44.

(3) it is transformative in nature.”³⁶ In the following sections, I will align the educational programs, practices, and experiences at the Oakland Community School to Freire’s components of a “liberatory education.”

Freire describes the impact an oppressive system has on an oppressed individual’s sense of self: “As long as their ambiguity persists, the oppressed are reluctant to resist, and totally lack confidence in themselves. They have a diffuse, magical belief in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor.”³⁷ Later, in his section on the program content of education as the practice of freedom, he writes, “Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character.”³⁸ It is clear that self-awareness is a key component of Freire’s theory of education—and this theme is also present in the pedagogical practices of the Oakland Community School.

In the classroom, the teachers at the Oakland Community school emphasized autobiographical writing, which helped the students define, understand, and accept themselves, thus reinforcing one of the key components of Freire’s argument. For OCS students, practicing autobiographical writing began as early as level three, where students were assigned to “... tell a story to the class based on a personal experience,” with a goal of promoting “better self-expression.”³⁹ As the students advanced to the next levels, they would continue to develop their autobiographical entries by adding more complex details, anecdotes, and personal characteristics. In addition to reflecting on their personal lives, the students were also required to engage with the personal experiences of others to better understand their roles in society. The *Oakland Community School instructor handbook* states: “Each child will be assigned to interview a person in the community and write the interview as an article for the school newsletter.”⁴⁰ This interview assignment encapsulates OCS’ teaching philosophy; by teaching students to engage both personally and communally, they thought critically about their own lives and learned what it meant

³⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 80.

³⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 64.

³⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 107.

³⁹ Oakland Community School, (1978, 79), Oakland Community School-Instructor Handbook-Huey P. Newton 1978-79, Retrieved from Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. collection, M0864. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. (Box 17, Folder 2).

⁴⁰ Oakland Community School, (1978, 79), Oakland Community School-Instructor Handbook-Huey P. Newton 1978-79, Retrieved from Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. collection, M0864. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. (Box 17, Folder 2).

to enact social change through prose. These ideas directly correlate with that of Freire, who believed that self-awareness was critical awareness: “Without a sense of identity, there can be no real struggle.”⁴¹

In addition to prompting students to think critically about themselves and their counterparts, the Oakland Community School was also committed to developing self-confidence in its students. Every day after lunch the entire staff and students sat quietly for a few minutes to “honor their own innate greatness.”⁴² This practice, central to the students’ daily lives at the Oakland Community School, demonstrates how the children were taught not only to reflect on themselves and one another, but care for themselves and one another as members of a greater community. They were successful in doing so, according to Betty Jo Reuben, who enrolled her son, Tim, and daughter, Keshia, at OCS because she wanted them to learn about Black history. She says, “My children grew up feeling proud of being Black instead of feeling like it was a curse like a lot of children.”⁴³ Her daughter, now an adult, affirms this: “If I didn’t go to OCS, I think my life would have been more destructive. You can be influenced by stressors ... like gangs, drugs, whatever. But knowledge of self kept me grounded.”⁴⁴

Oakland Community School students thought critically about themselves and their peers, but also about the world around them, and this is seen best through the field trips that fostered critical awareness with their decidedly political tones. According to Jones and Gayles in “The World is a Child’s Classroom,” OCS pupils regularly attended political trials, including the “San Quentin 6” trial, to acquire “direct exposure to the inadequacies of the American judicial system for Black and other minority people.”⁴⁵ This one example embodies OCS’ commitment to educating its students about their surroundings in a revolutionary way, consistent with Freire’s idea that “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world in which

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 186.

⁴² Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 174.

⁴³ Tammerlin Drummond, “Black Panther School a Legend in Its Time,” East Bay Times (East Bay Times, October 29, 2016), <https://www.eastbaytimes.com/2016/10/06/black-panther-school-ahead-of-its-time/>.

⁴⁴ Cassidy Rosenblum, “At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success,” Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

⁴⁵ Jones, C., & Gayles, J. (2008). “The world is a child’s classroom: An analysis of the Black Panther Party’s Oakland Community School,” in C. Payne & C. Strickland (Eds.), *Teach freedom: Education for liberation in the African-American tradition*, (Teachers College Press), 110-116.

they find themselves. Indeed, they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”⁴⁶

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, author Paulo Freire details the dominant “banking” concept of education: “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits in which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.”⁴⁷ For Freire, liberatory education in many ways is a reaction to this dominant concept of education. He writes, “The *raison d’être* of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students.”⁴⁸ Here, we understand the importance of transformative dialogue within a school community as the basis for a liberatory education.

This “drive toward reconciliation” is understood at the Oakland Community School through its “Each One Teach One” philosophy, a guiding principle for the school and its students and faculty members. In this section, I will expand on the “Each One Teach One” philosophy, but there are two notable examples that highlight the essence of this philosophy. Perhaps the most poignant manifestation of this “solution of the teacher-student contradiction” at OCS was its Youth Committee, a formal venue for students to critique faculty, school, and self in an attempt to foster independence, as was the student-generated newsletter.”⁴⁹ In addition, “OCS students tutored their peers, hence implementing the essence of the school’s “Each One Teach One” philosophy.”⁵⁰

As mentioned above, the Youth Committee was instrumental in helping the students at the Oakland Community School define their voices and contribute to the school community. The Youth Committee was an elected student body that was responsible for the Youth Shore, the Newsletter, and the Justice Board, which had the responsibilities to “handle the children’s relations with each other and their understanding of school rules” in addition to critiquing faculty.⁵¹ The

⁴⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 83.

⁴⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 83.

⁴⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 72.

⁴⁹ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 172.

⁵⁰ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 173.

⁵¹ Oakland Community School, (1976), [Oakland Community School Instructor Handbook], 1976, Retrieved from Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. collection, M0864. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. (Box 17, Folder 1).

Justice Board was especially remarkable; if a student had misbehaved, they would appear in front of the Justice Board, which handled student conduct in a truly revolutionary fashion:

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.⁵²

It is evident how the Youth Council, through the process of child and error, encouraged student development in a way that allowed them to hold the reins.

At the very foundation of the Oakland Community School was emphases on students' autonomy, which directed activities both inside and outside of the classroom. The Oakland Community School Instructor Handbook states:

Concentration is a natural consequence of voluntary interest, but without interest there can be no concentration. Therefore, we make every attempt to provide our children with interesting tasks upon which to focus their attention. We provide a warm, structured environment which we feel gives rise to the development of classroom discipline. Discipline to us does not mean control of the class; but rather directing inevitable human energies into productive, socially meaningful channels.⁵³

Two examples of the Oakland Community School's willingness and commitment to think beyond the physical limits of a classroom are Project Seed and Chisenbop, both outlined in a 2007 interview with former leader of the Black Panther Party, Ericka Huggins.

On reflecting on the classroom activities at the Oakland Community School, Huggins says:

Project Seed was this innovate math tutorial but the innovation part was they came into the elementary schools that would allow them in and taught algebra, algebraic thinking, problem solving, to third, fourth, and fifth graders. Then one of the young men I interviewed said that he remembered being given calculus problems in fifth grade by Project Seed and it was the most exciting part of his day.⁵⁴

⁵² Robert P Robinson, "Until the Revolution: Analyzing the Politics, Pedagogy, and Curriculum of the Oakland Community School," *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): pp. 181-203, <https://doi.org/10.14516/ete.273>, 185.

⁵³ Oakland Community School, (1976), [Oakland Community School Instructor Handbook], 1976, Retrieved from Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. collection, M0864. Dept. of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford, Calif. (Box 17, Folder 1).

⁵⁴ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 85.

Project Seed’s integration into the Oakland Community School certainly underscores one of its major premises and philosophies: that you could teach a child how to think, not what.

In the interview, Huggins also references Chisenbop—a Korean finger-counting method—which was taught at the Oakland Community School. “You could learn how to count your tens, hundreds digits, and ones on your fingers, but it’s a rhythmic, almost beat way of doing it.”⁵⁵ Though Project Seed and Chisenbop are two examples of OCS’ innovative teaching methods, they embody the school’s efforts to challenge the dominant educational methods of the time. A former student at the Oakland Community School writes, “I enjoyed the classes here because we learn methods and how to work problems. I think method is important because it is a tool that helps me solve all problems and not just find the answers to a few ... Here the classroom is not a locked-up classroom. Our school motto says, ‘The world is the children’s classroom.’”⁵⁶

The examples of the Oakland Community School’s “Each One Teach One” philosophy like the Youth Committee, Project Seed, and Chisenbop are directly aligned with the type of education that Freire suggests. He writes:

Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher’s thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students’ thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible.⁵⁷

Through this quote, we understand that the dominant banking concept of education not only serves, but also activates the interests of oppression. By operating under the mission that “the world is the children’s classroom,” the Oakland Community School’s pedagogical practices refute the banking concept, as the teachers empowered the students to be their partners in their own education and the overarching quest for social justice.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire introduces his “problem-posing” education, which is transformative in nature. He writes:

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men, as conscious beings, and

⁵⁵ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 85.

⁵⁶ Gregory B. Lewis, (1995), “Power To the Children: Writing from the Life of a Panther Cub”, Oakland, CA.

⁵⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 77.

consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world.⁵⁸

It is clear that Freire's "problem-posing" education should encourage students to ask questions about the world, and, in turn, see the possibility for social change. This leads to holistic development as students and people and at the center of that development is reflection, then action. This process, important to Freire's problem-posing education, speaks to the transformative powers of his theories, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Human beings are not built in silence, but in work, in action-reflection."⁵⁹ Here, Freire poses education as a catalyst for action and social movements, viewing students as agents for progression and, eventually, liberation.

The Oakland Community School also used education as a transformative experience and tool. OCS alumni Kesha Hackett speaks to the experience: "I meditate on this ... sometimes I think I would have been a statistic, being born to a 17-year-old mom in East Oakland. Those project schools were hard."⁶⁰ She continues, "Where would I be today if we [OCS] had a middle school, and a high school? What further heights would I have reached?"⁶¹ Freire's idea that "to exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it"⁶² is also seen in OCS' commitment to educating the whole child. Specifically, each student's physical health, cleanliness, and appearance were also important to OCS staff, with Donna Howell coordinating the youth's general health care and appearance, overseeing clothing, grooming, nutrition, and doctor visits. According to Huggins and Ernest, "the special interconnectedness and sharing that occurred in the BPP extended family life was an integral part of the trademark atmosphere of love, support, and learning that made OCS so special."⁶³

⁵⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 79.

⁵⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 88.

⁶⁰ Cassady Rosenblum, "At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success," Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

⁶¹ Cassady Rosenblum, "At Historic Black Panthers School, Black Teachers Were Key to Student Success," Oakland North, May 20, 2019, <https://oaklandnorth.net/2016/12/15/at-historic-black-panthers-school-black-teachers-were-key-to-student-success/>.

⁶² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 69.

⁶³ Gore et al., "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education," Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 163.

The Oakland Community School experience was so transformative and empowering that graduates often struggled to adjust to public schools in communities of color. *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* highlights Zachary Killoran, an OCS alum who had difficulty transitioning to a public school because the curriculum was not challenging enough and “one of the main things he learned to do in public school was use profanity and fight.”⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Killoran continued to reflect on the transformative lessons he learned at OCS: “I don’t just take care of me, I take care of my community; anybody who happens to be around me.”⁶⁵ Killoran’s story is just one example of how OCS accomplished its goal of equipping their students with the tools necessary to transform themselves, and their worlds—a direct parallel to Freire’s idea that “education is inherently directive and must always be transformative.”⁶⁶

The Dialectic at the Oakland Community School

The idea of dialectical materialism is seen in Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and in the pedagogical practices at the Oakland Community School. Specifically, director Ericka Huggins says:

“Our motto was to – one of our principles was to teach children how to think, not what to think. So we called it – because we were all studying philosophies from all over the world, we called it dialectical materialism ... And it was very important, and we always – when children came to us tattle-taling or with some gossip or a rumor they didn’t fully understand fully, we would say, ‘Go and investigate and come back.’”⁶⁷

Huggins and Ernest expand upon this idea in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, explaining OCS’ philosophy of dialectical materialism as one that emphasized critical thinking skills, encouraging students to ask questions that fostered discussion and ideas.⁶⁸

Central to Freire’s argument is this theme of dialectics, which animates his views on education. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argues that dialectics are the fundamental logic

⁶⁴ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 181.

⁶⁵ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 181.

⁶⁶ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 25.

⁶⁷ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 40.

⁶⁸ Gore et al., “Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education,” Essay, in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, (New York, NY: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 173.

of reality, which he uses in his discussions of education, oppression, and social change. For Freire, oppressed people must learn to view the world as “dialectical,” which helps them understand reality—a necessary component of liberation. This is seen most profoundly in the following quote; “[Themes] imply others which are opposing or even antithetical; they also indicate tasks to be carried out and fulfilled. Thus, historical themes are never isolated, independent, disconnected, or static; they are always interacting dialectically with their opposites.”⁶⁹ Here, Freire poses a unique challenge to liberatory educators: to use the investigation of themes to help oppressed people understand their conditions. This challenge explains Freire’s view of history as interconnected, and as a constantly shifting set of beliefs and concepts.

Educators at the Oakland Community School had a similar view of history to that of Freire, which impacted their pedagogical practices and teaching styles. A great example of this is when a fourth grade OCS student asked her class what the Middle Passage was like. That class, using the idea of dialectical materialism, went as follows:

We talked about slavery. We simulated the slave ships so that children would understand what it felt like to be packed in there, head to groin, arm to arm with people, like in a sardine can. The children would ask, ‘So how did they pee, Ericka? Where’d they poop?’ And they could answer their own questions couldn’t they? ‘Did they get sick? Did they throw up? How did they have babies? Do you think they wanted to live?’ We didn’t know a public school setting or a private school setting where children were allowed to think in this way, think things through. We didn’t have them sit there and agonize over the history of slavery for days on end, but we didn’t hide it from them.⁷⁰

Here, we see how OCS educators’ ways of teaching history operated in a dialectical manner, where students and their questions informed and inspired one another—a distinctly Freirian idea. These conversations in the classroom influenced how OCS students saw the world, using the understanding of historical themes as future agents for social change.

It is also worth noting that OCS’ one-of-a-kind Youth Committee and Justice Court (discussed above) also followed these tenets of dialectical thinking. Allowing the students to hold themselves and their peers accountable for their actions espoused a sophisticated social engagement that necessitated careful thought of concepts and their opposites before arriving at conclusions. Gregory, a student at the Oakland Community School fondly remembers the process,

⁶⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (s.l.: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 101.

⁷⁰ University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library, *University of California Oral History Center at the Bancroft Library*, 2007, pp. 1-111, 88.

“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 and it’s important to adhere to them ... about being accountable.”⁷¹ This reflection is important because it shows how inquiry-based learning at the Oakland Community School compelled students to discuss and reason in the classroom through dialogue and investigation—two tools important to dialectical thinking, and in line with Freire’s “pedagogy of hope.”

In 1994, pedagogical theorist Gloria-Ladson Billings introduced the concept of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, a theory with three main components: a focus on student learning and academic success, developing students’ cultural competence to assist students in developing positive ethnic and social identities, and supporting students’ critical consciousness or their ability to recognize and critique societal inequalities.⁷² This theory can be seen as a continuation, or a new development of Freire’s work, specifically his idea of fostering critical consciousness through education. The Oakland Community School’s dialectical training and ability to care and nourish the whole student poses OCS as an early iteration of culturally relevant teaching in action—a legend in its time.

Echoes of the Oakland Community School staff are seen in Ladson-Billings’ *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, a contemporary call to give Black students the education they deserve. She writes, “the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community.”⁷³ In a time where federal loopholes enable lower spending on students of color⁷⁴ and 14-point achievement gaps exist between low-income and non-low income students,⁷⁵ the case for culturally responsive teaching could not be more relevant. In this context, we must examine the past to dream of the future. The Oakland Community School and its efforts to engage its students in meaningful dialogue, foster critical thinking, and celebrate their cultural backgrounds marked education as a tangible vehicle for a dream of

⁷¹Gregory B. Lewis, (1995), “Power To the Children: Writing from the Life of a Panther Cub”, Oakland, CA.

⁷²Ladson-Billings, G., (1995a), “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Theory Into Practice”, 34(3), 159-165. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1476635>.

⁷³ Ladson-Billings, G., (1994), “The dreamkeepers: successful teachers of African American children,” (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), xv

⁷⁴ Ary Spatig-Amerikaner, “Unequal Education - UNCF,” https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/UnequalEducation.pdf?_ga=2.73597201.2005597485.1669692407-508998608.1669692407, August 2012, <https://cdn.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/PDFs/UnequalEducation.pdf>.

⁷⁵ State House News Service Sam Drysdale, “Coalition Says Education Achievement Gap Has Widened,” WBUR News (WBUR, September 14, 2022), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/09/14/student-opportunity-act-report-achievement-gap>.

liberation. Contemporarily, Ladson-Billings' *The Dreamkeepers* espouses a special hope of the future of educating Black students: "Each of my ancestors had a hope nestled in a dream. My generation is the beginning of that fulfillment of that hope."⁷⁶ Here, Freire's "pedagogy of hope" intersects with Huey P. Newton's belief that, with education as the compass, "the revolution has always been in the hands of the young."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ladson-Billings, G., (1994), "The dreamkeepers: successful teachers of African American children," (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 177.

⁷⁷ MerriCatherine, (2018), "Huey P. Newton's Interview with the Movement Magazine (1968)," Medium, February 21, 2018, <https://medium.com/@merricatherine/huey-p-newtons-interview-with-the-movement-magazine-1968-a328e6b78c32>.

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