

**“We Gotta Think About Our Community as a Collective”: A Youth Participatory Action  
Research Study to Address Rural Black Students’ College-Going Culture Experiences**

by

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# **“We Gotta Think About Our Community as a Collective”: A Youth Participatory Action Research Study to Address Rural Black Students’ College-Going Culture Experiences**

Jenay Florence Elizabeth Willis, PhD

University of Pittsburgh, 2023

This study examined and addressed the role of the broader rural community as supportive in shaping access to higher education among Black students as knowledge holders of their own lived experiences. Using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach, the theoretical underpinnings for the study included Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model and Perna’s (2006) college access and choice model. Yosso’s (2005) model offers a racial analysis while Perna’s (2006) model offers a spatial analysis to understand rural Black students’ college-going culture experiences within their broader community. The research questions for the study are: (1) How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access? (2) In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students’ access to higher education? Guided by YPAR as a methodology, this study involved a total of eight co-collaborators, including seven student co-collaborators and me as the adult co-collaborator.

Centering the student co-collaborators’ voices, the findings are presented as podcast episodes using a mixture of the students’ perspectives shared throughout our study and the art of counterstorytelling. The findings reveal how rural Black students make sense of their YPAR experiences to shape their access to higher education given the support of their broader community. Within our study, the broader rural community encompassed the high school,

families, friends, community members, and resources such as local organizations that aid in increasing Black students' access to higher education. While the study took place within the Resourceful County School District, specifically at Montpelier High School, the implications within our study may be applicable to communities situated within similar rural contexts. Rural Black students, both domestically and internationally, could potentially benefit from engaging in YPAR as a practice to challenge structures of domination such as anti-Black racism, elitism, and classism, to shape their access to higher education. Such an approach allows rural Black students to shift their narratives in the literature to blame the systems of oppression at play rather than place the onus on this student population.

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## **Preface**

### *DEDICATION*

I dedicate this dissertation to my maternal grandmother, Florence Jones, whose presence is felt from each cardinal bird that visits me, and from whose home I engaged in this heart work. My passion for education comes from my paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Willis, a former teacher and lifelong educator, whose legacy lives on within me, and to whom I also dedicate this dissertation. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to rural Black students and communities around the world. May you always remember how resourceful, resilient, and radiant you are in owning your rurality.

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“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”

-Coretta Scott King

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Community, I thank you, and because of you, your love, and endless support, I am Dr. Jenay F.E. Willis.

## 1.0 Introduction

*Alright chirren' turn that TV off and get to bed y'all have an early start tomorrow morning. Act like you know the summer routine. I done ironed your clothes and laid 'em cross the sofa for you. Remember y'all going over there to that church for summer school so you can learn you something. And don't mumble nothing under y'all breaths. I stay on to y'all about this school stuff cause I ain't have this opportunity growing up. So, y'all best be prepared for tomorrow. Listen here, get ya education cause that's the one thang the white man can't take from y'all. I will preach it time and time again till y'all get it cause y'all gone be ready come time for college.*

-F. Jones (personal communication, June 4, 2006)

Listening to my grandmother harp about summer school at the church and how it prepares me and my brothers for college carries me right into her bedroom to drift off to sleep. The sun rises the next morning and the light breaks through the windows of my grandmother's living room. The Hillside Baptist Church (*pseudonym*) van pulls into her driveway blowing the horn loudly at 7:00am for me and my brothers to come out for the Soulful Summer College Preparation Programming, which caters to rural Black students in the community. Jordan and Jared rush out to the van with their yellow JanSport bookbags, and I follow right behind them with my neon pink bookbag. Several of our cousins who are joining us at the church are also on the van. Mrs. Rosetta (*pseudonym*), the driver, leaves my grandmother's yard and pulls up to the church. Me and my brothers as well as my cousins jump off the van with bright smiles on our

faces and baby oil glistening on our skin, adding an extra glow to our melanin, and run into the church annex to have a warm hot breakfast of pancakes and sausage with orange juice on the side.

After breakfast we begin our day with the Black church leaders by engaging in Morning Math and Melodious Music Sing Alongs. We then break for lunch as Pizza Hut delivers our hand tossed pepperoni pizzas with barbecue wings and two gallons of sweet tea. Remembering that it's Monday, we hear a speech during lunch from Mrs. Culpepper (*pseudonym*), one of the church leaders, reminding us about Motivational Monday. Every Motivational Monday we take a trip to a Black-owned organization in surrounding counties or within Resourceful County (*pseudonym*), a county known for being rich in resources. This Monday, once we clean up our spaces from lunch, we hop in the church van excitedly and head to the local Black History Museum, which displays “The Telling Our Story” Exhibit. In the exhibit our eyes glow with joy and amazement in learning about Black people from Resourceful County who are now doctors, lawyers, athletes, musicians, journalists, among many professions. Still overjoyed while leaving the museum, we take directions from Mrs. Culpepper and jot down lessons in our notebooks about what drives us the most about our future college careers after this trip.

My grandmother preaching to me and my siblings about attending summer school at the church to prepare us for college truly embodies the African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child.” From my grandmother to the Black church leaders at the Soulful Summer College Preparation Programming to the trips to local Black owned organizations and to community members who help run the organizations, I am reminded of the importance of my “village” that contributed to my college dreams and aspirations as a rural Black student. It indeed takes a community of people and resources to support rural Black students’ college-going aspirations

and to cultivate the dreams becoming reality (Boettcher et al., 2022; Means, 2019). Cultivating the college-going dreams of rural Black students must exist within the minds of those community members that are helping the dreams come to fruition. In thinking of those that contributed to my college dream becoming a reality, I am reminded that my grandmother was one of the most instrumental persons to support mine and my brothers' college journeys. Although my grandmother did not have a formal education, she was educated in life lessons that gave her the opportunity to share her knowledge learned with us as her grandchildren, which in many ways coincides with the Frelimo, peoples who are of African liberation in Mozambique (Simpson, 1993), and what they embody. Much like my grandmother and the Frelimo are institutions with their education radiating from within, it is vital that the same occurs in rural Black students' communities. Therefore, the institution must be within the spirit and minds of rural community members in that rural community members exists as the institutions themselves.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

College-going culture impacts rural students' access to higher education. Corwin and Tierney (2007) define college-going culture as that which influences students' entry into institutions of higher education. The rate at which students gain access to higher education exists on the basis of college-going culture environments rooted in expectations and standards upheld by schools and communities (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). While literature addresses how rural students' college-going culture experiences shape their access to higher education (Rosecrance et al., 2019), there is a need to highlight several challenges in the current literature.

First, there is a need to examine and combat the idea that rural students are a monolith and experience college-going culture or lack thereof in the same ways. While examining the notion that rural students and their experiences of college-going culture are not a monolith, scholars must understand that rurality does not equate to whiteness (Romero, 2020). Hence, it is significant to examine how college-going culture experiences among rural Students of Color, specifically rural Black students, shapes their access to higher education. Second, high schools are only a single component of what shapes rural Black students' access to higher education (Griffin et al., 2011; Ticken & San Antonio, 2016). Therefore, it is vital to investigate how the broader rural community shapes access to higher education among rural Black students in terms of their college-going culture experiences. Third, the narratives of rural Black students and their college-going culture experiences are often addressed through a deficit lens (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015). Hence, there is a need to address the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students in their broader rural community from an asset-based and critical approach. Further, it is vital to understand that combatting the deficit narratives of rural Black students in the literature is not always synonymous with addressing the white gaze (Carroll, 2022; Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). The white gaze does not have to be acknowledged but we can instead honor the voices of rural Black students while speaking directly to those which we are directly addressing, future generations of rural Black students and rural Black communities. The three problems mentioned here that are crucial to examine and address will be discussed in the following sections.

### **1.1.1 Problem One: Rural Students Are Not a Monolith**

Highlighting the experiences of rural students is significant in addressing college-going culture. However, it is also crucial to acknowledge that rurality does not equate to whiteness when centering the experiences and voices of rural students. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the diversity that exists across rural student populations both racially and culturally. To address rural Students of Color and their experiences with college-going culture in their high schools, it is vital to consider the systems of oppression they must navigate. These systems include white supremacy, classism, and racism, among many other -isms that rural Students of Color navigate to gain access to higher education (Martinez et al., 2020; Murillo et al, 2017). Considering the systems which may challenge or impact rural students' access to higher education, it is crucial that rural Students of Color are not treated as a monolith. More specifically, rural Black students' experiences with college-going culture are not synonymous with the experiences of non-Black rural Students of Color. For example, rural Black students must navigate white supremacy, classism, and racism, specifically anti-Black racism. The ways rural Black students encounter and must navigate these institutional systems are unique to the individual. Hence, while rural Students of Color should not be lumped together in terms of their experiences, rural Black students as a population should not be understood as a monolith in accessing higher education.

### **1.1.2 Problem Two: Not Addressing the Role of the Broader Rural Community**

College-going culture experiences among rural Black students largely encompasses their high schools (Crumb & Larkin, 2018; Crumb et al., 2021; Means et al., 2016). Addressing the experiences of rural Black students and college-going culture in their high schools is crucial;

however, minimal literature addresses the role of rural Black students' broader community in accessing higher education as it pertains to college-going culture (Hall & Park, 2022). Therein lies the need to address rural Black students' experiences of college-going culture encompassing their broader rural community. Focusing only on the high school without consideration of the broader rural community does not account for the resources and community members that contribute to rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. Resources include Black churches, community centers, college access programming held by local organizations, among many others. Community members include rural Black students' parents or guardians, chosen family, extended family, and city council members, among the plethora of community members that exists. Hence, the broader rural community plays a crucial role in rural Black students' college-going culture experiences, which is vital to examine and address.

### **1.1.3 Problem Three: Deficit Perspectives of Rural Black Students' College-Going Culture Experiences**

Rural Black students and communities are sometimes viewed through a deficit perspective, which needs to be addressed to improve access to higher education (Combs et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). The narratives of rural Black students, as they pertain to college access, encompass the resources that this student population often lacks such as access to mental health facilities (Enos, 2020) and opportunities to prepare for college (Brigandi et al., 2020). A recent study addresses rural Black students and their lack of access to the necessary resources to prepare them for college and the workforce due to low preparation during secondary schooling (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2022). As such studies show, rural communities that are predominantly Black are often addressed in terms of what is lacking while using terminology

such as “at-risk,” “underserved,” and “disadvantaged” (Brigandi et al., 2020). Highlighting the narratives of rural Black students from a deficit perspective does not take into account the systems of oppression students must navigate, which include white supremacy, classism, elitism, and anti-Black racism. Rather than placing the onus on students and their rural Black communities, as the deficit perspective often does, higher education research needs to develop perspectives in which these systems of oppression are to blame.

To challenge the deficit narrative of rural Black students in the literature, the experiences of college-going culture among this student population encompasses the use of frameworks which are both crucial and significant in exploring the ways that rural Black students gain access to higher education. For example, studies addressing the college aspirations of rural Black youth as they pertain to college-going culture employ Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework (CCW) (Crumb et al., 2021; Means, 2019). Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework highlights varying forms of capital which are beneficial in serving as assets among Students of Color in accessing higher education. Applying the CCW framework while addressing rural Black students’ access to higher education as it pertains to college-going culture allows the deficit mindset to be challenged while centering an asset-based and critical approach.

## **1.2 Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of the present study guided by youth participatory action research is to examine and address rural Black students’ experiences of college-going culture within their community. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a branch of participatory action research (PAR) which serves the purpose of centering the voices of youth (Cammarota & Fine,



2008), specifically rural Black youth in the current study. Employing a YPAR approach combats the deficit perspective about rural Black students in acknowledging the students as co-collaborators. As co-collaborators, the rural Black students in the study engaged in all research processes including data collection and analysis. Additionally, a YPAR approach shifts the deficit narrative to address the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students from an asset-based and critical approach. Centering an asset-based and critical approach allows the co-collaborators to be knowledge holders and change agents of their own lived experiences. This in many ways equates to the co-collaborators being experts of the research phenomenon being examined and addressed, a phenomenon that impacts their lives directly. Collaborating with the students in the study on the research processes afforded them the opportunity to create and implement an action plan (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) that influences their access to higher education. Establishing an action plan in our community with rural Black students has the potential to enact change locally. Specifically, the action plan that is established could enact policy change on the local level and inform change of practices, beliefs, and structures at the local level as well. The rural Black students serving as co-collaborators benefits them in identifying and shifting their own postsecondary trajectories. Additionally, in practice, an YPAR approach highlights its impact in the rural Black students' community at the local level.

For this study, there is a focus on rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their broader rural community. While rural high schools play a significant role in helping Black students gain access to higher education (Castro, 2021; Means et al., 2016), it is equally important to address how students' rural community at large influences their access to higher education. The broader rural community's college-going culture influences access to higher education. The broader rural community may include schools, Black churches, family

(immediate, extended, and chosen), and community programming, among a wide variety of resources that exist within the students' community. To gain an understanding of how college-going culture impacts rural Black students within their broader rural community, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access?
2. In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education?

### **1.3 Overview of Study**

The present qualitative study employs a critical paradigm. A critical paradigm holds significance in challenging as well as combatting systems of oppression that rural Black students must navigate in accessing higher education (Scotland, 2012). A critical paradigm disrupts the traditional approach to research (Asghar, 2013) within the current youth participatory action research project. Combatting traditional research with the use of a critical paradigm and a YPAR approach occurs through the sharing of power with co-collaborators while acknowledging the rural Black students in the study as knowledge holders of their own lived experiences.

The study also employs Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model paired with Perna's (2006) college access and choice model. Using Yosso's (2005) CCW model offers a critical approach for understanding the multiple forms of capital which serve as assets among rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. Pairing Yosso's (2005) CCW model with Perna's (2006) college access and choice model further reveals the role that the high school

and community contexts offer as outlined in the college access and choice model. Conjoining the two models provides both the racial and spatial analyses necessary to examine and address rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their rural community. Furthermore, employing both models in tandem with one another challenges the deficit perspectives about rural Black students in shifting the students' narratives, specifically their lived experiences, through an asset-based and critical approach.

For the research project, using youth participatory action research as the methodology revealed the need to center the voices of rural Black youth as change agents who facilitated an action plan of their choice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) that shapes and supports their gaining access to higher education and advancing college-going culture in their rural community. Rural Black students being the change agents of their own lived experiences allows them to be in control of change that impacts them directly on a day-to-day basis. Members of the research team engaged in data collection and analysis. Both research processes occurred in phases corresponding to the research questions. The first research question is: How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access? For the first research question, the student co-collaborators and I engaged in focus group discussions using photovoice, which is a process used to collect photos for addressing and understanding the research phenomenon under study (Shimshock, 2008; Wang & Burris, 1997). The focus group discussions involving photovoice occurred in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research project.

The second research question is: In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education? For the second research question, we implemented an action plan developed by the student co-

collaborators, and I engaged in three one-on-one semi-structured interviews with all research team members to gain insight into their experiences of YPAR. The action plan was Phase 3 of the research project while the one-on-one interviews were Phase 4 in the study. Together, phases one through four comprise the research project, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

## **1.4 Significant Terms**

There is a need to highlight terms in the present study to acknowledge the nuances that exist across languages in my academic and personal life. Specifically, it is vital to offer definitions for terms while being mindful of the readership for this study who may include higher education staff, administrators, and students, along with people residing in rural communities, specifically my rural Black community and rural Black communities alike. For these reasons, I offer context for the following terms:

### **1.4.1 College-Going Culture**

According to Corwin and Tierney (2007), college-going culture encompasses an environment that supports enrollment within higher education through beliefs, practices, and structures. College-going culture beliefs are the expectations that high school staff and administrators, community members, and family (immediate, extended, and chosen) establish within a community. College-going culture practices pertain to the actions which are steppingstones for accessing higher education, such as the college application process and

college tours. College-going culture structures encompass components upheld by schools and communities that impact students' access to higher education from an organizational or accountability standpoint. Organizational structures encompass programming held by school staff and administrators and include course offerings (Noll, 2021). Accountability structures include practices that prepare students for college such as college seminars incorporated into the curriculum as a requirement for all grade levels (Noll, 2021). Combined, the three abovementioned aspects are what comprise college-going culture.

### **1.4.2 Insider-Outsider**

An insider-outsider acknowledges both the role held as the lead researcher(s) and the personal, professional, and social connections to the research site or community they are studying with (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019). For the present study my role as an insider-outsider refers to being an alumna of the rural school district along with being a long-term resident of the county where the research took place. Additionally, I identify as a rural Black student and engaged in community with rural Black students as my co-collaborators, which allows me to identify as an insider-outsider. Serving as the lead researcher of the study allows me to uphold the title of an insider-outsider in being the only adult co-collaborator within the study in community with the student co-collaborators.

### **1.4.3 Rurality**

Rurality is defined in several ways, which may be tied to a population number (USDA, 2019) or a physical space (Halfacree, 2017), and/or tied to identity based upon individual

perception (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Vincent & Austin, 2021), among a plethora of definitions that exists. For the present study, rurality is defined based upon the physical space in that the county, Resourceful County, Georgia (*pseudonym*), in which the study takes place, is defined as a rural county due to having a population of close to 28,000. The United States Department of Agriculture (2019) defines a rural county as that which has a population of less than 50,000. Therefore, Resourceful County is defined as rural.

#### **1.4.4 Broader Rural Community**

Broader rural community is defined as that which encompasses the rural community holistically. Within the present study, I use the language of broader rural community to refer to the high school, families, community members, and resources such as Black churches and local organizations, among many others that are crucial in impacting rural Black students' access to higher education.

#### **1.4.5 Black**

As it relates to race, Black refers to “a racial category to describe people with African ancestral origins” (Edwards, 2021, p. 255). Black encompasses people identifying as Black Americans and people of the Black race across the African diaspora (e.g., Dominicans, Ghanaians, Jamaicans, Nigerians, etc.) all of which make up the Black population.

## 1.5 Significance of the Study

Current research largely focuses on how college-going culture experiences of rural Black students impact their access to higher education within the confines of their high schools (Crumb & Larkin, 2018; Crumb et al., 2021). However, minimal literature addresses how college-going culture shapes access to higher education among rural Black students while encompassing their rural community at large (Crumb & Chambers, 2022; Hall & Park, 2022). Hence, the present study adds to the literature in addressing the role of college-going culture among rural Black students in their broader rural community. Encompassing the high school as part of the broader rural community in the study reveals how the use of youth participatory action research as a practice increases access as well as supports how this student population gains access to higher education. Furthermore, using youth participatory action research as a practice serves as a model revealing the necessity for rural community members, high school staff and administrators, and local policymakers to center the voices of rural Black youth and their experiences with college-going culture in their broader rural community. Therefore, the study examined and addressed rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their broader rural community through an YPAR approach. Using an YPAR approach to study the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students in their broader rural community has the potential to shape practice as it pertains to increasing access to higher education among rural Black students. Further, the use of YPAR in rural communities supports Black youth in pursuit of their postsecondary education careers. YPAR as a practice is useful to a range of people and resources such as local businesses situated in rural contexts, significantly informing how they increase rural Black students' college access.

## 1.6 Chapter Summary

As written in the introduction chapter above, I outline the necessity to invite rural Black students in as experts of their own lived experiences through a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach. Centering rural Black students as the change agents of their college-going culture experiences in their rural community allows them the opportunity to share power as co-collaborators in shaping their access to higher education. Examining and addressing rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their rural community enacts change at the local level (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Within the students' rural community, it is vital to call in the role of high schools and equally important to acknowledge the role of Black churches, community members, and local organizations among a plethora of community resources in shaping rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. In bringing this work to my hometown, it is my hope that YPAR as a practice significantly impacts rural Black students' access to college.

In addition to shaping access to higher education among rural Black students, YPAR also yields attention to school staff and administrators, city council members, among several others who are gatekeepers impacting rural Black students' access to higher education at the local level. Therefore, not only is this work crucial to shaping rural Black students' access to higher education but is also significant in seeking the attention of gatekeepers in using YPAR as a practice to increase access to higher education for this student population. My hope is that by inviting rural Black students in as change agents while also inviting their gatekeepers into our conversations that all individuals involved tap into the change necessary to make higher education accessible for rural Black students. Hence, I come to this work to knock down doors of inequality and injustice in shifting the narratives of rural Black students' access to higher



education from a deficit perspective to an asset-based and critical approach. The change happens in doing the work of those who paved the way for me but most importantly for the rural Black students who will come behind me.

## 2.0 Review of Literature

College-going culture permeates throughout students' schooling primarily within their high schools (Bryan et al., 2019; Nunn, 2014). The present study highlights rural students specifically. While high schools play a crucial role in rural students' engagement in college-going culture, it is significant to include the role that rural communities contribute to rural students' access to higher education as it pertains to college-going culture. Rural communities also encompass community members inclusive of family (immediate, extended, and chosen family), college access programming, and various resources that contribute to college-going culture. The following chapter highlights the significance of college-going culture within communities with respect to locale (i.e., rural contexts). More specifically, the chapter addresses how college-going culture exists as beliefs, practices, and structures, within the mentioned communities (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). The chapter then highlights the role of college-going culture among rural students broadly as a student population followed by highlighting rural Black students specifically. In addressing the importance of college-going culture among rural students as a population and rural Black students specifically, the chapter ends by highlighting the theoretical underpinnings of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth model (CCW) in tandem with its connection to Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Perna's (2006) college access and choice model.

## **2.1 College-Going Culture as Beliefs, Practices, and Structures**

According to Corwin and Tierney (2007), college-going culture encompasses an environment that supports enrollment within higher education through beliefs, practices, and structures. Beliefs refer to expectations and standards set by community members (e.g., high school staff and administrators, parents and guardians, church personnel); practices engage steps taken to pursue college enrollment; and structures include both organizational and accountability components set within environments, specifically schools and communities, which support college-going culture (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Noll, 2021). Together, college-going culture beliefs, practices, and structures largely aid in supporting students' transition to college. The following will highlight a big picture overview of the beliefs, practices, and structures college-going culture embodies.

### **2.1.1 College-Going Culture as Beliefs**

Beliefs are the principles and morals created by members of the community. Specifically, college-going culture beliefs permeate throughout multiple settings in rural, urban, and suburban places. In the respective places, individuals establish college-going culture beliefs broadly across primary (McClafferty Jarsky et al., 2009; Pulliam & Bartek, 2018) and secondary schools (Kim et al., 2022; Perna et al., 2008). College-going culture beliefs existing in schools is vital to support students' access to higher education (Vela et al., 2018). This is because the standards within schools are expected to be followed by students. While college-going culture beliefs exist widely within school settings, they too exist within the broader communities (Moon & Bouchey, 2019). In understanding college-going culture beliefs as standards and norms set by people in

authority and community members, it is significant to establish beliefs by schools, families, and the broader rural community that facilitate college enrollment. While understanding that college-going culture beliefs are set by authoritative personnel and community members, it is vital that the beliefs set by the respective individuals permeate communities in which they are established. In this way, the standards that serve as cultural norms established by community members exist for rural students to gain access to higher education. Hence, the establishment of college-going culture beliefs by authoritative personnel and community members is crucial to increasing access to institutions of higher education for students in rural communities.

Existing college-going culture beliefs are largely influential of gatekeepers within school settings. Gatekeepers within schools are often administrators and staff. Among the administrators, there exist principals within the schools who may potentially influence college-going culture beliefs. Utilizing a case study approach, Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) examine the college-going culture beliefs of a principal within an urban high school largely comprised of a low-income and racially minoritized student population. The principal of the high school in the study, Mr. McDaniel, established the role of teacher input as a way for all students to receive the support and encouragement which is crucial in achieving and pursuing college aspirations (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). However, the principal's perceptions of students' college worthiness do not equate to students' college readiness. For example, the principal views students from low-income and racially marginalized backgrounds through a deficit lens while negating that the onus should be placed on the systems of oppression. Rather than placing the blame on the systems of oppression, namely racism and white supremacy, Mr. McDaniel placed blame on the students themselves which further perpetuates the deficit mindset among marginalized student populations. Findings reveal that a school leader's perception of

students' college worthiness can influence how those students perceive themselves (Convertino & Graboski-Bauer, 2018). The mindset of those in leadership, particularly principals, is one of many ways in which students' access to higher education is significantly impacted. Hence, viewing students from a deficit lens who are within the margins of the margins (hooks, 2000) or have multiple identities rooted in oppression, further marginalizes this student population. Deficit refers to perceiving low-income and racially minoritized students in a negative manner that limits the students' access to higher education (Davis & Museus, 2019; Richards, 2020). Therefore, it is vital to call attention to gatekeepers' beliefs and challenge their frame of thought to push their thinking into an asset-based and critical approach in hopes of increasing marginalized students' access to higher education. Transforming the thinking of gatekeepers in a critical yet respectful manner has a significant impact on the college-going culture beliefs which promote students' access to higher education, specifically multiply marginalized students.

In comparison, college-going culture beliefs are vital to examine among families and individuals situated in the broader communities who may influence students' enrollment in college. Carey (2016) conducts a study in an urban charter school about the experiences of one Latino boy and one Black boy. The findings reveal the beneficial nature of the boys putting their families' knowledge of college into practice to support their access to higher education (Carey, 2016). Due to the knowledge and inspiration gained from their families, immediate and extended, the Latino boy and Black boy had the necessary support and guidance which increased their access to enrollment in higher education. While the prior mentioned examples employ college-going culture beliefs in urban settings, this too is applicable to rural school settings and communities. Firstly, it is important to consider how administrators' college-going culture beliefs influence students' access to higher education whether it drives equitable or inequitable

college-going preparedness. In the case that college-going culture beliefs drives inequities, there is a need to shift this into equitable approaches of college-going culture among students accessing higher education. Secondly, it is vital to consider college-going culture beliefs and the role of families and individuals in the college-going process. In understanding college-going culture beliefs as sources of support which influence students' access to higher education, the establishment of such should be largely considered to promote college enrollment rather than hinder college enrollment, specifically among multiply marginalized students.

### **2.1.2 College-Going Culture Practices**

Practices of college-going culture are essential for accessing higher education among students situated within primary and secondary education settings. College-going culture practices involve several tactics which are steps that support accessing as well as enrolling in college. The practices are often those which permeate students' communities that are significant both individually and collectively in students gaining access to higher education. Respective practices of college-going culture may include culturally relevant practices (Knight & Marciano, 2013) along with school specific college-going culture practices (Bryan et al., 2022). For example, culturally relevant college-going practices largely influence students from multiply marginalized backgrounds (Knight & Marciano, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). In comparison, school specific college-going culture practices aim to incorporate the whole student as it relates to their needs in accessing higher education, which is a practice that can be used among all students and does not solely cater to students from multiply marginalized backgrounds.

Establishing college-going cultural practices is both crucial and pertinent in promoting as well as increasing students' access to higher education. While practices of college-going culture

are plentiful the following two are vital to highlight: culturally relevant college-going culture practices and school specific college-going culture practices. Knight-Manuel and colleagues (2019) engage in a study which examines how a team of 18 administrators and staff, specifically teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff, use culturally relevant college-going culture to increase access to higher education among students from multiply marginalized backgrounds. According to Knight and Marciano (2013), a culturally relevant college-going culture is that which recognizes the significance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds in every aspect of learning while meeting the needs of the students holistically in all their identities. Examples of culturally relevant practices include culturally relevant peer interactions and media literacy practices (Marciano, 2017). Culturally relevant peer interactions refer to students' providing each other with support regarding words of affirmation on not being defined by a failed assignment in coursework or encouraging one another to seek help from teachers as necessary. The peer interactions mentioned largely support students' access to college in advocating for one another through the act of reciprocity, in showing up for their peers as their peers show up for them. In comparison, media literacy practices include students using their cellular devices to send and receive text messages from one another among their peers to support college access as a form of college-going culture (Marciano, 2017). Along with text messaging, students also lean heavily upon social media for networking to support college readiness as it relates to culturally relevant college-going culture practices (Marciano, 2017). The examples of culturally relevant practices provided are crucial to consider while understanding that a plethora of culturally relevant practices exist in supporting multiply marginalized students.

To understand that there is not a one-size-fits all approach to culturally relevant college-going culture practices, it is significant to address the idea which makes clear that the respective

practices are dependent upon students' needs in their environments, mainly school environments. The specific aim of engaging in culturally relevant college-going practices contributes to students' access to higher education as it pertains to college-going procedures (Knight & Marciano, 2013). Findings in the study reveal that school contexts such as staff and administrators' perceptions of culturally relevant practices and students' plans of action for college enrollment are significant in establishing culturally relevant college-going culture practices. Hence, the establishment of environments rooted in college-going culture by those in leadership and the needs of students are important aspects to consider as schools embark upon creating culturally relevant college-going practices.

A second form of college-going culture practices is frameworks. For example, school counseling college-going culture (SCCGC) is a framework adopted by school districts that is important to consider. Bryan and colleagues (2022) employ SCCGC as a framework to examine high school seniors' college-going decisions. SCCGC is conceptualized in the following four ways: a) counselor expectations and priorities; b) student—counselor contact for college career advising; c) college and career readiness (CCR) activities; and d) constraints (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 40). First, counselors' expectations and priorities refer to counselors' perspectives held about their students' capabilities and the outcomes of students as counselors assist and provide support to them. For example, counselors' expectations may include making college readiness a priority for students and allotting the time necessary in making college an expectation among students (Rangel & Ballysingh, 2020). Second, student—counselor contact for college career counseling and advising consists of direct communication between counselors and students regarding college or career knowledge. Information shared as a form of student—counselor contact may include “college admissions counseling, financial aid information and assistance, and academic



and career advising and planning” (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 42). Third, college and career readiness (CCR) activities acknowledge that students have the tools necessary (e.g., knowledge and skills) to be successful as they matriculate within postsecondary education or the knowledge and skillsets beneficial for employment post high school graduation. CCR activities may include college campus tours, job and career fairs, and college application information sessions and workshops (Bryan et al., 2019; Goodwin et al., 2016). Fourth, constraints refer to calling attention to the systemic pressures or policies in place that may cause challenges in the role counselors play and the support they provide in making college attainable for students. Examples of constraints counselors face include the ratio of student—counselor caseloads and the number of counselors (Shi & Brown, 2020). The four components that contribute to the SCCGC conceptual model as mentioned here are crucial in impacting the following college-going outcomes: “college admissions counseling, financial aid counseling, number of college applications, and college enrollment” (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 40). In many ways, the components of SCCGC serving as predictors for the outcomes are impactful in supporting college-going culture in high school settings across rural, urban, and suburban contexts. Tied together, culturally relevant college-going culture practices and school specific college-going culture practices aim to meet the needs of students holistically to increase students’ access to higher education, specifically marginalized students (Bryan et al., 2022; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019).

### **2.1.3 College-Going Culture Structures**

The college-going culture structures that schools use are vital in promoting equitable access to higher education among students. Structures which embody college-going culture largely fall under one of two categories, organizational and accountability (Noll, 2021).

Organizational structures are inclusive of programming such as that held by college counselors and course curriculum offerings which imbue messages that make assumptions about students' futures as the structures relate to class or students' socioeconomic status (Noll, 2021). It is crucial to name that organizational structures create messages which are deeply embedded within society tied to racism, classism, and several forms of oppression that impact access to higher education for students (McDonough, 1997; Meyer et al., 2007). The forms of oppression in society are pervasive in terms of how they impact students' access to higher education presently and historically as such forms of oppression pertain to organizational structures. Students' futures may be in jeopardy in some ways due to class-based assumptions made about them. This in turn places the blame on students rather than systemic pressures and structures of domination. For example, the impact of spatial and social class factors among rural students, specifically rural poor, and working-class students, influences rural students' college aspirations (Ardoin, 2018) and institutional choice (Koricich et al., 2018).

Rural students' understanding of academic jargon such as FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) in the financial aid process may influence their access to higher education (Ardoin, 2018) if students have not been exposed to this language. Specifically, language such as FAFSA may exist as a barrier among some rural students, particularly from working-class backgrounds (Ardoin, 2018), when guidance counselors and teachers in high schools seem to be inaccessible (Alleman & Holly, 2013). In understanding and acknowledging the role of social class and geographic location, it is important to note that systems of oppression are to blame in rural students' ability to access higher education (Ardoin & McNamee, 2020). Therefore, rather than placing the onus on students as it relates to organizational structures embedded in society the onus needs to be placed on the oppressive systems at play which significantly impact

students' access to higher education in relation to college-going culture. The establishment of organizational structures is largely influential in informing students' college-going processes (Holland & Farmer-Hinton, 2009). Whereas organizational structures primarily engage course offerings and programming by school staff and administrators, accountability structures involve processes that push forth programming or tactics such as "College for All" that supports college access and preparedness (Noll, 2021). As an accountability measure, "College for All" serves the purpose to establish college-going processes into day-to-day school schedules by school staff and administrators for students. Accountability structures within "College for All" are inclusive of college application processes, college seminars as a requirement for all grade levels from ninth through twelfth, and college preparatory activities such as writing college essays led by staff and administrators, namely counselors (Noll, 2021). The establishment of both organizational structures and accountability structures are significant in providing access to higher education for students in them being embedded as college-going culture resources.

## **2.2 College-Going Culture and Rural Students**

In defining college-going culture as that which is understood as beliefs, practices, and structures that promote and increase access to institutions of higher education for students, I will now highlight college-going culture as it pertains to rural student populations broadly and rural Black students specifically (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). The following literature review will address college-going culture among rural students and rural Black students specifically as college-going culture permeates throughout the students' families, high schools, rural community, and through the lens of a macro context (i.e., state policy and federal policy). The

first theme, rural students and families, refers to the ways in which rural students' families and rural students as individuals impact their everyday lives as well as contribute to their access to higher education. Next, high school context, encompasses rural students within the context of their high schools, placing a significant focus on rural Black students and the high school context relating to college-going culture. Third, the community context situates how the broader community promotes college-going culture. The fourth and final theme, macro-level context, addresses the social and cultural forces such as the roles state and federal policy play in shaping college-going culture among rural students.

### **2.2.1 Rural Students and Families**

The level at which college-going culture impacts rural students' access to higher education encompasses the involvement of rural students themselves and rural students' families (Roksa & Robinson, 2017; Schneider et al., 2013). Families of rural students have the potential to influence their students access to higher education (Xuelong & Yongjiu, 2019). In many ways, the beliefs and practices of college-going culture shared among rural students and their families influences rural students' access to higher education (Tieken & San Antonio, 2016). The following will highlight the impact of college-going culture among rural students and will then address rural Black students specifically. Approaching the literature review in this manner will encompass rural students as individuals and the influences of rural students' families on rural students' college going processes as it pertains to college-going culture.

### **2.2.1.1 Rural Students and the Influence of College-Going Culture Among Their Families**

Rural students are significantly influenced by their families in pursuing their pathways to postsecondary education (Tieken, 2016). For example, rural students' families social class and socioeconomic status influences access to postsecondary education (Xuelong & Yongjiu, 2019). According to Lehmann (2009), it is assumed that lower social class backgrounds play a crucial role in students' educational achievement. Historically, prior studies argue that the beginning point of class divisions is the family in there oftentimes being a disconnect between the culture of schools and the culture of families (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). I would argue that placing the blame on families of lower-class status is a deficit framing which need be challenged and combatted. A deficit framing places the blame directly on students and their families without acknowledging the systems of oppression and structures of domination at play. Rather than placing the onus on rural students' families who identify with lower social class status, it is vital to consider how the systems of oppression at play hinder rural students' access to higher education, namely white supremacy, classism, and racism. In addition to challenging the systems of oppression rural students and their families must navigate to access higher education, specifically as it connects to college-going culture, it is of great significance to shift the deficit framing to an asset-based and critical framing among rural students and their families. An asset framing of the respective student population and their families considers the strengths that are achievable through engagement in college-going culture (Nixon et al., 2021). Along with an asset framing, a critical approach allows me as a researcher to disrupt the systems which are to blame for rural students' access to higher education, specifically as it relates to college-going culture. Together, an asset framing and critical approach must coexist to promote as well as increase access to higher education among rural students.

Using an asset-based and critical approach in addressing rural students and college-going culture allows for the calling out of systems of oppression while shifting the blame away from students. Shifting the blame places the blame directly and rightfully on the systems that must be challenged which impact students' access to higher education as it pertains to college-going culture. One way to highlight rural students from an asset-based and critical lens while increasing their access to higher education is using familial cultural capital (Xuelong & Yongjiu, 2019). Xuelong and Yongjiu (2019) find that familial cultural capital plays a significant role in shaping access to higher education among rural students with their success being attributed not only to rural students individually but to the involvement of their families as well. For example, students in the study often mentioned an embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018) as a form of familial cultural capital, which allows cultural capital to exist long term, leaving mental imprints on students from their parents' ways of existing and being (Xuelong & Yongjiu, 2019).

Therefore, rural students in the study understood familial cultural capital as a form of dutifulness (Xuelong & Yongjiu, 2019) which their parents embody and ultimately the students came to embody in accessing higher education. Embodying dutifulness is largely significant in students' perceptions of themselves along with their perceptions of their parents that both maintains and sustains college-going culture among them through familial cultural capital.

A second example of highlighting rural students' and their families' influences on college-going culture are the ways students discuss their career aspirations in STEM while sharing about their lives and their futures which is shaped by their families (Kier & Blanchard, 2021). According to Kier and Blanchard (2021), highlighting the voices of eighth grade students from a low-income rural school district addresses the importance of focusing on the ways that the students' aspirations in STEM are nurtured by family members while disregarding negative

self-images created by staff and administrators. Students' home life experiences had a significant impact on how they saw themselves positively, largely dependent upon the social and cultural experiences among rural students' families. For example, Darius, a student in the study, shared of his dreams of becoming a mechanical engineer and said he owed that to his father and his cousin. His father would assist him with fixing motors on his dirt bike as early as the age of seven while his cousin taught him how to reassemble cars during his free time out of school. These instances shared with his father and his cousin supported Darius in his dreams of becoming a future mechanical engineer. Hence, the influence of rural students' families greatly impacts how they view themselves presently as well as in the future in hopes of embarking upon STEM careers. Therefore, the way rural students see themselves individually is attributable to how their families see them while achieving their aspirations which promotes and supports college-going culture in accessing higher education.

#### **2.2.1.2 Rural Black Students and the Influence of College-Going Culture Among Their Families**

Central to college-going culture, rural Black students' families heavily influence their access to higher education. Crumb and colleagues (2021) address the importance of college aspirations as a form of college-going culture among rural Black male students. The study highlights the significance of rural communities' social and cultural capital as it engages the role of families, specifically rural familism. According to Crumb and colleagues (2022), rural familism refers to the feeling of connectedness among kinfolk, namely family, and the combination of individual goals and achievements towards a greater accomplishment. Relative to rural families of rural Black male students, the collective goal is providing an uplifting sense of community which in many ways provides motivation in pursuing college (Agger et al., 2018).

However, rural familism may also serve as a barrier in the case that college enrollment among rural students equates to rural out migration (Tabit & Winters, 2019; Tieken & San Antonio, 2016), specifically among rural Black male students. While rural out migration may be viewed through a deficit lens it could in some ways serve as an avenue of support towards upward mobility among rural students. Hence, I would argue that rural familism is beneficial among rural Black male students or rural Black students at large in supporting students' access to higher education.

In addition to rural familism among rural Black students and their families, it is crucial to consider programming that partners with rural Black students and their families to increase the students' access to higher education. Programming such as the Emerging Scholars (ES) Program, a college access program which supports access to higher education for students from multiply marginalized backgrounds, specifically rural Black students, has been beneficial in catering to the needs of students and their families (Combs et al., 2020). Through the help of the programming, rural Black students' families advocate for their children to go to college which increases access to higher education for the respective student population. Partnering with families through the Emerging Scholars Program allows for the needs of rural Black students to be met. The rural Black students have the support of both their families and the college access programming to increase their access to higher education (Combs et al., 2020).

Rural Black students also receive support from their families with family members encouraging them to attend college. For example, Means and colleagues (2016) found that rural Black students would in some ways hesitate to leave their hometown to go to college or would also fear going too far away for college. However, with the support from family members, such as parents and grandparents, rural Black students were encouraged to attend college which has



the potential to contribute to upward mobility for their families (Means et al., 2016). Therefore, rural Black families play a significant role in rural Black students' college-going culture experiences as students make the decisions to attend college.

Existing literature addressing rural Black students' experiences of college-going culture is minimal (Crumb et al., 2021; Means, 2019; Means et al., 2016). There is a need to highlight the roles of rural Black students as individuals in their college-going processes along with rural Black students' families. Rural Black students play a critical role in their college-going culture experiences which is often shaped by their families. Therefore, the study in which I will engage offers support in highlighting the role of college-going culture, specifically addressing the ways rural Black students see themselves as individuals that are the drivers of their own educational pursuits along with their families playing a significant role.

### **2.2.2 Rural Students' High School Context**

College-going culture in many ways encompasses the context of rural students' high schools. However, rural high schools are not monolithic much like rural communities are not monolithic (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2018). Within the high schools, the college-going culture may vary from one high school to the next. Hence, college-going culture in one rural high school may not be synonymous with college-going culture in another rural high school. Therein lies diversity which exists across rural high schools as it pertains to establishing and implementing college-going culture (McHenry-Sorber & Hall, 2018). The following will highlight college-going culture situated within rural high schools among rural students broadly as well as rural Black students specifically.

### **2.2.2.1 College-Going Culture Among Rural Students in High Schools**

In understanding that the establishment of college-going culture does not succumb to a one-size-fits-all approach, the following will include examples of college-going culture which acknowledges the diversity across rural high schools. In a study situated in rural Texas, Welton and Williams (2015) incorporate critical ethnographic approaches to assess how Green High School, a school whose student population is largely low-income and are from racially and ethnically minoritized backgrounds, fosters a college-going culture through linking accountability to college readiness. Welton and Williams (2015) define accountability based upon the systems in place, such as Adequate Yearly Progress, which has been replaced with teacher and principal evaluation support accountability systems. The mentioned systems were put in place to determine students' academic achievement along with serving as a means of measuring students' success as college-going culture permeates rural high schools. The findings in the study reveal that accountability structures are only a portion of the barriers rural students must navigate as administrators and staff establish a college-going culture rooted in college readiness (Welton & Williams, 2015). Similarly, it is important to consider the complexities of systems of oppression at play that attribute to the development of a school-wide college-going culture in the high school. Hence, establishing an environment rooted in college-going culture must consider various factors that may include academic support, the demands of establishing and achieving along with maintaining accountability structures, and resources to support and promote college-readiness as an accountability measure in students' ability to access higher education (Welton & Williams, 2015).

Equally important as accountability structures, it is significant to highlight the ways in which rural high schools may foster a college-going culture in alignment with college

knowledge. College knowledge refers to students' understanding and level of engagement with components of college-going that do not pertain to academics, specifically, the steps of enduring college admission processes and the associated norms of higher education (Holland, 2017). According to Crumb and Larkin (2018), a source of aiding college-going culture that ties to college knowledge is implementing social justice counseling within a rural high school. Social justice counseling encompasses four core principles: "equity, access, participation, and harmony" (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012 as cited in Crumb & Larkin, 2018, p. 25). Equity engages access for all to the same allocation of resources, entitlements and obligations and access includes the ability and capability of all to gain the knowledge necessary to employ self-driven purpose (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012). Participation involves the act of equal rights for all in having autonomy over decisions that impact their livelihood and harmony equates to striving as well as achieving the greatest outcome for the greatest good of all members within society (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012). Social justice counseling helps students produce as well as gain access to the knowledge necessary to access institutions of higher education (Crethar & Winterowd, 2012; Crumb & Larkin, 2018). Therefore, social justice counseling is both a source of support and an asset for rural students which drives efforts to build and sustain college-going culture in direct alignment with college knowledge.

Using academic preparation and college knowledge ensures the persistence to high school graduation and ultimately college enrollment of rural students while establishing a cyclical as well as critical college-going culture environment. Specifically, accountability systems and social justice counseling are crucial when working in tandem with one another, providing equitable access to resources and knowledge while increasing and ensuring access to higher education for rural students (Crumb & Larkin, 2018). Accountability systems and social

justice counseling are two of the many that exists with respect to academic preparation and college knowledge as forms of college-going culture. At the center of an impactful college-going culture environment for rural students, equity must continuously thrive along with flexibility in considering students' needs while understanding rural high school districts are diverse and do not encompass a one-size-fits all approach (McHenry-Sorber & Hall, 2018). It is when rural school districts negate the idea that flexibility is necessary that access is driven by inequitable structures, therefore catering to the students' needs is vital both individually and collectively among rural student populations.

#### **2.2.2.2 College-Going Culture Among Rural Black Students in High Schools**

College-going culture ingrains itself throughout rural high schools. Implementing college-going culture has a significant impact on rural students, rural Black students specifically, as it engages promoting as well as increasing access to higher education for the respective student population. In a recent study, Castro (2021) addresses the ways rural Black high school students' access to higher education is historically hindered due to deficit ideology (Valencia, 1997) and dysconscious racism (King, 1991) within their high schools. Deficit ideology refers to wrongful acts of victim blaming rather than acknowledging the systems of oppression and structures of domination that are to blame (Valencia, 1997). According to King (1991), dysconscious racism disregards the larger systems of oppression at play, including racism and classism, and places the blame on individual rural Black students as targets who are in the way of their own educational pursuits. Both deficit ideology and dysconscious racism have ties rooted in policy that often outcast marginalized populations, specifically rural Black students as it relates to the present study. Deficit ideology and dysconscious racism continuously perpetuate harm among rural Black students in blaming them as a population for failing to access higher

education. I would argue that this way of thinking overlooks or underestimates how systems of oppression like white supremacy, classism, and racism impact rural Black students' access to higher education. This is largely due to educational deficit thinking, which in many ways abides by policy by the book while negating the needs of rural Black students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds that often exclude this student population (Castro, 2021). In some cases, this frame of thinking even shifts the blame to rural Black students themselves. Systems of oppression, including deficit ideology and dysconscious racism, need to be deeply considered to challenge the narratives about rural Black students accessing higher education within their high schools as it relates to college-going culture. These systems should also be combatted within institutional policy that is central to rural Black students' access to higher education. Not only do spaces of inclusiveness need to be created for rural Black students within institutional policy, but spaces that also acknowledge rural Black students from an asset-based and critical approach.

Acknowledging the systems of oppression at play is vital to creating pathways to and through higher education for rural Black students. Means and colleagues (2016) engaged in a qualitative study addressing rural Black high school students' educational aspirations. The findings reveal that the rural context significantly impacts as well as shapes their college-going aspirations. Additionally, the rural Black students in the same study address the importance of the encouraging motivation and support felt from peers, teachers, counselors, and administrators within their high schools in shaping their college-going aspirations. Studies like this show that educational policy and schools themselves need to push back against deficit ideology and dysconscious racism by building structural support systems.

### **2.2.3 Rural Students' Community Context**

In examining and addressing the college-going culture experiences of rural students, it is also vital to include the broader community context in which rural students experience college-going culture. The broader community context encompasses high schools and families (Crumb & Larkin, 2018; Flora et al., 2018). Below, I will provide examples that include how rural students as a population experience college-going culture within their communities and will also include rural Black students specifically and their experiences of college-going culture in their communities.

#### **2.2.3.1 College-Going Culture in Rural Students' Communities**

Community is a significant aspect in several rural communities. Having the support of family members and community members is in many ways beneficial in supporting pathways to higher education among rural students as it relates to college-going culture (Dollinger et al., 2021). The feeling of community within rural places largely influences rural students' pursuit of their postsecondary educational aspirations (Means, 2018). For example, the close-knit relationships that often exist in rural places help foster community, which plays a crucial role in influencing rural students' postsecondary educational outcomes (Johnson & Zoellner, 2016; Means et al., 2016). Social institutions in rural communities that are beneficial in supporting students' postsecondary aspirations are local companies, institutions of higher education, and churches (Alleman & Holly, 2013).

While highlighting the importance of the role community plays in supporting rural students' postsecondary aspirations, there is a need to understand how rural students use social capital to attain access to higher education. Nelson (2016) addresses the need for rural students to

access community social capital in their college search and application process. Using community social capital involves rural students' engagement with peers and friends who are supportive, along with students' interactions with adults, family ties that extend beyond the immediate family, and a community that exudes genuine care and concern (Nelson, 2016). In a broader sense, community that supports rural students' postsecondary aspirations may include religious organizations and local leadership including business and government; such entities can provide sponsorships and programming for students (Means, 2018). Because they are very much interwoven into rural families, schools, and communities, each of these organizations is vital in supporting rural students' access to higher education as it pertains to college-going culture (Nelson, 2016). While it is of dire importance that these organizations be in place, they alone are not sufficient in supporting students' college search and application process. Together rural families, schools, and communities comprise the local level at which rural students' access to higher education is largely influenced.

### **2.2.3.2 College-Going Culture in Rural Black Students Communities**

College-going culture that exists within rural communities both directly and indirectly impacts rural Black students' access to higher education. College access programming, inclusive of TRIO Programs, shapes rural Black students' access to higher education through partnerships with local organizations as well as rural high schools (Cowan Pitre & Pitre, 2009). TRIO Programs encompass three education opportunity programs: Educational Talent Search, Upward Bound, and Student Support Services (Cowan Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound specifically cater to students in secondary education who come from low-income backgrounds, are racially minoritized, and identify as first-generation college students (Cowan Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Both programs support these students as they transition from high

school to their postsecondary education careers. Therefore, college access programming like Educational Talent Search and Upward Bound serve as assets within rural communities to support and increase access to higher education among rural Black students (Cowan Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

In addition to college access programming that partners with and in rural communities, Black churches often serve as pillars to support students' access to higher education. Stephens (2020) found that Black churches often serve as places of learning that contribute to social, cultural, and human capital among rural Black people, specifically grandmothers who raise their Black grandchildren in the church. Hence, the socialization of Black children in Black churches is significant in impacting their access to higher education. Together, college access programming and the role of Black churches both contribute to rural Black students' access to higher education. This dissertation study adds to the literature by acknowledging that, to examine and address college-going culture—which exists as beliefs, practices, and structures (Corwin & Tierney, 2007; Noll, 2021)—it is necessary to consider the local community resources that shape access to higher education among rural Black students.

#### **2.2.4 Macro Context**

In many ways the enactment of specific state and federal policies in the United States shapes access to higher education among rural students. Both forms of policies impact rural students' access to higher education economically, which may include state and federal financial aid (Menifield, 2012; Patrick et al., 2021; Sowl & Crain, 2021). Therefore, it is vital to consider how the varying forms of policy impact and contribute to the ways rural students navigate their experiences in accessing higher education.



#### **2.2.4.1 Macro Context of College-Going Culture Among Rural Students**

College-going culture among rural students from the macro perspective addresses how both state and federal policies shape access to higher education for the respective student population. In a recent study, Sowl and Crain (2021) engage in a literature review to address rural college access and choice from as early as the year 2000 to the year 2020. The findings reveal that a total of three studies incorporate an analysis of a particular policy initiative pertaining to rural college access. For example, upon examining policy implications for the “Top Ten Percent Law” in Texas, Long and colleagues (2010) identified a policy change that strengthens access to higher education for students who reside in rural areas, allowing for guaranteed admission to flagship universities for high school seniors who rank at the top ten percent of their graduating class. For the states of Georgia and Tennessee, the HOPE scholarship, a lottery-based scholarship for each state, shapes access to higher education for students, specifically students from marginalized backgrounds (Menifield, 2012). Although the scholarship supported a significant increase of students from marginalized backgrounds, there was still a noticeable difference between white students and Black students from low-income backgrounds, white students outnumbering Black students (Menifield, 2012). For Georgia and Tennessee, a great number of students who are multiply marginalized encompassed rural students, specifically rural Students of Color who received the HOPE scholarship as first-year college students (Menifield, 2012). The percentage of students who received the scholarship their first year and kept it through their final year up until graduation decreased significantly (Menifield, 2012). This is largely due to the barriers that permeate higher education such as classism, racism, and elitism, which impact rural students' access as well as their retention in college. The “Top Ten Percent Law” in Texas and the HOPE scholarships for both Georgia and

Tennessee offer examples of how state policy and regulations impact rural students' access to higher education. An example of a federal policy impacting rural students' access to higher education is the rural broadband access policy adopted by the American Bar Association (ABA) in 2019. The ABA adopted the policy to increase broadband connectivity in rural areas (ABA, 2019). Due to the abrupt move to online learning because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, rural students were left to navigate schooling from home (Patrick et al., 2021). The move to online learning heightened the existing barriers rural students must navigate with limited broadband access being one of those barriers. The policy adopted by the ABA helped in some ways, yet still caused rural students to suffer in other ways due to connectivity issues in their homes or lack of access to broadband connection altogether (Patrick et al., 2021). Therefore, to better support rural students' access to higher education, state and federal policy must attend to their needs.

#### **2.2.4.2 Macro Context of College-Going Culture Among Rural Black Students**

While there is a growing amount of literature addressing the macro context of rural students' access to higher education, minimal research focuses specifically on rural Black students (Chambers, 2020; Means et al., 2016). Chambers (2020) conducted a study that addresses the role of mathematics achievement and self-efficacy among rural Black students. In her study, Chambers (2020) found that increasing access to higher education among rural Black students is significant in elevating their presence in higher education. Within her study, she also noted the importance of policies that provide access to higher education on the federal level, specifically policies whose purpose is to make community college affordable for rural Black people in the United States. The findings in Chambers (2020) reveal that although affordable college access increases rural Black students' presence in higher education, significant work is

required to decrease the poverty levels among rural Black students as a population. Therefore, it is vital to highlight the role of policies, both state and federal, that impact rural Black students' college-going experiences while situated in the macro context.

### **2.2.5 Review of Literature Conclusion**

This literature review highlights the significance of college-going culture experiences among rural students broadly and rural Black students specifically. I begin by addressing the role of Black families, then rural high schools, followed by the broader rural community and the macro context inclusive of state policy and federal policy. Each of these levels impact rural students' access to higher education. While the current literature reflects the role of families, high schools, the broader rural community, and the macro context, I will focus specifically on the broader rural community and college-going culture among rural Black students in my study. It is vital that I acknowledge the broader rural community to examine and address rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. The broader rural community in my study—including the high school, families, community members, local organizations, and programming—plays a significant role in shaping access to higher education among rural Black students. Hence, this study seeks to advance literature through centering the importance of the broader rural community in contributing to rural Black students' college-going culture experiences to increase their access to higher education.

## **2.2.6 Guiding Theoretical Frameworks**

The present study uses a qualitative youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach while underpinning Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model paired with Perna's (2006) college access and choice model. Both theoretical frameworks are necessary to examine and address the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students, specifically to account for the racial and spatial contexts in the students' broader rural community. I use Yosso's (2005) CCW model to understand how rural Black students lean heavily upon multiple forms of capital such as familial capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital, among other forms of capital to navigate their college-going culture experiences in their community. Perna's (2006) college access and choice model is used to make sense of local and community context within rural Black students' broader rural community, which includes the high school, Black churches, local organizations, community members, and several entities that shape rural Black students' access to higher education. The following will outline the significance of Yosso's (2005) CCW model and its relationship to critical race theory along with how using such a critical framework best supports my study. I will then address the significance of Perna's (2006) college access and choice model and the role it plays in this study. Paired together, both models are crucial in examining and addressing rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their broader rural community.

### **2.2.6.1 Community Cultural Wealth Model**

The narratives of rural students historically engage a deficit mindset as it relates to how this student population gains access to and through higher education (Byun et al., 2012; Irvin et al., 2012). In particular, the voices of rural Students of Color are often overgeneralized in a

negative manner; however, recently there occurs a shift in the narratives to an asset-based and critical approach (Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021). Shifting the narrative to focus on an asset-based and critical approach illuminates the ways in which the varying identities held by rural Students of Color support them as they enter and embark on their college-going journeys. The theoretical underpinning of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model supports both an asset-based and critical framing in acknowledging the identities of rural Students of Color that influence their access to higher education. In using CCW, I will first address how the framework builds upon critical race theory (CRT) and Yosso's (2005) rationale behind creating the model. I will then provide context about the CCW model, the forms of capital it encompasses, and how it is crucial in the present study to address rural Black students and college-going culture.

The introduction of critical race theory (CRT) in education contributes to the establishment of community cultural wealth (CCW) as a theoretical framework (Yosso, 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). To understand the framing of CCW, it is vital to address the significance of CRT and its role in serving as the foundation for CCW. Critical race theory (CRT) was coined by legal scholar Derrick Bell (1992, 1995). As a theory whose purpose is to address acts of oppression, specifically racism, CRT sprouted as early as the 1980s in the field of law (Barnes, 1990; Crenshaw, 1998). CRT is multifaceted in nature, involving overlap across fields including racial and ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies, critical legal studies, among many more (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT began branching out to education in the mid-to-late 1990s (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

According to Solórzano (1998), CRT comprises five tenets. The first tenet addresses the notion that “race and racism are endemic and permanent” in society, namely within the United

States (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). This tenet acknowledges that race and racism are intertwined with social identities such as class and gender in any understanding of the permanence of both race and racism. For the second tenet, it is crucial to combat dominant western ways of thinking that may include “objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). Accepting such a frame of thought as the norm reinforces a patriarchal and heteronormative society rather than challenging and disrupting the norm. The third tenet values a commitment to social justice that aims to challenge racism along with other isms and structures of domination (Solórzano, 1998). Tied to the first tenet, the third tenet serves as a pivotal tool in disrupting the permanence of racism. For the fourth tenet, it is significant to acknowledge the experiences of People of Color, honoring us as knowledge holders of our own lived experiences as they pertain to race and racism (Solórzano, 1998). The fourth tenet is especially important in centering the experiences of Students of Color through both an asset-based and critical lens. The fifth and final tenet of CRT demands that scholars in education lean heavily upon the interdisciplinary nature of historical contexts across various fields (e.g., racial and ethnic studies, gender and sexuality studies) while addressing and combatting race and racism within research (Solórzano, 1998). Together the tenets of CRT contribute to creating CCW as a theoretical framework.

Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model (CCW) emphasizes the following forms of capital that greatly contribute to how Students of Color navigate higher education: aspirational capital, navigational capital, social capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, and resistant capital. Yosso (2005) developed the CCW model to focus on Students of Color as a whole. The present study employs an asset-based lens to highlight how the forms of capital outlined in the model support rural Students of Color, specifically rural Black students, in

navigating and experiencing college-going culture. Aspirational capital pertains to the ability to persist towards achievement and goal attainment as well as overcome barriers amidst adversity. Navigational capital entails maneuvering through institutions of higher education or social structures within society. More specifically, it acknowledges that students are often in transition while occupying educational spaces, which demands that students adapt to new cultures (Cuellar et al., 2018). Social capital refers to how students attain upward mobility through their community of people while using accessible resources. Linguistic capital centers the ability to communicate in more than one language or in multiple ways that exceed verbal communication. Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge and traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Resistant capital challenges the inequities and varying forms of systemic oppression within society and higher education. Altogether, the six forms of cultural capital outlined in Yosso's (2005) CCW model overlap in multiple ways in serving as assets among rural Black students as they engage in college-going culture.

In addition to the six forms of capital outlined in Yosso's (2005) CCW model, it is significant to name two points that need be considered in expanding the model. For the first point, it is vital to understand the many complex parts and workings of CCW as a model. As such, this demands that we continue exploring CCW as scholars in understanding the numerous assets and resources Communities of Color and Students of Color utilize to navigate institutions along with a plethora of existing social systems (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2021; Yosso, 2005). The second point suggests that it is necessary to further develop community cultural wealth as a model to encompass more forms of capital that are beneficial in supporting Students of Color in accessing higher education (Espino, 2014). In addressing such, I would like to include the newly added tenets and forms of capital outlined in Acevedo and Solórzano's (2021) proposed model.

Acevedo and Solórzano's (2021) CCW model proposes that "cross-disciplinary concept building is not only useful but necessary for advancing educational agendas" (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017, p. 20). As a model that emerges out of the scholarship of CRT, CCW provides tools for Communities and Students of Color to disrupt day to day aggressions rooted in racism within educational contexts (Solórzano, 1998). In the model there are many forms of capital that should be included, but for the purposes of the present study, it is significant to add spiritual capital (Espino, 2014). Pérez Huber (2009) defines spiritual capital as that which serves as "a set of resources and skills rooted in a spiritual connection to a reality greater than oneself" (p. 721). The points above are crucial in addressing rural Black students and college-going culture within their communities while underpinning CCW as a theoretical framework.

Rural Students of Color face numerous barriers as they navigate college-going culture, specifically college aspirations, however it is critical to note that the experiences of rural Black students are not synonymous with all Students of Color. While all Students of Color may experience racism, Black students must navigate anti-Black racism as they transform college-going aspirations into lived realities. It is vital that rural Black students' college aspirations be framed through an asset-based and critical approach while challenging the deficit perspective. Crumb and colleagues (2021) examine the college aspirations of rural Black male students within their high schools using CCW. The findings reveal the support necessary for rural Black male students to achieve their educational outcomes upon embarking on their postsecondary education careers. For example, using the data from the High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 in the mentioned study shows that rural Black males have high educational aspirations which are made achievable with support and guidance received from teachers and school counselors as well as community members.



In a similar study, Means (2019) uses CCW to address the college and career aspirations of fourteen rural Black and Latinx students. The study explores the college and career aspirations of this student population and the ways in which varying forms of social capital cultivate and support their aspirations (Means, 2019). The first theme, career and college aspirations of rural Black and Latinx middle school students, reveals that students leaned upon aspirational capital to achieve college aspirations. For example, Jose, Kristin, and Stephanie's career aspirations were influenced by watching television (Means, 2019). In comparison, Erika, Melanie, and Renee's career aspirations were influenced by their desire to help people (Means, 2019). Specifically, Renee shared how she aspires to become a cardiologist, which stems from her interests in wanting to help people cure their illnesses in centering people's needs to become well rather than focusing on the media's influence (Means, 2019). Additionally, students also leaned heavily upon familial capital; Means (2019) writes that "students' descriptions of family went beyond parents and siblings to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins" (p. 7). Regarding familial commitment, the rural Students of Color in the study shared how family members supported as well as encouraged their college and career aspirations (Means, 2019). Hence, both studies provide examples of how rural Black students rely heavily on aspirational, familial, and other forms of capital that CCW accounts for to navigate educational settings. Using CCW as a model that is asset-based helps researchers understand the ways that rural Black students achieve their college aspirations.

The studies mentioned above are examples of ways in which CCW is often used by researchers to understand and make sense of the experiences of Students of Color. As it relates to my study, I employ CCW to examine rural Black students' experiences with college-going culture and how college-going culture shapes their access to higher education. Aspirational

capital engages rural Black students' persistence to embark upon their postsecondary educational journeys while navigating systems of oppression. Navigational capital engages rural Black students' use of knowledge gained from navigating structures of domination, namely white supremacy, classism, and anti-Black racism, to then persist amidst adversity. Social capital within my study, engages rural Black students' use of knowledge from their networks to which they are connected that contributes to students' upward mobility. Linguistic capital engages rural Black students' use of their own vernacular which is understood among them along with the use of standard English students use to navigate college-going culture within their rural communities. This form of linguistic capital is not in alignment with Yosso's (2005) defining of such but instead offers my perception of the power in having multiple dialects that rural Black students use to engage as well as navigate college-going culture within their communities. Familial capital engages the use of knowledges gained from family—immediate, extended, and chosen—which support students' college-going culture experiences as it promotes access to higher education. Resistant capital engages rural Black students' use of their power in combatting systems of domination that create barriers which this student population must navigate. The last form of capital, spiritual capital, reveals how rural Black students attune to their spirituality and religious beliefs while experiencing college-going culture. Together, the varying forms of capital outlined in the original model (Yosso, 2005) and proposed model (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2021) were included to support a racial analysis in understanding as well as addressing rural Black students' college-going culture experiences within their community. CCW supports a racial analysis in that it offers multiple forms of capital which serve the purpose to support Students of Color, specifically rural Black students regarding the present study in all their identities while experiencing college-going culture in their community.

### **2.2.6.2 College Access and Choice Model**

Enhancing college access for rural students engages several layers including “habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context” (Perna, 2006, p. 117). Each of these layers are outlined in Perna’s (2006) college access and choice model as factors that contribute to accessing institutions of higher education. The first layer, habitus, refers to an individual’s demographic makeup, specifically gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status along with social capital and cultural capital (Perna, 2006). Within the model, Perna (2006) conceptualizes social capital as the establishment, function, and maintenance of social networks (Morrow, 1999). In comparison, cultural capital refers to the skillsets associated with cultural values that are attained to navigate higher education (Bourdieu, 1986). The second layer, school and community context, reflects McDonough’s (1997) idea of organizational habitus, which acknowledges the ways that structures within schools and communities help or hinder college choice among students (Perna, 2006). For example, McDonough (1997) posits the idea that organizational habitus shapes college choice; McDonough also offers ways that social class or socioeconomic background influences the college selection process. Broader structures of domination are at play, namely classism and white supremacy, which affect students’ class status as it pertains to their college choice processes. The third layer, the higher education context, accounts for the role that institutions of higher education have in influencing college choice for students (Perna, 2006). This layer comprises the following: whether or not a student enrolls in a four-year college or institution of higher education (Perna, 2006), enrolled in an institution of higher education at all (Ellwood & Kane, 2000), or enrolled in their number one college of choice (Hurtado et al., 1997). The fourth and final layer—social, economic, and policy context—largely considers how societal and

systemic forces such as state and federal legislation as well as inflation impact college choice for students (Perna, 2006).

In addition to the four layers of Perna's (2006) model addressed above, also embedded within the model are the demand for higher education, supply of resources, expected benefits, and expected costs, and how all of these factors shape college choice (Perna, 2006). The demand for higher education encompasses both academic preparation and academic achievement. Varying differences in the demand for higher education reflect differences across student populations as it pertains to academic preparation and academic achievement (Perna, 2006). The supply of resources has a great deal to do with family income and financial aid (Perna, 2006). Expected benefits refer to monetary and non-monetary assets gained from investing in one's self to pursue higher education (Becker, 1993; Perna, 2006). Finally, expected costs encompass the costs of attending college, forgone earnings, and the travel costs between home and the university, all of which influence college choice (Becker 1993; Perna, 2006). Together, the four layers of Perna's (2006) college access and choice model, along with the embedded components of the model, highlight the factors that impede or influence college choice among students.

Focusing on how rural students access institutions of higher education is crucial in understanding and supporting their experiences of college-going culture. There is a need to highlight college-going culture in rural schools as well as in the broader communities. Worsham and colleagues (2021) conducted a study addressing rural students' college choice process in selecting engineering as a major upon enrolling in college; they focus specifically on the first two layers outlined in Perna's (2006) college access and choice model, habitus along with school and community context, "to understand how the social, economic, and financial characteristics unique to rural environments have shaped their college-going process" (p. 29).

In using Perna's (2006) model, the findings in Worsham and colleagues' (2021) study reveal four pertinent themes, but I will highlight the two that directly address college-going culture and choice. As an example of the first theme—the inextricable nature of college, major, and career choice—Esther, a rural white third-year student in the study, did not have exposure or access to a family or community member within her hometown who worked in the field and therefore was unsure of how to navigate choosing a major. It was not until Esther began working, post college, that she understood the importance of selecting a major that would become her career choice. The fourth theme, school and community as crucial resources in college and major exploration, highlights the important role that community plays in choosing engineering as a major upon embarking on rural students' college going journeys. For example, Paige, a rural white third-year student, mentions how conversations shared between her and her AP Chemistry teacher sparked her interests in pursuing engineering as a major that opens the door to a career in chemical engineering. Both of these themes showcase how community can either hinder or help rural students' college access and choice, playing a vital role in fulfilling their college aspirations. The influence that community members have on rural students' college-going experiences contributes to the pivotal moment in transforming rural students' college aspirations into accessing and entering institutions of higher education. Therefore, Perna's (2006) college access and choice model reveals the significance of the role community members play in rural students' ability to access higher education.

Means and colleagues (2016) use Perna's (2006) college access and choice model to examine “the college aspirations, choices, resources, and barriers, for rural African American high school students” (p. 549). The study centers the first two layers of the model, habitus and school and community context, to understand how students' environments in which they are

largely socialized impact students' college choices (Means et al., 2016). Although findings in their study reveal three key themes, I will highlight the first theme, "The Tensions of Staying or Going: College and Career Aspirations and Rurality" (Means et al., 2016, p. 555). This theme illuminates the impact students' rural communities have on the college and career opportunities that are made accessible to them, whether directly or indirectly. For example, Ben, a participant who had military career aspirations, stated, "Why aren't they funding more money to the schools...Instead, we're getting more Dollar Generals, Family Dollars, and we're getting more rebuilding McDonalds" (Means et al., 2016, p. 556). His comments suggest the ways in which rural communities create barriers for rural students to access college and career opportunities given the perpetuation of classism and elitism within these contexts. Therefore, the college aspirations of rural Black students are in many ways influenced by habitus and school and community context, as outlined in Perna's (2006) college access and choice model.

As it pertains to this dissertation study, Perna's (2006) college access and choice model contributes to strongly considering the significance of geographic context in making sense of rural spaces. To increase rural Black students' access to higher education, I deeply engaged with the second layer as it relates to their college-going culture experiences. The second layer, school and community context, addresses the significance of the rural high school along with the community context in supporting access to higher education among rural Black students. Focusing on the school and community context allowed me to examine and address the importance of enacting change to support access to higher education among rural students locally within their community.

Both theoretical frameworks—community cultural wealth (CCW) and the college access and choice model—are significant in my study for addressing the role of college-going culture

in shaping access to higher education among rural Black students. It is first important to understand the racial analysis of rural Black students' college-going culture experiences, which is supported using Yosso's (2005) CCW model and components of Acevedo and Solórzano's (2021) proposed model. In conjunction with CCW, it is also crucial to consider the role of spatial analysis in terms of locale, specifically within rural contexts, while making sense of place and space in supporting rural Black students' college-going culture experiences to access higher education. Hence, CCW and the college access and choice model are significant for the present study and work together to conceptualize a racial analysis and spatial analysis needed to support rural Black students' access to higher education.

### **2.2.6.3 Chapter Summary**

The chapter above highlights the existing literature addressing college-going culture among rural students. I begin the chapter by defining college-going culture as that which encompasses beliefs, practices, and structures. To acknowledge the role of college-going culture among rural students, I address the influence of families, high schools, communities, and the macro context among rural students broadly and highlight rural Black students specifically as it pertains to these influences. Then, I offer a literature review conclusion to provide a brief overview of what I addressed in the preceding sections. Finally, I discuss the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study which include Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) and Perna's (2006) college access and choice models while offering examples of research studies that employ the models.

### **3.0 Methodology**

The following chapter outlines the paradigm I employ along with the methodology, including data collection and analysis procedures. The present study is framed through a critical paradigm to address rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. In addressing the use of a critical paradigm, I highlight the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and axiological assumptions underpinning the paradigm. After addressing the use of a critical paradigm, I address the importance of using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a methodology. To address YPAR I provide a historical overview of action research and how both PAR and YPAR derive from action research; and I also provide the tenets of YPAR. I then provide context for the research site followed by the sampling and recruitment strategies. The chapter also highlights the varying forms of data collection and analysis that will be used in the study.

#### **3.1 Critical Paradigm**

The present study is framed through a critical paradigm. A critical paradigm is defined as that which “advocates becoming aware of how our thinking is socially and historically constructed and how this limits our actions, in order to challenge these learned restrictions” (Higgs & Titchen, 2008, p. 134). According to Asghar (2013), the framing of a critical paradigm is in direct contrast to the traditional framing of paradigms situated from a constructivist or positivist lens. A critical paradigm challenges the norms of society, specifically the systems of



oppression at play which include white supremacy, heteronormativity, classism, sexism, and racism, along with several others (Asghar, 2013). In many ways, the use of a critical paradigm challenges these structures of domination. Challenging the respective systems very much calls into question the power relations among races, ethnicities, classes, genders, and a host of social identities embedded within society (Asghar, 2013). Using a critical paradigm allows the researcher not only to acknowledge systems of oppression such as white supremacy and racism upheld as the norm but also to push the researcher to challenge the same systems that permeate society (Usher, 1996). Everyone in our society must challenge structures of domination, which supports the use of a critical paradigm. This sheds light on how the systems of domination create disparities rather than ascribing deficits to marginalized people and communities.

While using a critical paradigm, the researcher heavily engages in the use of critical reflection, which serves as an essential aspect of the research processes (Glesne, 2016). The use of a critical paradigm while simultaneously engaging in critical reflection allows the researcher the opportunity to explore and discover ideas that have not yet been assessed within research among participants (Glesne, 2016). Using a critical paradigm in conjunction with critical reflection also allows the researcher the opportunity to examine how oppressors, namely white people in power (the dominant majority), ingrain structures of domination within society to control the oppressed (Glesne, 2016), specifically controlling those with little to no power. Therefore, the use of a critical paradigm that centers critical reflection is essential in supporting my role as a researcher within the current study, allowing me as the researcher to combat and address the systems of oppression set up against rural Black students in gaining access to higher education. The barriers rural Black students must navigate are attributed to systems of oppression

in place such as classism and anti-Black racism, which is crucial in acknowledging that the onus is not on rural Black students themselves. Instead, the systems of oppression and structures of domination are to blame as they pertain to rural Black students accessing higher education. In the next section, I will discuss the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and axiological assumptions of a critical paradigm and how these assumptions all relate to my study and influence my relationality as a researcher.

### **3.1.1 Critical Paradigm and Epistemological Assumptions**

In conducting research, epistemological assumptions are guided by the following questions: “How do we know what is real? What is the nature of knowledge?” (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020, p. 687). Epistemological assumptions refer to how we come to understand the knowledge we hold as researchers, which engages our ways of knowing within society (Jones et al., 2013). The use of a critical paradigm upholds those epistemological assumptions rooted in understanding how we make sense of our own lived experiences while navigating power structures rooted in oppression that shape our overall reality (Ravenek & Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Power structures shape our reality both socially and historically as they pertain to epistemological assumptions underpinning a critical paradigm (Ravenek & Laliberte Rudman, 2013). While using a critical paradigm, I am applying the prior questions to acknowledge the ways in which I make sense of rural Black students, like me, and their experiences of college-going culture as individuals within their rural community while navigating systems of oppression. The ways of knowing of the rural Black students in the study are central to my understanding of their experiences in navigating college-going culture within their rural community. For example, using a critical paradigm in conjunction with critical reflection allows

me to better understand as well as address how rural Black students' college-going culture experiences within their rural high school and the broader rural community influence their access to higher education. The rural community in the study comprises the high school, family members, friends, Black churches, community programming along with several individuals and entities that contribute to college-going culture as it permeates rural spaces to increase access to higher education among rural Black students. Therefore, I must clearly understand rural Black students' ways of knowing with respect to navigating college-going culture through centering their narratives.

### **3.1.2 Critical Paradigm and Ontological Assumptions**

According to Varpio and MacLeod (2020), ontological assumptions are guided by the following questions: "What is real? What is the nature of reality?" (p. 687). Ontological assumptions refer to our state of being as researchers, more specifically our knowledge, which we make meaning of as researchers (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020). Even further, ontological assumptions require that, as researchers, we reflect deeply "on the assumptions we hold about reality" (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020, p. 688). Using a critical paradigm upholds the ontological assumption that meaning making of the world exists (Pino Gavidia & Adu, 2022) in conjunction with the knowledge we gain and learn daily (Ponterotto, 2005). The knowledges we gain are diverse in nature whether learned socially, politically, economically, or culturally (Ponterotto, 2005). In using a critical paradigm while centering critical reflection, it is vital that I understand the identities of the rural Black students participating in the present study, which is a process that contributes to my ontological assumptions as a researcher. Understanding the identities of the rural Black students in the study means centering all of who they are holistically as individuals.

Additionally, in understanding as well as acknowledging all identities held by the rural Black students in the study, I must also understand how their identities such as race and social class play a significant role in their college-going culture experiences. Rural Black students' college-going culture experiences with navigating systemic structures may either hinder or support their access to higher education. In understanding the role of college-going culture, it is important to note that the onus is not on the rural Black students' identities, but, rather, it is placed upon the systems of oppression at play, largely contributing to ontological assumptions that undergird the use of a critical paradigm. Hence, the use of a critical paradigm, along with the ontological assumptions, contributes to how I approach the study as a researcher.

### **3.1.3 Critical Paradigm and Methodological Assumptions**

Methodological assumptions are rooted in answering the following questions: “How do we come to know what is real? How do we build knowledge?” (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020, p. 687). In other words, methodological assumptions truly aim to answer the following: What is the process that I as the researcher should delve into to gain or find out knowledge? What is the nature of the process which will support me as a researcher and scholar in developing new knowledge? To answer these questions, it is vital that I acknowledge the significance of my methodology of choice in the study. According to Varpio and MacLeod (2020), methodology “is a set of guidelines and principles that put an epistemology and an ontology into action in a given research project” (p. 688). Using a critical paradigm leans heavily upon the methodological assumptions that I must make as a researcher regarding the decisions about using the necessary methodological approach to address a particular research phenomenon (Mertens, 2010). The present study employs youth participatory action research (YPAR) as the methodology. YPAR

extends from PAR but specifically engages the voices of youth (Means et al., 2020). Utilizing YPAR for the present study supports me as a researcher in understanding the ways rural Black students' experiences of college-going culture may influence their access to higher education while in other ways hindering it. More importantly, placing the voices of rural Black students at the center of their own experiences alongside me as the lead researcher helps us, as a research team, develop ways to increase access to higher education for this student population as it relates to college-going culture. Hence, using a critical paradigm that underpins these methodological assumptions challenges me to reveal how rural Black students' college-going culture experiences shape their access to higher education.

The methodological assumptions upheld by a critical paradigm supports YPAR as the methodological approach for the present study. A critical paradigm undergirding methodological assumptions centers the need to address the rationale for choosing the methodology, specifically YPAR, for this study, from a cultural and social standpoint (Mertens, 2010). Culturally, it is vital to use YPAR while employing the use of a critical paradigm to understand the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students as knowledge holders of their own lives. Such an approach centers the identities of rural Black students in terms of their racial and rural identities. Additionally, it is also vital to address the rural Black students' college-going culture experiences socially while understanding the systems that this student population must navigate to access higher education. Both the cultural and social elements are crucial in acknowledging rural Black students in the study as changemakers of their own lived experiences while also placing their voices at the center. Hence, the use of YPAR and a critical paradigm in the present study calls attention to the methodological assumptions while continuously calling out the systems of oppression which are to blame. In this manner, the methodological assumptions being outlined

coexist with the epistemological and axiological assumptions that must be considered while using YPAR with a critical paradigm.

### **3.1.4 Critical Paradigm and Axiological Assumptions**

The axiological assumptions we must consider as researchers are driven by the following question: “What are the values underpinning all the above?” (Varpio & MacLeod, 2020, p. 687). This question challenges me to remain cognizant of the epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions underpinning the use of a critical paradigm, therefore informing how I approach the work as a researcher. Further, Varpio and MacLeod (2020) encourage me to strongly consider the following question as it relates to the axiological assumptions I hold as a researcher: “What are the values and/or value judgments that shape this research approach” (p. 688). In order to humanize lived experiences and to strive towards becoming more socially just as a human population (Mertens, 2010), using a critical paradigm demands that I as a researcher consider the connection between the research processes and the action taken to address the findings.

While understanding the epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions underpinning the use of a critical paradigm, it is significant to address how each of these three types of assumptions contribute to the axiological assumptions upheld by a critical paradigm. As addressed in the preceding sections, the epistemological assumptions are relative to my ways of knowing and understanding as they relate to rural Black students’ experiences of college-going culture. The ontological assumptions which inform my frame of thought as a researcher pertain to my ways of being and existing within the world; additionally, these assumptions support me in addressing rural Black students’ college-going culture experiences within their rural community.

The methodological assumptions that I must consider as a researcher are informed by my use of YPAR in the present study for understanding how rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their community influence their access to and through higher education. Combining the three types of assumptions centers the fourth type of assumption, axiological, which is driven by using a critical paradigm that reveals my values as a researcher. In using a critical paradigm, some of my values as a researcher include continuously challenging power dynamics between me as the adult co-collaborator and my student co-collaborators from the community, constantly combatting the systems of oppression at play, and centering the voices of marginalized people, specifically rural Black students, in a way that they wish for their voices to be included within literature.

### **3.2 Methodology**

I employ a qualitative, youth participatory action research (YPAR) methodological approach. Qualitative research focuses on gaining insight into as well as understanding the perceptions of those whose lives are directly impacted by a social phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is often flexible rather than fixed, which provides space for shifting and transforming research processes as necessary throughout the course of the project (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The present research project, which involves the lives of rural Black students' college-going culture experiences, is flexible in that it is guided by youth participatory action research (YPAR). While YPAR engages several tenets, the tenets are fluid in nature, which allows for the chosen methodological approach to make shifts and changes as necessary throughout the course of the research project (Anderson, 2020). In using youth participatory

action research as the methodology, it is vital to include a brief history about action research and how it contributes to the establishment of PAR and YPAR. Then, I will address the tenets of YPAR. Following the history of action research, PAR, and YPAR, along with the tenets of YPAR, I will then discuss how a qualitative research design guided by YPAR is beneficial for the present study.

### **3.2.1 Historical Context of Action Research, PAR, and YPAR**

Historically, Lewin (1946), founder of action research, established social research as action research that grapples with addressing the focus of two key components of research, which include “the study of general laws of group life and the diagnosis of a specific situation” (p. 36). Furthermore, the two components aim to address how to get to the root cause of an issue among a particular group, which is of great significance in centering intergroup relations. Lewin’s perspective on the purpose of action research strongly suggests that “to improve relations between groups both of the interacting groups have to be studied” (Lewin, 1946, p. 44). Action research leans heavily upon grappling with the two key components mentioned above (Lewin, 1946).

First and foremost, PAR derives from action research since PAR also engages in revolutionary pedagogical projects (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Selener, 1992). Revolutionary pedagogical projects encompass research that combats traditional research while centering the voices of people and their communities particular to their lived experiences (Selener, 1992). PAR’s existence stems from its acknowledgement as the research arm of several popular education programs (Kane, 2001). Specifically, PAR coincides with popular education, or an education driven to strive towards a socially just world, by addressing knowledges which



challenge injustice and deeply engage the enactment of social and political change through a collective effort (Torres & Fischman, 1994). The collective effort encompasses the lead researcher and the lives of individuals who are directly impacted by their lived experiences in their communities. Both the lead researcher and individuals within the communities hold shared power and are knowledge holders serving as change agents in all research processes.

Paulo Freire's (1993) foundational knowledge around praxis contributes to the establishment of PAR, which focuses on critical reflection and action. Freire's contributions served as additions to Lewin's (1946) existing development of action research which later became known as participatory action research (PAR), a research practice that largely engages marginalized populations and is a collective effort with roots in education, health, and several social sciences (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). YPAR emerged shortly after the introduction of PAR (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The focus of YPAR is largely youth development, which allows students to study their own lived experiences as knowledge holders and co-collaborators (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Hence, students' ability to shape their educational experiences by creating and implementing an action plan allows them to be the change agents of their own lives.

Together, PAR and YPAR derive from action research as methodological approaches that allow individuals to be change agents as those whose lives are directly impacted by a social phenomenon (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). This gives power to the voices that are being centered in a particular community whom the lead researcher is studying with. This also empowers the lives of those who are directly impacted to combat the systems of oppression that they are up against rather than accepting the blame for what is rooted in these systems. Therefore, as change agents, those who are directly impacted by the social phenomenon being studied have the power to humanize and transform their own experiences.

### **3.2.2 Tenets of PAR and YPAR**

PAR engages several tenets. The first tenet of PAR centers partnerships in the research process, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts among members of the given communities. This offers the opportunity for all researchers to be seen as experts and knowledge holders (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Hence, researchers who engage in PAR “collaborate with potential benefactors of the research to study and address inequities and injustices” (Means et al., 2020, p. 45). As it relates to the second tenet of PAR, data collection and analysis engage the members of the community as co-collaborators to disrupt as well as challenge power dynamics to enact social and political change while combatting inequities and injustices (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Therefore, PAR studies aim to shift deficit-based narratives to an asset-based approach acknowledging that the systems of oppression—namely white supremacy, racism, and capitalism—are to blame and that the onus is not on individuals, their communities, and their families (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The third and final tenet of PAR develops a plan of action in response to the issue that serve the purpose of facilitating social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cook et al., 2019). PAR studies involve several approaches, from “changing public policy...to organizing a local event, to simply increasing awareness about an issue native to a particular locale” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 5). To enact change within historically marginalized communities while engaging in PAR practices, there is flexibility in creating and implementing action plans. Hence, a monolithic approach is not applicable when engaging in PAR studies but instead there exists a wide array of options in pushing forth an action plan for the individuals and communities whose lives will be directly impacted.

As a methodological approach, PAR includes YPAR, which “provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify

these problems” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). The purpose of youth participatory action research is to place the voices of youth at the center of their own lived experiences from an asset-based and critical approach. For the present study and to enact effective change, “critical” refers to the necessity to call out the systems of oppression at play while “asset-based” refers to acknowledging the resources and knowledge of people and their own lived experiences. Through both an asset-based and critical approach, youth are given the power to change their narratives as knowledge holders of their own lived experiences. This in turn allows for youth to have autonomy over how their voices are represented in the literature. Centering their lived experiences, youth address an issue they are facing alongside an adult leading researcher and determine a call to action to resolve or find a solution to the problem at stake. The goal is to motivate those in power, namely stakeholders such as school administrators or policy makers, to enact as well as facilitate change (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). For the current research project, it is crucial to use YPAR to center the voices of rural Black youth as experts and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences with college-going culture.

### **3.2.3 PAR, YPAR, and Photovoice**

The use of participatory photography is referred to as photovoice, which is a research method developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (Wang & Burris, 1994). Photovoice is “an arts-based qualitative research method” that exists broadly in participatory research, which is community based (Delgado, 2015, p. 7). As a research method, photovoice refers to the use of photographic equipment, mainly digital, to capture photos that contribute to a larger discussion aimed at transforming the lives of those most impacted by the research phenomenon under study (Delgado, 2015).

Participatory action research (PAR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR) as practices often incorporate the use of photovoice. Here lies the relationship between PAR, YPAR, and photovoice: PAR research topics address community issues impacting the lives of the broader community and all people whereas YPAR addresses issues directly impacting youth with whom lead researchers collaborate (Smith et al., 2012). Photovoice is used in both PAR and YPAR studies to examine and address issues that have a broad sociocultural context while impacting the community and people who serve as co-collaborators with lead researchers at the local level (Smith et al., 2012). As a research method, photovoice centers the use of the SHOWeD method to discuss photos that address the research phenomenon under study (Wang & Burris, 1997). The SHOWeD method is a process used to discuss the photos captured by co-collaborators that poses the following questions:

What do you See here?

What is really Happening?

How does this relate to Our lives?

Why does this problem or strength Exist?

What can we Do about it?

(Farley et al., 2017, p. 50)

The purpose of the SHOWeD method in PAR and YPAR studies is to center the voices of co-collaborators in being change agents of their own lived experiences. Additionally, the SHOWeD method supports “a meaningful group process experience” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 6) that engages shared power dynamics and group leadership through the discussion of photos (Wang, 1999). To understand the significance of photovoice in YPAR, it is crucial to include a few studies. For example, Haugen and colleagues (2019) conducted a YPAR study to address

how school counselors can incorporate photovoice to empower students' self-advocacy, enabling them to communicate their needs through a power sharing approach. Their findings revealed that photovoice is impactful at both the micro and macro levels to further support student advocacy. At the micro level, students engaged in active dialogue while serving as co-collaborators and advocates of their own lived experiences using photovoice (Haugen et al., 2019). At the macro level, school counselors and students discussed their findings of their photovoice project with policy makers through the use of a photo exhibit to advocate for systemic change (Haugen et al., 2019). Similarly, Vaccarino-Ruiz and colleagues (2022) conducted a YPAR study using photovoice to address the significance of social biography in facilitating children's critical dialogue. The findings revealed that photovoice is beneficial in enhancing children's critical dialogue through social biography based upon three elements, including "windows of relationality, struggle, and moving understanding from the individual to the collective" (Vaccarino-Ruiz et al., 2022, p. 444). Therefore, the use of photovoice in the present YPAR study is necessary for examining and addressing the college-going culture experiences of rural Black students in their broader rural community, as well as for shaping their access to higher education.

### **3.3 Research Site**

The research site for the present study encompasses several towns that make up the rural school district of Resourceful County (*pseudonym*), which is situated in Georgia. The Resourceful County school district serves the following communities: Brightford, Cullpepper City, Milestone City, Harmonious Town, and Spiritual City (*pseudonyms*). Resourceful County

has three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, Montpelier High School. In Resourceful County, the schools that make up the school district are in Milestone City, which has a population of approximately 4,000 whereas Resourceful County has a population close to 28,000. According to the United States Department of Agriculture (2019), Resourceful County is defined as a rural county due to having a population of less than 50,000.

In addition to the details provided about Milestone City, GA, and Resourceful County, it is vital that I provide demographics about race, class, and education. The five schools which make up the Resourceful County school district have a student population of nearly 4,200. Thirty percent of the overall student population identifies as Students of Color, and similarly close to the same percentage identify as low-income. The student population across the Resourceful County School district includes the majority being white, nearly a quarter identify as Black or African American, and the remaining student population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, biracial or multiracial, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native. As it relates to education in Resourceful County, close to ninety percent of residents hold a high school diploma while less than thirty percent of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Within the school district itself, the high school has a graduation rate that exceeds ninety percent and falls below ninety-five percent. Additionally, there are nearly seventy-five colleges in surrounding counties that are accessible to students, given the geographical context.

The rationale for choosing this research site is twofold. First, I chose this research site due to personal connections in being an alumna of the rural school district, having graduated from Montpelier High School. These connections facilitate my ability to bring the knowledge and resources that I have gained over the course of my career in higher education back to my hometown community, with the potential to support the district in many impactful ways. Second,

it is vital that I chose the Resourceful County school district as my research site to acknowledge the significant population of Black students in the school district, specifically within the high school. The high school has close to 1,300 students, of which Black students make up nearly twenty-five percent of the student population. The number of rural Black students in the high school has increased considerably since I graduated in the year 2012. As mentioned previously, the school district comprises a predominantly white student population that can in many ways overshadow students from racially marginalized backgrounds. Therefore, to combat the notion that rurality equates to whiteness and to acknowledge the diversity in rural spaces (Romero, 2020), it is crucial that I include the voices of rural Black youth in my dissertation research.

### **3.4 Sampling and Recruitment Strategies**

I used purposive sampling for the study. Purposive sampling engages people in the research process who must meet certain criteria to serve as a participant (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014). For the present study, the focus addresses rural Black students and their college-going culture experiences within their rural community. To participate in the study as co-collaborators, students had to identify as Black, be a resident of Resourceful County, and be in high school.

While the study comprised the Resourceful County school district, it took place in the high school in Milestone City, Georgia. Montpelier High School, as the only high school in the county, is crucial to include in the study. For the present study, I employed a nomination process that coincided with the selection criteria to recruit students (Harper, 2010; Stanton et al., 2022). The nomination process involved working alongside school staff and administrators in the high

school to recruit rural Black students for the study. Using a nomination process for the study allowed the high school personnel to identify students who they thought would benefit greatly from their participation in the study or students with whom high school staff and administrators held existing relationships. The high school administrators, specifically the assistant principal, nominated the students for the study. A total of fifteen students were nominated for the study. Upon nominating the students serving as co-collaborators in the study, I coordinated a meeting time with the support of the principals to meet with the co-collaborators for a formal introduction and to distribute materials in a confidential meeting space within the high school. The materials included a cover letter from the high school, a cover letter from me as the leading adult co-collaborator outlining the details of the study, a parental consent form, and an assent form for students. In the case that students recruited for the study were not under the guardianship of their biological parents or a family member who serves as a guardian, a waiver of consent was provided. I allotted up to two days for students to gain consent as well as provide assent to participate in the study. A total of seven rural Black students returned forms and chose to engage in the study (See Table 1). The student co-collaborators' pseudonyms, gender, and year in high school are as follows.

**Table 1 Student Co-collaborators' Information**

<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Grade in High School</b>
Melanin Pearl	Girl	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Robert Voorhes	Boy	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Kevin Smith	Boy	12 <sup>th</sup> Grade
BonQueQue Harris	Girl	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Darnell Mooney	Boy	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Eli Henry	Boy	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade
Mimi Jones	Girl	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade

*Note:* This table includes the student co-collaborators' pseudonyms, gender, and grade in high school.



### 3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

For the present qualitative youth participatory action research (YPAR) study, I engaged in data collection and analysis in phases. Prior to the start of the phases, I held an introductory meeting for all research team members. After the introductory meeting, a total of four phases unfolded, organized by the research questions for the study. Each of the four phases involved the recording of field notes, which are notes used in qualitative research to document detailed information supporting rich contextual analysis for a study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). I informed the student co-collaborators of the significance of field notes for all phases of the study. The first phase served as the informational training for YPAR and photovoice, which is related to the first research question (How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access?). For the second phase, the research team engaged in photovoice, which required that we held multiple focus group meetings and analysis meetings as a research team to share and reflect on the eight to ten photos that I asked student co-collaborators to collect. According to Mishra (2016), focus group discussions serve the purpose to generate conversation through shared ideas and contributions over the course of the discussion with my guidance as the moderator, or the leading adult co-collaborator for the present study. The second phase is also related to the first research question.

Next, the third phase involved meetings to discuss the student co-collaborators' action plan of choice, which is related to the second research question (In what ways does using youth participatory action research as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education?). Phase three helps answer the second research question in that the action plan is a significant aspect of YPAR as a practice in addressing the research phenomenon under study.

Therefore, implementing an action plan alongside the student co-collaborators as experts of their own daily lives allows me to understand how the practice of YPAR directly impacts rural Black students' college-going culture experiences. The fourth and final phase involved one-on-one interviews that I had with each student co-collaborator in the study to converse about their experiences with YPAR, providing answers to the second research question. The fourth phase overlaps with each phase of the study since I met with the student co-collaborators to ask them about their experiences from the beginning of the research project to the end. Across the phases, the principals at Montpelier High School agreed to provide me the space to meet with students who served as co-collaborators. The meeting space was reserved for thirty-minute increments, which allowed me to be flexible in working around the students' schedules. Below, I discuss the details of the introductory meeting and phases one through four of the study; each phase is organized according to the research questions they serve to address.

### **3.5.1 Introduction Meeting**

All student co-collaborators on the research team met during the initial meeting where they had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and the importance of YPAR. In this discussion we addressed the layers of YPAR and the four phases of our YPAR project. In addition, I provided directions for Phase 1 of the study related to photovoice. Using photovoice as a method, I invited student co-collaborators to capture two pictures of their college-going culture experiences. I asked that the photos respond to the following prompts: 1) If you could capture what comes to your mind when you think of people and resources in your rural community who contribute to your pathways to college, what would it be and why? 2) What are you resisting or refusing as you pursue college? In answering the first prompt, I pushed student

co-collaborators to consider the role of family and skills used to navigate their college-going culture experiences in their rural community, among other people and resources that impact their access to higher education. As it relates to answering the second prompt, I asked student co-collaborators to consider what they are pushing back against in their pursuit of college. The pictures were used as a trial run in practicing photovoice during Phase 1 and I used the same prompts for Phase 2 of the study. Student co-collaborators could use online images if needed for the sole purpose of the trial run to ensure that they could upload the photos on their laptop provided by the school during our meeting in having access to Montpelier High School's internet. If student co-collaborators did not have access to a camera of their own, I asked that they used a family member's or friend's camera to capture their photos. All the details regarding next steps pertaining to Phase 1 were shared in the meeting as well as by email after the close of the introduction meeting. I asked that student co-collaborators reflect deeply on the significance of the rural high school, local businesses, community members, peers, and the broader rural community at large, that impacts their college-going culture experiences. Pushing student co-collaborators to think of such assets highlights the necessity of Yosso's (2005) CCW model as they captured their photos. In addition to the assets, pushing student co-collaborators to consider the role of the broader rural community given the high school and community context reveals the significance of Perna's (2006) college access and choice model as they captured their photos.

### **3.5.2 Data Collection and Analysis for Research Question 1**

The first research question asks the following: How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access? Phase 1 begins to answer this question through the informational

training and trial run of photovoice, which occurs during this phase. Following Phase 1, Phase 2 dug deeper into examining and addressing the role of college-going culture among rural Black students in their community through focus group discussions centering photovoice in which student co-collaborators conversed and reflected on the photos gathered for the study. In answering the first research question, the first and second phases for the study are described in further detail below.

### **3.5.2.1 Phase 1: YPAR & Photovoice Informational Training**

The first phase of the project addressed the research processes of YPAR, photovoice, and the aims of the study, which are details I thought were critical to reiterate since the initial discussion in our introduction meeting. For this phase, I met with the student co-collaborators twice. To offer reminders of details about Phase 1 that I provided in our introduction meeting, I covered the information again in both meetings that occurred in this phase. For the first meeting I discussed the importance of YPAR and addressed the four phases of our study. I offered time to answer any questions from student co-collaborators about YPAR. I wrapped up this meeting, offering next steps about the second meeting, which addressed the use of photovoice along with a trial run. To prepare for the second meeting, I asked that students come ready to discuss two photos by addressing the following prompts: 1) If you could capture what comes to your mind when you think of people and resources in your rural community who contribute to your pathways to college, what would it be and why? 2) What are you resisting or refusing as you pursue college? I asked students to capture the photos using their phone. If students did not have access to a personal phone, I asked them to use a family member's or friend's phone to capture their photos. For the second meeting, we reconvened to discuss the process of photovoice and

then engaged in the trial run using the SHOWeD method in a focus group, which poses the following questions:

What do you See here?

What is really Happening?

How does this relate to Our lives?

Why does this problem or strength Exist?

What can we Do about it?

(Farley et al., 2017, p. 50)

The focus group discussion about the photos unfolded with each student co-collaborator sharing about their photo as it applied to the initial prompts. I asked student co-collaborators to reflect on their photos and the prompts before sharing out. As each student co-collaborator shared about their images during the trial run, I displayed the photos on a whiteboard in a slideshow presentation as they discussed their photos individually. Once the student co-collaborators began to share out, I asked that all the other research team members recorded field notes while their team member was speaking. I brought journals for everyone to record their field notes in the trial run, which they used throughout the research project as needed. After each research team member shared out regarding their photos, we discussed the photos collectively by displaying them on a white board for the student co-collaborators to reflect upon, using the same slideshow presentation where we discussed all research team members' photos individually. After offering time for the student co-collaborators to reflect, I shared the SHOWeD method questions with them in discussing each question one by one. Upon getting to the fifth question (What can we Do about it?), I asked student co-collaborators to consider an example of an action plan that they would like to carry out to support shaping their access to higher education. After

completing the SHOWeD method, I processed the student co-collaborators' experiences of photovoice to gain their initial reaction and offer space to answer any questions. Student co-collaborators shared how they perceive the importance of community in accessing higher education as well as suggested that we engage in a tour of a historically Black college and university (HBCU) campus, and then present to the high school administrators about the significance of having in-person college exposure to support their access to higher education as our action plan. After the discussion, I shared next steps regarding Phase 2 of the study and what student co-collaborators must prepare as well as followed up with an email after the completion of Phase 1. The next steps I shared with student co-collaborators included asking them to collect between eight and ten photos using the same prompts from the trial run. I suggested that student co-collaborators use their phones to capture the photos if they had access to one. For student co-collaborators who did not have phones, I asked them to use a family member's or friend's phone. I asked that student co-collaborators uploaded their photos to our OneDrive link sent via email.

### **3.5.2.2 Phase 2: Meetings to Discuss Images**

For data collection in phase 2, each student co-collaborator collected eight to ten photos to engage in photovoice, me and the student co-collaborators recorded field notes, and there were audio recordings of the focus group discussions. All student co-collaborators consented to being audio recorded. For the first focus group discussion, which lasted approximately thirty minutes, the first half of the research team discussed all their photos as it applied to the prompts. As each research team member shared, the other student co-collaborators along with me recorded field notes in our journals. Time was offered at the end to debrief about the first set of photos from student co-collaborators and share out about their experiences. Following the first focus group discussion, we met for the second focus group discussion which also lasted approximately thirty

minutes where the second half of the research team discussed all their photos as it applied to the prompt. Much like the first focus group discussion, all co-collaborators, including me, recorded field notes as each research team member took turns sharing their photos. Time was offered at the end to debrief about the second set of photos from student co-collaborators and share out about their experiences. We then debriefed as a research team about the second set of photos from student co-collaborators and allotted time for them to share out about their experiences.

Following the second focus group discussion was the third focus group discussion that I audio recorded after receiving consent from the student co-collaborators, which was a discussion of all research team members' photos that were laid out on a table and students walked around the table to reflect upon what themes arose in seeing the photos collectively. Shortly after this, we had a fourth meeting to hold an audio-recorded discussion as a research team using the SHOWeD method. Using the SHOWeD method, we addressed the questions collectively. In discussing the photos via SHOWeD method, I asked that the student co-collaborators pay close attention to the themes that arose in their field notes.

As a research team, we used field notes and transcripts across the focus groups and meetings in Phase 2 to engage in a thematic analysis process. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a data analysis method which supports "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). In conjunction with thematic analysis, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model and Perna's (2006) college access and choice model informed the analysis process. CCW illuminated the racial analysis within our study which revealed the various forms of capital, including familial capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, and spiritual capital that rural Black students in the study rely heavily on to navigate their college-going culture experiences. The college access and choice model reflected the spatial

analysis within our study, which allowed us to consider the context of the broader rural community while encompassing the high school. Multiple analysis meetings were held to discuss the findings which aimed to answer the following question: What are the key findings seen across all the photos?

As a research team, we engaged in four steps for data analysis, which involved the four transcripts, and the use of our individually recorded field notes as needed. The first step involved me, the adult co-collaborator, providing the student co-collaborators with the transcripts. Additionally, after giving a copy of the transcripts to each of the student co-collaborators, we read through the transcripts and our individual fieldnotes to make sense of the data. After the first step occurred, the second step involved highlighting and taking notes after having read through the four transcripts and our individual fieldnotes. As we engaged in step two, I asked student co-collaborators to consider the common themes that arose for them individually. Then, based on the individual themes that were discovered, I asked that they write the themes in their journals. Based on the themes, I then asked the student co-collaborators to highlight or underline quotes in their transcripts that were applicable to the themes as well as take notes in their journals about the themes that were revealed in the transcripts. Additionally, I asked them to take notes in their journals to record the page numbers of where the themes arose. Altogether, the second step supported me and the student co-collaborators in identifying themes we recognized individually. For the third step, we had a conversation as a research team about the themes that student co-collaborators recognized which revealed the findings. As they shared the themes one by one, I wrote them on a whiteboard so that everyone could read them. The themes include success, motivation, family, Black mamas being a huge source of support, support systems, role models, representation mattering, and choosing your friend group wisely. The themes pertaining



to what the student co-collaborators are resisting or refusing as they pursue college revealed the following findings in our study: drugs, streets, alcohol, gang violence, and stereotypes. Themes that had overlap were consolidated, such as Black mamas, cousins, best friends, parents, and siblings becoming the theme for family; coaches, teachers, resource officers, church members, and counselors becoming the theme for support systems; gossip, drama, fighting, gang violence, and stereotypes becoming the theme for negativity; all of which will be addressed in our study's findings. The third step served the purpose to find quotes to support the themes that arose. After the themes were consolidated and finalized, for step four I asked that each student co-collaborator used their writing utensils to place an asterisk next to the quotes that support the themes and write the theme to the side of the quote that it supports.

### **3.5.3 Data Collection and Analysis for Research Question 2**

The second research question is: In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education? To answer this research question, we implemented an action plan as a research team, and I engaged in three individual one-on-one semi-structured interviews with each student co-collaborator. As a research team we developed and implemented an action plan with student co-collaborators taking the lead while I served as a source of support in their action plan of choice that directly impacts their college-going culture experiences. The interviews served as checkpoints to inquire about the rural Black students' experiences with YPAR as well as to debrief about any questions concerning their experiences in the research project. I will discuss the significance of the action plan and the one-on-one interviews in answering the second research question by addressing both data collection and analysis as follows for Phase 3 and Phase 4 of the research project.

### **3.5.3.1 Phase 3: Meetings to Execute Action Plan**

After the second phase Phase 3 of the research project unfolded, me and the student co-collaborators established meeting times to execute the action plan of their choice at the beginning of the spring semester in 2023. Leaning heavily upon the SHOWeD method from Phase 2 helped us think about a more concrete action plan that we discussed as a research team. Student co-collaborators came up with three action plans: (1) tour a historically Black college and university (HBCU) in Georgia and present to the high school administrators of the importance of early exposure to college (2) present to the Resourceful County Board of Education about our research and (3) engage in a Question & Answer (Q&A) session with the high school administrators following a presentation of our research. Because of working with a sensitive population comprised of minors, each of the action plans were discussed with the high school administrators via email. The tour of the HBCU and the research team presentation to Resourceful County's Board of Education were disapproved by the head principal. I relayed the messages of the disapproval to the student co-collaborators and as a research team they brainstormed ideas to come up with the third action plan that I fully supported which did not require approval but instead required that I offer the administrators potential dates to meet.

To fully plan and prepare for it, we met every day up until the presentation date, engaging in a total of six planning meetings. The first meeting served the purpose to discuss the solidified action plan of choice followed up with a conversation of how we decided to execute the plan. The second, third, and fourth meetings were beneficial to plan and discuss the specific details of the action plan. Time for questions were allotted throughout our conversations in meetings two, three, and four. The fifth and sixth meetings served the purpose to solidify a date regarding the execution plan upon receiving responses from the high school administrators regarding their

availability and to discuss any last-minute ideas or questions about the action plan. For the action plan, it was important that the student co-collaborators' ideas and their active involvement be the central focus with them being the change agents of their own lived college-going culture experiences.

To ensure that the student co-collaborators remain the change agents of their own lived experiences in shaping their access to higher education, they facilitated the conversation with the administrators while I offered my support, when necessary, throughout the presentation and Q&A session. The student co-collaborators received questions from the administrators and vice versa. Some of the questions posed to the administrators are: (1) In hearing about our research, how do you think it has the potential to support going to college for rural Black students in Resourceful County? (2) How did your community play a role in supporting your success? In comparison, some of the questions student co-collaborators received from the administrators are: (1) What did you learn about yourself in participating in our research? (2) What are your plans upon graduating from high school and how do you hope to apply what you learned from the research to your college and career plans? The conversation we shared with the administrators following our presentation was informative and beneficial, which allowed the administrators to understand the work me and the student co-collaborators engaged in to shape the Black students' access to higher education with the support of their broader rural community.

### **3.5.3.2 Phase 4: One-one-One Interviews About Student Co-collaborators' YPAR**

#### **Experiences**

The fourth phase of the study involved three one-on-one semi-structured interviews that I had with each student co-collaborator to understand their experiences with youth participatory action research (YPAR) as an approach. According to McIntosh and Morse (2015) semi-

structured interviews are loosely structured in nature and offer participants the opportunity to respond to questions freely and organically as it relates to the research phenomenon under study. Semi-structured interviews are important for the present study to offer rural Black students the space to reflect and process on their experiences of YPAR. I audio recorded the interviews after asking for permission and receiving consent from the student co-collaborators. The interviews occurred throughout the research project from beginning to end.

For the first interview, it lasted between ten to twenty-five minutes and occurred after Phase 1 and before Phase 2. The rationale for having the first interview with each student co-collaborator was to gain insight into their perspectives about their exposure to research, and for each of the student co-collaborators it was their first time being involved with a research project from an YPAR approach. Therefore, the first interview with each student co-collaborator revealed to me how the research team members felt about research, specifically YPAR, during their early introduction to the methodology. The interview also revealed what brought the student co-collaborators to the research study in terms of their interests which began to answer the second research question for the study.

The second one-on-one interview with student co-collaborators served as the mid-point interview. The mid-point interview served as the checkpoint to converse with student co-collaborators about their experiences with YPAR. The second interview occurred after Phase 2. This interview allowed the student co-collaborators to go into further depth about their experiences with YPAR and share about the knowledge they gained which shapes their access to higher education. The mid-point interview lasted approximately between fifteen to thirty-five minutes with each student co-collaborator.

The third one-on-one interview with student co-collaborators involved conversing with the research team members individually about how they made sense of their YPAR experiences from the beginning of our research study to the end. In this interview, I gained a greater understanding of how YPAR as a practice impacts the college-going culture experiences of the rural Black students serving as co-collaborators in the study. The third interview lasted approximately between fifteen to thirty minutes and occurred after Phase 3, the action plan, was fully complete.

Together, Phase 4 unpacked the individual experiences of the student co-collaborators by acknowledging the impact of YPAR in how they navigate their daily interactions with college-going culture in their broader rural community. Their experiences with YPAR reflect how they understand the ways that they are shaping their access to higher education as rural Black students central to how they navigate and combat systems of oppression such as white supremacy and anti-Black racism along with the multiple ways they communicate with their family, peers, and community members among other resources and people in their community they lean on to shape their access to higher education. Each of these serves as assets as to how rural Black students make sense of their rural high school and broader rural community that influences their access to college.

The data analysis portion of Phase 4 engaged both holistic analysis and thematic analysis which was done solely by me. According to Josselson (2013), holistic analysis aims to acknowledge the complexity of the data in understanding the research phenomenon. Holistic analysis allows me to understand the experiences of each rural Black student with YPAR in all its messiness rather than minimizing how YPAR affects co-collaborators differently based upon individual perception (Josselson, 2013). Holistic analysis allows me as the adult co-collaborator

to understand and acknowledge the student co-collaborators' individual experiences with YPAR fully. Additionally, Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model and Perna's (2006) college access and choice model informed data analysis. CCW allowed me to largely consider the racial analysis pertaining to the varying forms of capital outlined in the model that serve as assets for rural Black students in accessing higher education. The college access and choice model was supportive in allowing me to consider the spatial analysis given the high school and community context and how such informs rural Black students' access to higher education. Following each individual one-on-one interview with the student co-collaborators, I did an initial read of the transcripts and my individual field notes, then reread the transcripts and my field notes as I highlighted the common themes as well as took notes in my journal regarding the themes that emerged. Holistic analysis occurred in between interviews as I analyzed the student co-collaborators' transcripts individually. I analyzed data in between meetings to clearly recall the experiences from the interviews during their initial occurrence with each student co-collaborator. This approach ensured that I had context about what happened in the prior interview and allowed me to ask follow-up questions in the upcoming interview as necessary. Holistic analysis allowed me to use both the field notes and transcripts from the audio recordings to gain a full perspective on each student co-collaborator's experiences with YPAR from the beginning, mid-point, and final interviews. After the third and final interview, I used the individual transcripts from each of the student co-collaborators' three interviews to recognize the themes across each student co-collaborator holistically. Using the notes about the common themes with respect to each student co-collaborator, I developed individual participant or co-collaborator profiles for the rural Black students in the study. Co-collaborator profiles are beneficial when engaging in a collaborative study to understand the interactions of co-

collaborators individually (Marttunen & Laurinen, 2012). In the co-collaborator profiles, I included the student co-collaborators' pseudonyms in the study, the themes which arose from each student co-collaborator from each of the three interviews, and the forms of capital discussed by each student co-collaborator as outlined in Yosso's (2005) CCW model along with the racial context discussed by each student co-collaborator as outlined in Perna's (2006) college access and choice model. Co-collaborator profiles had some overlap relating to themes but also looked different based upon individual experiences and perceptions about how their engagement in YPAR shaped their access to higher education.

In addition to holistic analysis, thematic analysis “moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data” (Guest et al., 2011). For thematic analysis, I looked collectively across all the transcripts, the co-collaborator profiles, and the field notes I recorded from student co-collaborators to engage in thematic analysis, which occurred after all one-on-one interviews were complete. I paid close attention to the highlights and notes taken previously from the interviews that allowed me to readily recognize the common themes among the student co-collaborators. The common themes began with a broad list which included: common research interests for participating in our research study, the definition of YPAR truly centering community, identifying the college career of their choice, knowledge gained from YPAR experience, the ripple effect of passing knowledge learned in our research study to rural Black students who come behind them, the research experience ratings, and the one-word key takeaways to describe their experience with our research study. To narrow the common themes down, I consolidated themes with great overlap, which resulted in solidifying the following findings: common research interests for participating in our research study, knowledge gained from YPAR experience, the research

experience ratings, and the one-word key takeaways to describe their experience with our research study.

Therefore, using both holistic analysis and thematic analysis as well as both theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, CCW and the college access and choice model, were beneficial in understanding the student co-collaborators' experiences with YPAR from an individual standpoint and collective standpoint. The use of holistic analysis and thematic analysis answer the second research question in that I could understand how the individual and collective YPAR experiences of each rural Black student serving as co-collaborators shapes their access to higher education. Thematic analysis answers the second research question in my ability to understand the student co-collaborators' experiences with YPAR as it pertains to looking across co-collaborators' profiles to reveal common themes. Together, holistic analysis, thematic analysis, and the guiding theoretical frameworks of CCW and the college access and choice model were significant in answering the second research question to unpack the student co-collaborators' experiences of YPAR individually and collectively.

### **3.6 Researcher Relationality Statement**

My existence as a rural Black student is a position of power in terms of the knowledge I hold as a researcher about my own lived experiences which informs much of my work. I bring to the fold who I am in relation to my work. For the purpose of my dissertation, I use relationality to acknowledge the racial and cultural consciousness that is vital to consider in conducting education research (Milner IV, 2007). Further, I employ the following four components central to relationality within my research: “researching the self, researching the self in relation to



others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system” (Milner IV, 2007, pp. 395-397).

First, in researching the self, it is critical to engage in cultural self-reflection while considering the dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen in research (Milner IV, 2007). The dangers seen within education research refers to the dangers that may arise because of the decisions we make as researchers while conducting studies. As a researcher, it is vital that I remain conscious of the decisions I make in all research processes with my student co-collaborators while challenging power dynamics in using youth participatory action research as the methodology (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1970). In conducting a youth participatory action research project, the co-collaborators, rural Black students in the study, and I hold shared power as well as are knowledge holders of our own lived experiences. Unseen dangers in education research refers to those that we as researchers do not readily account for which equates to the dangers being covert. As the lead researcher in the present study, I am aware that not all practices in the research processes are accounted for. For example, instances occurred where the student co-collaborators recognized the occurrence of research practices more readily than I did that were brought to my attention during data collection and analysis. Student co-collaborators recognized common themes more readily during our photovoice focus group discussions after we shared conversations about how to highlight and take notes to support findings being revealed. This reveals the significance in having shared power. Unseen dangers in the study were significant while understanding that all research processes occurred collaboratively with research team members on the project (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Unforeseen dangers in education research refer to those that are unpredictable in any given research project that occur due to decisions made in the research processes by the lead researcher. As the lead researcher of the present

study, it is crucial to understand that I could not account for the unknown in the research processes but therefore remained flexible in nature as instances occurred that were unpredictable (Milner IV, 2007). For example, the meeting times with student co-collaborators shifted upon them communicating that it was an early release day or if they had a school wide event to attend such as a pep rally. The meeting schedule also shifted due to me becoming ill for a week, which required that our data collection take a pivot, causing the research processes to be placed on pause until my return.

Dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen, are threaded throughout the four components of relationality but are especially important in understanding the first component of researching the self in connection with the other three components (Milner IV, 2007). Researching the self is important in terms of how it contributes to who I am as a researcher, scholar, and educator. In researching the self, the dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen are especially important in me understanding the experiences of rural Black students accessing higher education relating to college-going culture. Second, researching the self in relation to others, largely encompasses how I see myself in relation to the community and people I am studying with. For example, in doing a community driven study guided by youth participatory action research (YPAR), I constantly reflected on my role as a researcher alongside my student co-collaborators within my rural community. Additionally, in researching self in relation to others, I also acknowledge the skills and knowledge that my student co-collaborators bring to the project in the research processes being a collaborative effort among the research team.

Third, engaged reflection and representation, centers race and culture (Milner IV, 2007) while I as the lead researcher and my student co-collaborators reflected deeply together in thinking about what is happening within our rural community among rural Black students in

accessing higher education in focusing on college-going culture. Highlighting the role of race and culture as it pertains to rural Black students and college-going culture is significant while remaining racially and culturally conscious throughout the study. During our study, I often centered my spirituality in acknowledging that each of my student co-collaborators also rely heavily on their faith as rural Black students, which was evident throughout our shared conversations. The two coexists, our spirituality and identities as rural Black students, in terms of culture and race, both of which were supportive in helping me remain racially and culturally conscious and supportive in bonding with the student co-collaborators. Fourth and finally, shifting from self to system, encourages me as a researcher to acknowledge my personal and newly gained knowledges and place them in context with the larger systems at play inclusive of social, systemic, and political systems (Milner IV, 2007). Shifting from the focus on self to system allowed me and the student co-collaborators to tap into our racial and cultural consciousness while combatting systems of oppression, namely white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and classism. As a research team, we shared several conversations about how the systems that permeate society create barriers for rural Black students to access higher education, and how it is significant to place the onus on the systems themselves and not us as individuals. Tied together, the four components addressed here contribute to my relationality as a researcher in addressing as well as understanding the role of college-going culture among rural Black students in accessing higher education.

In further understanding my relationality as a researcher, it is vital to center my social identities in being rural, Black, Southern, and a woman. Centering the mentioned identities are necessary in acknowledging how they serve as an asset to who I am as a researcher. For me, asset refers to a useful aspect of my identity that strengthens who I am and the knowledge I bring

in all my identities coalescing. Similarly, as the project encompasses the research processes, it is of great significance that the rural Black students in the study center their identities as well in being rural, Black, Southern, and a student. Acknowledging that all research team members including myself as the lead researcher have shared identities of being rural, Black, and Southern is crucial in honoring that while identities may be similar rural Black students' experiences of college-going culture are not monolithic (Crumb et al., 2021; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019). Therefore, the experiences of rural Black students and college-going culture in accessing higher education does not exist in a vacuum. Such reveals the need to center intergenerational knowledge or intergenerational learning (IL). According to Bjursell (2015) intergenerational learning centers the co-creation of knowledge as it pertains to knowledge sharing. This approach considers that knowledge which is both learned and gained is likely to happen across different age groups, which is significant for the present study in the process happening across grade levels from tenth through twelfth grades for the rural Black students in the study. Additionally, the components of relationality in conjunction with intergenerational learning allows me as the researcher to co-create knowledge and continue to hold shared power with the rural Black students in the study who serve as co-collaborators. This in turn disrupts power dynamics that often exists within traditional research (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Approaching the study in this manner allows me as the lead researcher to highlight the voices of rural Black youth through an asset-based and critical approach.

Due to the nature of the study, the present youth participatory action research project is both personal and community driven. In embarking upon the research project as an insider-outsider (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019) it is vital that I acknowledge how my relationality in identifying as such contributes to the study. As it refers to being an insider-outsider pertaining to

the personal aspect of the study, I entered this project with the mentality of “making good trouble,” from the words of the late United States Congressman John Lewis. Entering in this way allows me to hold steadfast to those who have come before me, including my mother who is an alumna of the school district and my father who served in many capacities in several of the school’s organizations, and both my siblings who are alumni of the school district. I, too, am an alumna of the school district which contributes to a deeper personal connection. In my role as an insider-outsider I recognize that I must highlight the experiences of my rural community, more specifically rural Black students in the Resourceful County School District (*pseudonym*) from which I graduated. Highlighting the voices of rural Black students encompasses the community aspect which is crucial in shedding light on the lived experiences of rural Black students accessing higher education while college-going culture permeates throughout the rural community. Both the personal and community driven aspects are significant in encompassing the high school as part of rural Black students’ community in the broader community’s contribution of creating and sustaining an environment rooted in college-going culture.

### **3.7 Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness for the present study I engaged in multiple processes that both center and shine light on rural Black students’ voices and their experiences of college-going culture to access higher education. I used researcher triangulation, peer review, and researcher reflexivity, which will be described in further details below.

### **3.7.1 Researcher Triangulation**

Researcher triangulation is crucial in supporting trustworthiness for the present study. According to Denzin (1989), researcher triangulation refers to the collaboration of multiple researchers on a study engaging in all aspects of the research processes. Using researcher triangulation for the present study was significant because the data collection and data analysis processes occurred simultaneously among all co-collaborators. As a research team, we held shared power and were all knowledge holders in the research processes to address rural Black students' engagement in college-going culture within their broader community. While addressing the significance of college-going culture among rural Black students as it permeated the community, it was also important to highlight the theories underpinning the study that played a role in researcher triangulation. Remaining cognizant of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) and Perna's (2006) college access and choice models were beneficial in my understanding and making sense of the rural Black students' college-going culture experiences.

### **3.7.2 Peer Review and Researcher Reflexivity**

The use of peer review was significant in the present study to acknowledge my role as the principal investigator to ensure that I remained conscious of the shared power and knowledge among me and my fellow co-collaborators. As the principal investigator, I was an insider-outsider whose role was crucial in understanding my relationality as the principal investigator along with the power relations (Dhillon & Thomas, 2019). To ensure that I remained aware of such, peer review was important in discussing my approach to data collection and analysis with peers who engage in community work much like my work is with the present YPAR research

project. For peer review, I had two peer reviewers, a peer reviewer who is a Sista scholar who identifies as a participatory action research (PAR) expert and a peer reviewer who is my thought partner in academia, both of whom I conversed with weekly throughout the research processes. We shared conversations regarding my relationality as the principal investigator along with my plans as data was collected and analyzed during the study.

Conversing with my Sista scholar, the PAR expert, helped me continuously challenge power dynamics and remain aware of who I was in relation to the research by ensuring that the student co-collaborators' voices were placed at the center when making decisions regarding the research processes. For example, me and her shared conversations about the action plans the student co-collaborators in my study came up with and ways which I should support the research team to implement the action plan of their choice. My thought partner in academia, the second peer reviewer, and I, shared conversations that challenged my way of thinking in how I approached the research while considering the multiple systems such as classism, anti-Black racism, and elitism, that permeate society. For example, me and her shared conversations about how I created a sacred space for the student co-collaborators in my study to share their research experiences with me, ensuring that I offered the place for them to take up space and for me to listen and offer my support when necessary.

Both of my peer reviewers were supportive in pushing me to constantly think about who I am in relation to the research and how I am showing up to the research, disrupting power dynamics and challenging traditional research through creating a sacred space for my research team driven by community. Additionally, voice memos were also used throughout the study to support trustworthiness. I recorded voice memos on my cellular device after several research team meetings that were crucial to the research study for the purposes of researcher reflexivity in

allowing me to replay the memos to continuously improve my approach to the research study, becoming a better researcher during the study (Watt, 2007). For example, replaying the memos often helped me reflect on the ways I offered the research team support to ensure that their voices were placed at the center in being the change agents of their own lived experiences, while my voice was for support and guidance as needed.

The practice of peer review and researcher reflexivity helped me consistently call into question and remain cognizant of my relationality to the research while in the same manner holding me accountable in my role as a principal investigator (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Watt, 2007). The processes of using peer review and researcher reflexivity supported the use of a critical paradigm and YPAR as a methodology in that my peer reviewers offered feedback through conversations while also challenging my way of thinking as the principal investigator along with the voice memos pushing me to think critically and be flexible involving my relation to the research. Approaching the study in this manner engaged critical reflection while placing peer review and researcher reflexivity as accountability tools to prove trustworthiness.

### **3.8 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I addressed the importance of employing a critical paradigm while framing the paradigm through epistemological, ontological, methodological, and axiological assumptions upheld by the paradigm. I also offer a historical overview of action research, PAR and YPAR, along with addressing the tenets of YPAR. Following the historical overview, I provide context for the research site I have chosen and address the sampling and recruitment strategies for the study. Then, I discuss the data collection and data analysis methods I used for



the study by research question. Finally, I offer my relationality of who I am in relation to the dissertation research project as a researcher, scholar, and educator; and the ways in which I proved trustworthiness in the study.

#### 4.0 Introduction of the Presentation of Findings

To rural Black students and communities all over the country and world, I write the following words for us and may they leave an everlasting imprint in y(our) memory:

May you always own who you are.

Should you ever forget? I dare to remind you.

You are Black. You are Love. You are A amazing. You are Courageous. You are Knowledgeable.

You are each of these and so much more.

You are Resilient, Unapologetic, Realistic, And Lionhearted.

Taken together, the first letters of each of these words spell out two of your most powerful traits, Black and Rural.

May you own your: Blackness. Rural Identity. And above all, the Brilliance that binds your Blackness and Rurality.

That is who you are and will forever be.

Black Rural Brilliance.

-Willis, 2023

I begin this chapter to offer the words above as a mantra that I hope will forever be etched in the hearts of rural Black students and individuals residing in rural Black communities. Rural Black communities are rich in intellectual resources through family members (immediate, extended, and chosen), friends, businesses, and organizations. Each of these assets in the broader rural community play a crucial role in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education.

This chapter introduces the presentation of the findings for this dissertation study. The present study centers the lives of seven rural Black youth who attend Montpelier High School (*pseudonym*) in the heart of Resourceful County, Georgia (*pseudonym*). The research team is made up of eight co-collaborators, including seven students in tenth through twelfth grades and me as the adult researcher. In working collectively with the student co-collaborators and me serving as the adult co-collaborator, the study addressed the role of the broader rural community in supporting Black students' access to higher education and the role youth participatory action research (YPAR) plays in shaping this student population's access to higher education. Using YPAR as a methodological approach along with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) and Perna's (2006) college access and choice models as the guiding theoretical frameworks, this study offers racial and spatial analyses in which rural Black students shape their access to higher education. We engaged in numerous photovoice focus group discussions, three one-on-one-interviews between each student co-collaborator and myself as the adult co-collaborator, multiple analysis meetings and action plan meetings, along with the execution of an action plan of the student co-collaborators' choice that contributes to them shaping their own access to higher education within their broader rural community. To honor the voices of the student co-collaborators, I present the findings from our study as podcast episodes while drawing upon the power of counterstorytelling.

#### **4.1 Presentation of Findings as Podcast Episodes**

In centering the voices of student co-collaborators, we had numerous conversations as a research team about the data from our study. The student co-collaborators shared that our daily

conversations felt like podcast episodes in which all research team members were featured collectively and individually. According to Llinares and colleagues (2018), podcasts are recorded conversations that can be used to disseminate research addressing a range of diverse topics and that can be downloaded instantly from the internet and shared through technological devices on multimedia platforms such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. Because our conversations were genuine and organic in nature, the seven student co-collaborators suggested that the findings be written up as podcast episodes.

In the following two chapters, I wrote the findings as podcast episodes, in two series, each series corresponding to one of the research questions for the study:

How do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access?

In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education?

The first chapter of findings, Chapter 5, answers the first research question, which addresses the conversations we shared collectively as a research team through (a) photovoice focus group discussions and (b) analysis meetings. To craft each podcast episode in this chapter, I used the transcripts that we analyzed together as a research team from our recorded conversations and my individual field notes to present the findings. The second chapter of findings, Chapter 6, applies to the second research question, which engaged three one-on-one semi-structured interviews between me as the adult co-collaborator and each student co-collaborator. All student co-collaborators had a beginning, mid-point, and final interview during the research process to understand how their individual experiences with YPAR support shaping their access to higher education within their broader rural community. In the second chapter of

findings, I used the transcripts from each student co-collaborator's one-on-one interviews, my individual field notes, and knowledge shared in the action plan meetings to present the findings as podcast episodes.

## **4.2 The Power of Counterstorytelling**

To present our findings from this study as podcast episodes, I use the power of counterstorytelling, “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). There are three forms of counterstorytelling: 1) personal stories, 2) other people's stories, and 3) composite stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For this study, I will use composite stories to craft the podcast episodes. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), composite stories draw upon multiple forms of data to address the systemically and institutionally oppressive experiences that Communities of Color and Students of Color must navigate in society. The data I used includes the transcripts and handwritten field notes produced from the photovoice focus group discussions and the analysis meetings where we examined and addressed the role of the broader rural community as well as the role of YPAR in supporting Black students' access to higher education. Composite stories offer “both biographical and autobiographical analyses” to create the composite characters, whether real or fictional (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 33). The composite characters in this study are real, and to ensure that their identities remain confidential, each student co-collaborator selected their pseudonym of choice. Regarding the scenarios presented in the podcast episodes, they are reimagined and recreated from our original conversations, but the presentation of the findings includes information shared by the student co-collaborators from the

data collected in our study. Direct quotes from the study are indicated using quotation marks while the remaining context presented in the findings are paraphrased based on the information shared from the student co-collaborators.

Considering the methodological framing (YPAR) and theoretical underpinnings of this study (i.e., CCW and the college access and choice model), counterstorytelling, a tenet of critical race theory (CRT), complements the presentation of our findings. Specifically, using Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model, which stems from CRT, highlights the varying forms of capital rural Black students lean on to access higher education with the support of their broader rural community. Therefore, using composite stories, as one of the forms of counterstorytelling, allows me to be mindful of the necessity of CRT and CCW coexisting to reveal the untold stories of Communities of Color and Students of Color, specifically the rural Black students in the present study. Additionally, the use of composite stories challenges the dominant narrative that rurality equates to whiteness (Romero, 2020) and confronts the deficit narratives about rural Black students in the literature that addresses how this student population accesses higher education (Castro, 2021). To counter the existing dominant and deficit narratives, I present our findings as podcast episodes while using the power of composite storytelling in the next two chapters.

In writing each of the podcast episodes, it is important to note that the content is reflected in Southern dialect which exudes the authenticity of the conversations shared through our podcast, as all co-collaborators identify as rural Black Southerners. The podcast episodes include cultural references which are also included for authenticity due to our conversations being organic in nature. Prior to each podcast episode I offer notes to provide a summary of what will be addressed. Following each podcast episode, I offer a reflection of my thoughts that I sat with

daily while analyzing the data. I analyzed the data collectively among all our research team members at the end of Phase 2: Meetings to Discuss Images, and individually as the adult co-collaborator throughout Phase 4: One-on-One Interviews About Student Co-Collaborators' YPAR Experiences. As we analyzed the data collectively as a research team, a wealth of emotions was expressed through our shared conversations. Additionally, a mixture of emotions ranging from laughter, joy, and sorrow, came over me as I played the audio recordings from the one-on-one interviews on repeat and read through the transcripts and my field notes, analyzing the data individually allowed me to be taken back to the moment of each of those conversations. Without further ado, I present to you our podcast, *Calling on the Community: Rural Black Youth Realizations*.

## 5.0 Findings

In this chapter, I present our podcast, *Calling on the Community: Rural Black Youth Realizations*, releasing its first series titled *Community: How Many of Us Lean on Ours*, featuring the seven student co-collaborators and me as the adult co-collaborator. In the title of this series, I pay homage to and offer a rendition of Whodini's (1984) hip-hop song, *Friends*, remixed with song artist Bill Withers' (1972) *Lean on Me*. The instrumental versions of both songs play on repeat in the background as we share our conversations. This series addresses the key findings that emerged across our Montpelier High School Research Team's photos (i.e., using photovoice as a method) that each student co-collaborator captured to reflect how the broader rural community supports them in accessing higher education. The key findings include family, support systems, and God as huge sources of support and motivation who make up the students' community, and impact their access to higher education. Role models is also a key finding, regarding the idea of representation mattering among rural Black students and how seeing someone who looks like them in their dream career pushes them to stay committed to their goals and aspirations. In addition to addressing the support of the broader rural community, this series offers what each of the student co-collaborators captured in their photos as it relates to what they are resisting or refusing as they pursue college. The findings include negativity and stereotypes, which the student co-collaborators hope to continuously push back against in their pursuit of college. The student co-collaborators led the conversations with my support. As the adult co-collaborator, I offer my experiences as a rural Black student from Resourceful County throughout the series to make organic and genuine connections with the student co-collaborators who attend the same high school that I graduated from, Montpelier High School.



Before diving into the podcast episodes, it is important to note that all students selected their pseudonyms for our study. Below, I will introduce to you the members of the Montpelier High School Research Team:

Melanin Pearl. Melanin is in her second year of high school and aspires to become a neonatal nurse upon graduating from high school and pursuing college. As a student co-collaborator on our research team, she led many conversations and offered her perspective on various topics that guided our research team discussions. She often offered her perspective to support other research team members in sharing their perspectives and to make them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

Robert Voorhees. Robert is in his final year of high school and aspires to become a business owner. He plans to pursue business as his major upon graduating from high school and enrolling in college. He is also a scholar athlete and will continue to uphold this identity on his athletic scholarship as a football player upon embarking on his college career. On the research team, he is the student co-collaborator that is very thoughtful in pushing all research team co-collaborators to chime in and was also very organized to keep the conversations flowing and centered on the current topic within that moment.

Kevin Smith. Kevin is in his final year of high school and aspires to become a photographer and film artist upon embarking on his college journey. As a student co-collaborator on the research team, he kept the conversations going with his vibrant personality by offering his perspective on many topics while also offering jokes to get us through difficult conversations about the systems of oppression we must navigate to access college as rural Black students. He always brought high energy to the research team that kept the conversations going which contributed to us centering our joy collectively.

Eli Henry. Eli is in his third year of high school and aspires to own his own construction company along with desires to be a college athlete upon high school graduation. As a student co-collaborator on the research team, he kept the conversations going and would never hesitate to ask questions for us to consider individually and collectively. For many of our research team conversations, asking one question often led to several follow-up questions that would support us as a research team in better understanding and addressing how we access college as rural Black students given the context of having support from our broader rural community. If there was a question that needed to be asked, he did not mind asking, which kept the conversations going to push our thinking as a research team.

MiMi Jones. MiMi is in her second year of high school and aspires to become a medical doctor upon graduating high school and embarking on her college career. As a student co-collaborator on the research team, she always offered her perspective and pushed all co-collaborators to share their thoughts in greater detail. She is strong-minded and determined which served as assets on the research team in her sharing her perspective and making sure that space was provided for all co-collaborators to contribute to our conversations.

Darnell Mooney. Darnell is in his second year of high school and aspires to attend college upon graduating from high school. On the research team, he is the student co-collaborator who observes and actively listens to what his fellow co-collaborators share and offers his perspective when the opportunity presents itself. He offers a wealth of knowledge when given the space to share about his experiences as a rural Black student in accessing higher education.

BonQueQue Harris. BonQueQue is in her second year of high school and aspires to become an actress. As a student co-collaborator, she was often reserved but when provided the space to share her thoughts she had a lot to contribute. She did not let her shyness hold her back

and would always own the spotlight in any moment that she had thoughts to share. Her voice was heard, and she proudly owns who she is and loves to be held accountable by co-collaborators on the research team pushing her way of thinking.

Jenay Willis. I am Jenay, the adult co-collaborator on the research team. I introduced the daily topics and cultivated a sacred space that my student co-collaborators referred to as “Black on Black on Black,” which includes having an all-Black space with Black students and Black conversations in addressing how rural Black students access higher education within our broader rural community. While I was the adult co-collaborator for our shared conversations, I served as a source of support as the student co-collaborators guided the conversations.

Now that I have introduced you to our Montpelier High School Research Team, let’s jump right into our podcast, *Calling on the Community: Rural Black Youth Realizations*.

## **5.1 Series 1 – Community: How Many of Us Lean On Ours**

### **5.1.1 Episode 1: We All ‘Bout Our Community**

Episode Notes: We say we’re all about our community. So, let’s be about the community that pours into us and nourishes us. This episode offers a conversation about those we lean on in our community to keep us going and those that help us strive for who we want to be and where we want to go in life as rural Black students. When we think about going to college and how we get to college, we think about the support of our community.

\*Starts the recording as an instrumental remix of *Friends* x *Lean on Me* plays in the background\*

Jenay: Good Morning! What’s up y’all? What’s good? How is everybody doing today? Y’all had a good weekend?

Student Co-collaborators (*in unison*): Yeah, yeah. Yes ma’am! \*thumbs up and head nods\*

Robert: Yeah, yeah, and we had a football game Friday night. Matter fact it was the last home game before we head to the regional playoffs!

Jenay: Y'all won?

\*Eli and Robert both nodding their heads in agreement\*

Robert: C'mon now Ms. Jenay, be forreal! Yeah, we won. You ain't expect nothing less did ya?

Eli: Don't try to play us like our team ain't good now!

\*Everybody laughing\*

Jenay: I ain't say all that! I know y'all a pretty decent team. Y'all do remember I was a student here way back when, so I do know a lil something. We were pretty decent when I was a student here too, so I know y'all keeping the tradition going!

Jenay: Alright, so anybody else want to say how their weekend was?

Melanin: Well, I had a great weekend I guess you can say. Although I had to work, it was still good or whatever!

Jenay: Okay, well I'm glad everybody had a good weekend and that the football team got a Win! And Congratulations on making it to the playoffs! Let's go ahead and jump into today's conversation. Today, we will listen to each of our research team members discuss their pictures and why they chose the pictures in helping us think about the people and resources in our rural community that support us in accessing higher education. Then we will also hear from each research team member about what we are resisting and refusing as we pursue college. Who wanna start?

Kevin: Well, y'all know me. I don't mind going first!

Robert: Yeah, we know!

\*Everybody laughing and side eyeing each other in agreement\*

Jenay: Okay then Kev, go right ahead.

Kevin: "So, I got my first picture and it's my brother and my cousin. And you know, I like my brother and my cousin is pretty chill."

Jenay: "Okay, so how do your brother and cousin support you in going to college? Or how do they contribute to you going to college in being a part of your support system?"

Kevin: “Cause my brother is in college and so it’s kind of like, I look up to him. And well, my cousin, he’s in ninth grade and he wants to go to college and play football, so that’s a Win!”

Jenay: “So, you feel like your brother being in college pushes you to want to go to college? And then for your cousin, he might see that your brother is in college and see that you are or will be pursuing college once you graduate high school and that will kinda or in some way inspire him to turn his dream into a reality of going to college to play football?”

Kevin: Yeah, pretty much. Yes ma’am!

Robert: Alright, so boom let me go ahead and go! I got a picture of my family, with my mama on my right, daddy on my left, and granddaddy next to my daddy, because they are the biggest support in my life, and this is us on the field at Senior Night with them escorting me at the football game. They are helping me go the right way and you know helping me stay on track.

Darnell: For me, I got a picture of my mom and dad. Cause like, they gonna help me get to college. They support me and give me what I need to get there. I also got a picture of my grandpa and grandma cause they also, you know, will support me. And yeah, they just gonna help me get to where I need to go.

Jenay: Okay, so now that the first half of our research team has shared their thoughts, what are the common themes that we are noticing so far?

Kevin: “I would say family.”

Robert: “Yeah, definitely family for sure!”

Kevin: “Mostly family, cause family plays a big part and are people that you feel like are going to lead you in the right place with their support.”

Jenay: Agreed, agreed.

Melanin: Yeah, I agree with family too and I would also say most of everybody has Black people in their pictures for who y’all consider family. I’m not sure if its cause when we think ‘Well, when you consider community that is mainly Black people for us,’ you know?

Jenay: It could be! How about we keep the conversation going to find out? And since you brought this idea to our attention why don’t you do the honors and share your pictures next, Melanin?

Melanin: \*laughing\* Oh, I’m ready Ms. Jenay! Let’s gooo.

Jenay: \*with enthusiasm\* Okay sista girl, go head then! Do yo thang!

Melanin: “So, my brother didn’t wanna be in a picture. So, I just got his hand with his gold and Black Rolex on his wrist. And my brother, well he’s my brother-in-law and he’s like someone I

go to often for support and advice. Cause, well you know my mom's older and she doesn't understand the younger generation as much as he does. So, I usually go to my sister and brother-in-law first before going to my mom. And my brother, he helps me out with stuff. He buys me the stuff I want and mostly what I need. My mom, well she buys me like Sketchers and stuff. And I can't tell her that, you know, people don't really wear those, but yeah, he buys me like most of the stuff."

Jenay: "So, how do you feel like that supports you going to college?"

Melanin: Cause you know, he had a hard time growing up, so to make sure I don't make the same mistakes he made when he was growing up, he helps us make better decisions, me and my siblings who are also around my same age and in high school. He helps us make better decisions to prepare us for our future. And he knows I want to be a neonatal nurse, so he does everything he can, well him and my older sister, do everything they can to help me achieve my goals by supporting me.

Jenay: Okay, and did you want to speak to any of your other pictures?

Melanin: Okay, yes. So, this picture is of my oldest sister.

Jenay: "The one you were just talking about with your brother-in-law? His wife?"

Melanin: "Yes! She didn't wanna be in a picture either so that's why I covered up her face with a red heart emoji. She's the one that gets me out of trouble a lot. Like when my mom makes a decision, sometimes she can help my mom make a better decision."

Jenay: "Kinda like a supportive big sister you look up to for guidance and support? I have an older brother who I look to for support in the same way so trust me I understand."

Melanin: Yes ma'am. So, she really is like a big sister to me! She helps me out a lot and I know she will do the same in supporting me going to college.

Robert: Melanin, you might be right then! Most of everybody pictures that's been shared so far includes family, Black family members especially that are a huge part of our community.

Eli: "Wait! Everybody in my pictures ain't Black that's a part of my support system."

Kevin: Yeah, mine either, my best friend is white!

Jenay: Key word here is 'Most' y'all and also Melanin said 'mainly Black people,' that ain't saying everybody. I hear everything y'all are saying and I want you to know that I see you and I hear you and at the same time the key words do matter. Now, let's keep this conversation going!

\*Everybody smiling and nodding at each other in agreement\*

Eli: Okay, you right, you right! My fault. My apologies.

Melanin: She is right, just accept it y'all so we can move forward with the convo.

Jenay: Y'all argue back and forth like brothers and sisters, don't y'all? Okay, so who wanna share next? BonQueQue?

BonQueQue: Okay. Yeah, so I'll go! I got this picture of our high school that represents people in the high school that support me going to college. Mainly like teachers, peers and friends like Melanin, who be pushing me and supporting me, that support me going to college and stuff.

Eli: "Dang, this starting to get real personal ain't it?"

Melanin: And personally, I think that's fine!

Jenay: That's okay, Eli! I agree with Melanin. It's her own life experiences and in one way or another a lot of what we share in this space will be personal cause it's the lives we are living as rural Black students navigating our pathways to college, which is very personal. To bring it back, I want to say what you shared BonQueQue cuz I can tell it came from your heart and that's beautiful, that's perfectly fine that's why we have this space! I'm glad you feel safe to share.

Jenay: So, you said for you the picture of the high school, that represents teachers, peers, and friends that support you and are rooting for you to go to college, like Melanin, okay. What about your other pictures?

BonQueQue: "Well, I got this picture of the bible that represents God, and I have it turned to my favorite scripture, Luke 17:20-21, 'If God is love and when we live in God, we live in love.' Because I gotta have God to get where I am. You know I gotta have God."

Jenay: "How do you feel like God contributes to you going to college?"

BonQueQue: "Because He made me and then whenever I'm having hard times, I can just talk to Him, and I will just talk to Him when I go to college too in helping me go to college and get through college."

Melanin: Amen to that! That's a word right there! You better preach!

\*Everybody making eye contact with each other and nodding heads in agreement\*

Jenay: Melanin agrees with you!

BonQueQue: By the looks of it everybody on the research team agrees!

Melanin: Yeah, cuz as soon as she said it and I said what I said, everybody was looking at each other and nodding in agreement, it's kinda like we got our own Amen corner going on in here!

Jenay: That's real! "So, now that BonQueQue has shared, what common themes are we seeing across photos?"

Robert: "I would say support system. And that includes family, friends, teachers, or peers. Well, so far!"

Melanin: Yeah, I think so too. And you know what, now that I'm looking at everybody pictures again and thinking about what BonQueQue shared with us, our support system doesn't always have to look like us.

Kevin: Yeah, I would agree with you Melanin! I think that's why earlier I was set on saying not everybody in my support system is Black and I think it's important to have a diverse group of friends.

BonQueQue: Yeah, well most of y'all in here know that I have a diverse friend group. Well in terms of race anyways.

Kevin: Well, yeah, we know race is a part of diversity but it's kinda like what you told us in the beginning during the trial run Ms. Jenay, when Melanin brought it up, I remember you telling us that diversity ain't just about race. Race is only a part of it. There is so much more that makes up diversity. And to tie it to our friend groups like you were talking about BonQueQue, it makes me think about our support systems in general. We can have different people in our friend groups and support systems who come from all types of backgrounds when we think about the ways they can be diverse. I think it all boils down to acknowledging the fact that having a strong support system is important as we pursue our college journeys as rural Black students.

Darnell: Agreed, yeah, I agree. \*Nodding head in agreement\*

Robert: Same, I agree too fam!

Jenay: "With that being said, we have two more team members we haven't heard from, y'all. So, who wanna share first?"

Eli: Me! Let me go ahead and share mine. "Alright, so I got a picture of Ma Dukes right here."

Jenay: Okay, you gotta picture of your mama.

MiMi: Okay, but I can't see it.

Jenay: Dang, he was finna turn the picture around. Give him time, give him time.

\*Everybody laughing\*

Jenay: "Okay, go ahead please continue Eli you were talking about and showing us a pic of your mama, well you and your mama and you got ya arm around her shoulders, with her dressed in all Black and you dressed in blue and Black with ya sunshades on."

Eli: "Yeah. So, she motivates me."



Jenay: “How does her motivating you support you in going to college?”

Eli: “It’s never a stopping point. Just keep going. She always motivates me to do better in any situation that happens in life so I know it will be the same energy when I go to college.”

Jenay: Yes, shoutout to Black mamas for holding us down, always and forever! \*holds up Black power fist for Black mamas support\* Okay, so what else do you wanna share?

Eli: “I got the guys!” Well, I gotta picture of me and my homeboys, me and my teammates on the football field in our all Black uniforms with gold lettering, under the Friday Night Lights, the lights are shining on us and then the football fans are behind us in the background in the stands with their Montpelier High School fanwear, rooting for us to win.

Jenay: And how do you feel like they support you as part of your community, your homeboys?

Eli: Well, you know being on the football team together, they’re really like brothers to me cause we always together and we push each other. Like push each other to stay out of trouble and not do anything dumb or crazy.

Jenay: “Kinda like y’all have similar morals and values and support each other in that way? That’s kinda like what Robert said the other day.”

Eli: “Yes, yes ma’am.”

Jenay: And MiMi, it’s your time to shine sista girl! You were speaking loud and clear when you first came in here so let’s keep that same energy!

MiMi: “Okay, so this is my cousin. She’s my cousin, that’s my dawg, she helps me and motivates me and encourages me to do good and stuff.”

Jenay: “And how do you feel like that contributes to you going to college?”

MiMi: Well, my cousin contributes to me going to college cuz she helps me and motivates me and I wanna go to college to become a doctor. And it is, I guess like say...wait what I just said?

Jenay: You said your cousin supports you and you also said like that’s yo homie, like basically she is your best friend.

MiMi: “Yes, okay. Like, okay, let’s say I wanna do something right? My cousin gonna push me to do it no matter how I feel, even if I wanna stop. She’s still gonna help me and try to push me to do it no matter what. So, I know she will support me when I go to college to become a doctor.”

Jenay: So, your cousin is a huge source of support and in your corner to support you no matter what, she a rider forreal.

MiMi: Yes, yes ma'am. Exactly! We all need somebody that's gone ride for us and go hard for us!

Jenay: "Okay, so now that everybody done shared out, what are the common themes we are seeing across the photos?"

Robert: Everybody got family that supports them. Well, yeah everybody got a support system, like we all gotta support system that supports us going to college and achieving our goals and whatever career we choose to help us stay on the right path.

Melanin: Yeah, for me I think family stands out the most and I know God isn't across everybody's pictures, but I noticed everybody agreeing and nodding their heads earlier when BonQueQue said we gotta have God.

Kevin: Yeah, family really like it's been through most of today's conversation.

Eli: Family forreal, and Black mamas to keep it real.

Darnell: I agree with Eli about Black mamas and a few of us have both of our parents but Black mamas gone definitely hold us down in being part of our support systems and communities.

\*Bell rings for transition to next class\*

Jenay: Yes, shoutout to Black mamas! I love mine. Anybody else wanna share out? The bell just rung so I ain't gone hold y'all long. We can continue the conversation tomorrow. Thank y'all for today!

\*Stops recording and instrumental remix of *Friends* x *Lean On Me* fades\*

#### **5.1.1.1 Adult Co-collaborator's Episode 1 Reflection**

In this episode, me and the student co-collaborators discuss who motivates and supports them in being a part of their broader rural community, which is reflected in each of their photos and in the conversations we shared. Family plays a vital role in supporting the students' college journeys, making up a large part of their support systems. In our conversations and within their personal lives, family is not limited to immediate but encompasses extended and chosen family as well. From mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, cousins, best friends, homeboys, and homegirls each of these play a vital role in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education.

Black mamas are named as one of the biggest supporters of the rural Black students in our study. In addition to the support and motivation given by Black mamas, a debate occurs between Melanin, Kevin, and Eli about many members of their support systems being Black due to the nature of who they view as part of their communities. While the Black community plays a significant role in supporting the students' access to higher education, all members of their community who are rooting for their success do not look like them. Support and motivation can come in many ways, and some of those ways include having a support system that is racially diverse.

Tied to family and support systems, is the role that God plays in shaping access to higher education for rural Black students in our study. BonQueQue is the only student co-collaborator who directly shared about the impact that God makes in her life which supports her college journey as a rural Black student. Many of her co-collaborators, including me, co-signed on the power that God and faith can play in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education, which affirmed and reaffirmed our organic and genuine connection as a research team. Therefore, this episode revealed the importance of leaning on family, support systems, and faith in navigating college access within rural Black students' broader community.

### **5.1.2 Episode 2: Know What Feels Right, Everything Ain't Always Appeasing**

Episode Notes: We talk about what it takes to be successful and what keeps us motivated and its only right that we do that while talking about our role models and why representation matters. While we have positivity, life can also throw in some distractions or pivots, but we are more than just stereotypes thrown our way. This episode involves a conversation about what drives us in helping us achieve our goals of going to college as rural Black students and what we want to steer clear of to stay focused on our paths to postsecondary education.

\*Starts recording as instrumental remix of *Friends* x *Lean on Me* plays in background\*

Melanin: Heyyy, Ms. Jenay!

Jenay: Hey girl, heyyy! How are you doing?

Melanin: I'm alright, just happy that its Wednesday cause that means we halfway through the week.

Jenay: Whew, girl tell me about it! I know that's right. So, how is everybody else doing today?

Robert: Good.

Eli: Same, good. We gotta game Friday night, you should come out and support!

Kevin: Yeah, Ms. Jenay. You should come support the team.

Jenay: I would love to come support y'all, but I got a loc hair appointment in the city! So, I'll be there all day. If it wasn't for that I would've definitely came to support y'all.

Eli: Oh, I understand. You know we understand cause most of us on the research team got locs.

Me: I knew y'all would understand! I appreciate y'all! Okay, so let's get into today's conversation cause we got plenty to talk about.

Melanin: Well, I want to kick the conversation off today. In yesterday's conversation, we wrapped up the conversation talking about our support systems. Oh, Ms. Jenay can you bring out the photos so we can continue our conversation?

Jenay: Oh yeah! Here y'all go. And today is just a continuation from yesterday's conversation as our research team members discuss their pictures and how people and resources in the community support them going to college. Then each research team member will talk about what they're resisting or refusing as they pursue college. Just a reminder, remember to take out ya journals so we can record individual field notes as our research team members are sharing out!

Melanin: "Okay, so I got this picture, cuz this is a picture like when I was younger, like maybe 12 or 13, my oldest sister that I always go to for support, had a purse and I asked her a hundred times could I get this purse? And I think that this purse is good cuz I started getting a job, making money and my sister decided she was gonna give me the purse."



**Figure 1 Louis Vuitton Purse**  
(Pearl, 2022)

Jenay: “Well, how does that contribute to you going to college?”

Melanin: It contributes, cause when I go to college, my sister already told me not to spend my money just to be spending it and to spend it wisely. So, I feel like starting this so early in my life will help me when I go to college in terms of saving and spending my money carefully. And that will help me be successful in college, like managing my money well.

Jenay: So, it will help you with your necessities in college? And ain’t nothing wrong with treating yourself from time to time to celebrate yourself and your accomplishments.

Melanin: Yeah, necessities. And yes, you gotta point! I feel like I do that well with the job I have now while also going to school so it will be easy to keep that same mindset in college.

Jenay: Okay, BonQueQue you look like you got something you wanna say?

BonQueQue: Okay, so I got this picture and it reads the words ‘role model’ that I wrote in all Black with stick figures in red capes drawn connected to the words, cuz I got people like my parents who I look up to and they be telling me to go to college and stuff. I know they will continue motivating me to go to college and they really are my role models. They didn’t wanna picture, so I decided to include a picture of the word role model instead.

Jenay: Yes, role models are so important when we think about who motivates us! Both of my parents were my role models but especially my daddy cause I’m a daddy’s girl and look up to him and all he has accomplished in his life as an entrepreneur. That makes me want to strive to be just as great!

Melanin: Oh, wait Ms. Jenay! I forgot to mention this picture. It’s a picture of a Pac Man game in my house, and for college I’m not gonna be playing games cause I know I don’t got time for that and I’m not gonna have time for this, for games and stuff. I’m gonna have to stay focused if I wanna get the type of college degrees that I want. So, games is off the list. I’m gonna have to stay away from that.



**Figure 2 Pac Man Game**  
(Pearl, 2022)

Jenay: C'mon degrees! Claim it! \*clapping\* We love to hear it! But in my true fashion, I gotta follow up question for you. What if you go to a school known for its sports team, like football and basketball, and a friend hits you up like, 'So, Melanin you trying to go to this game or nah?' What are you gonna do?

\*Both laughing and then everybody starts laughing\*

Melanin: "I would be like, well it matters cuz I would know how well I studied or not, but if I know that I didn't study enough or need more time studying, I'm gonna be like, 'You're gonna have to go by yourself. Cause I gotta study.'"

Jenay: "So, what I'm hearing is that you still feel like you can go to the game if you studied well enough?"

Melanin: "Yes! Like I'm not gonna take everything away, but you know sometimes I'm gonna need to stay home and study, cause well I am there for my degree first and the fun comes later."

Jenay: Got you! I just wanted to give you a realistic scenario of what could happen when you go to college, and I like that you want to stay focused and motivated. And also, you can still have fun too! Like yeah you can't go to everything your friends invite you to cause you gotta study but you can go to some of the things to take a break from studying and enjoy your social life!

Robert: Well, since we on the topic of success, motivation, and role models, let me talk about mine. So, I feel like my teammates motivate me to keep going so that's why I have this picture of some of us on the field and then I have the one with me and my coach cause I feel like my coach motivates me to keep my head in the game. And that's related to everyday life and life on the football field to help me stay focused.

Eli: And yeah, see me and Robert grew up playing ball together, so we support and motivate each other all the time. And really, we have similar morals and values that helps us push each other. Like we know to stay away from certain stuff that can cause trouble, like drugs.

Jenay: Yeah, that's real but before we get into what we need to stay away from to keep us motivated let's finish talking about what motivates us to go to college and who motivates us to achieve success to complete our goals and everything!

Kevin: "Well, each of us gotta picture of what we want to do. Most of us, I think. Like in some way, we all gotta picture of the reason behind us going to college."

Jenay: Sounds like a motivating force to me, let's talk about it! How about you go ahead, Kev, since you noticed it?

Kevin: "For me, I wanna go to college for film and photography and to be real my teacher, Ms. Lilburn (*pseudonym*), is the one who motivates me to pursue this as my career."

Jenay: Yes, I'm telling y'all the people who motivate us are so important. The people who really wanna see us win and become successful are some of the realest folks in our support systems.

Melanin: Yeah, that makes me think about motivation and how we recognize what is happening and how this connects to our lives as rural Black students to go to college.

Jenay: Wanna say more about that Melanin?

Melanin: "Yes ma'am. Like say if you see a successful Black person walking around, you're gonna be like, oh dang 'I could be that person one day and it's just gonna motivate you.' But if you see a successful white person, it's gonna be like, 'Oh yeah that's good. Good job.' And like maybe that will motivate you, well motivate us to be like, I'm gonna be that other Black person to succeed. So, yeah, I don't know, you know. You get what I'm trying to say?"

Jenay: Yeah, I get exactly what you're saying, it ties into what most of us have been saying with having support, motivation, and representation mattering. What about you Darnell?

Darnell: "I'm still figuring mine out, but I know that whatever I choose to go to college to pursue my family will support me."

Jenay: Well, yeah you don't have to know today. You have time as a tenth grader. And honestly folks go to college all the time and change their major. So, it's okay not to know right in this moment. Anybody wanna volunteer to share their college career next? MiMi?

MiMi: "I wanna be a doctor or nurse."

Jenay: "Yeah, that's right! Cause you been saying you wanna become a doctor, well you will be a doctor and then Melanin is going to be our neonatal nurse."

Melanin: "Oh, wow. Ms. Jenay you remembered? I feel special!"

Jenay: “Of course! I know what all of your college goals are cause y’all told me and I’m doing this research with y’all so of course I know!”

Melanin: “Awww, I feel so special!”

Jenay: Yes, each of you are special in your own way with the dedication and brilliance you bring to the research team every day! Now, before you get me to crying, tears of joy of course, about our research, lets shine light on a few more of our research team members!

\*Everybody smiling and making eye contact with each other\*

Melanin: Okay, okay! Sorry, Ms. Jenay.

Jenay: No, don’t apologize. No need to apologize that is what we have this space for. Y’all said it’s not often that you get to be in a space like this with everyone who looks like you so that’s why we’re here and why we hold space for moments like this that we continue to share.

Melanin: Yes, yesss ma’am!

Jenay: So, keeping it going, I know we got our infamous photographer and film artist, Kevin! We’ll go ahead and speak that into existence. Then we got our business owner, Robert and our other business owner Eli, who will own his very own construction company one day! Who knows, Robert and Eli, will be our multi-millionaire business owners. Let’s speak that into existence too!

MiMi: Okay! You better be speaking this into existence, Ms. Jenay!

Jenay: Got to! Cause if we don’t go hard for us, who will?

\*Everybody nodding their heads in agreement\*

MiMi: You right, you right!

Jenay: Okay, so let’s spin the block!

Eli: Spin the block on what? What ya talking about Ms. Jenay?

Jenay: Well, this is the perfect question at the perfect time! Cause you are the one who brought up the idea I’m bringing back to the research team for us to talk about. Let’s talk about it! So, now that we have talked success, motivation, role models, and representation mattering, it’s a must that we talk about what Eli mentioned earlier about what we should stay away from as we pursue college as rural Black students.

Eli: Wait, we done talked about a lot. What did I say Ms. Jenay?

Jenay: Anybody else remember?



Robert: Ms. Jenay we did talk about a lot. Wait a minute, it was when he was talking about us having similar morals and values cause we basically grew up together?

Jenay: Yeah, that's the part but he said what we need to stay away from too. Do you remember that?

Robert: No ma'am.

Jenay: Well, let me help everybody out! Eli said that we should stay away from drugs as we pursue college as rural Black students.

Melanin: You know what Miss Jenay? I was just about to say that. Forreal, I was about to say that!

Kevin: Girl please! No, you wasn't stop lying!

\*Everybody busts out laughing\*

Jenay: Okay, okay! But to bring back what Eli mentioned earlier, he said that we should stay away from drugs as we pursue college. Anybody else want to say what we should stay away from? Or speak to what is reflected across your pictures as to what we should stay away from?

Kevin: I'll go!

Jenay: Go head, Kev!

Kevin: "Like bad stuff. We want to stay away from negative stereotypes, and drugs and stuff."

Jenay: Okay, wanna speak more to the stereotypes? Give us an example.

Kevin: "Stereotypes, well bad stereotypes, can play a big part in our success in college. Say like, if someone says, 'Oooh you Black, and you gonna be sagging?' So, yeah bad stereotypes and stuff like that."

Jenay: "So, not feeding into the stereotypes is what I'm hearing?"

Kevin: "Yeah, or pushing back against stereotypes really, especially the bad ones."

MiMi: Well, when I think about the stereotypes we need to push back against, I think about our strength, I think about how our community, or all of our communities come from strength. Especially with Black people.

Jenay: Okay, anybody else wanna add to what MiMi said?

Eli: Well, it makes me think about how we might struggle as Black people, but we don't quit cause we push back against the stereotypes by leaning on our community.

BonQueQue: So, really about the community then? That's what I feel like, about how we lean on our community as rural Black students.

Jenay: Sounds about right to me! There's strength in leaning on our community as rural Black students to go to college. So, now that we know the strength let's talk about this action plan!

Kevin: "I say we protest!"

Robert: "Protest what, boy? You say anything."

\*Everybody looking at each other and busts out laughing\*

Eli: "I got a question, but I don't know how to ask it. I don't want it to sound crazy."

Jenay: "No question is a crazy question here. Just ask it if you feel comfortable and safe and we'll back you up. We'll talk through it together as a research team."

Robert: "I don't know now, when it comes to Eli I don't know. Gone and ask!"

\*Everybody making eye contact with each other and laughing\*

Eli: "Why do Black people struggle a lot? Like it's not easy, no wait. I don't know how to put this, but it's not like an easy life."

Jenay: It goes, well I think it goes back to what Melanin said earlier, well she said it before the holiday break. Stereotypes are placed on us as Black people and we can either push back against the stereotypes or be a part of feeding into the stereotypes. And not all stereotypes about us are negative. So, to you what does that mean? How do you feel in terms of how you navigate your own life or own journey as a rural Black student and young Black man, in terms of pushing back against the stereotypes that people place on us as Black people or rural Black students, or even Black students in general?

Eli: Well, ignore it, you don't ignore but you gotta choose how you will handle it.

Jenay: Handle it in what way?

Eli: For instance if somebody, I don't know..

Jenay: "C'mon co-collaborators help. Help a fellow co-collaborator out. Why is it so hard for us as Black people to navigate through society with all the stereotypes placed on us?"

Melanin: Its cause it, you know..

Eli: Pushes us to go harder, yeah like to go harder and not become like what they..

Robert: Yeah, makes you wanna be successful in pushing back against those stereotypes to prove them wrong.

Melanin: Yeah, to prove them wrong we will succeed anyways.

Jenay: “Okay, Darnell what about you? What do you think we should stay away from as we pursue college as rural Black students? Thinking about stuff we should stay away from in our community.”

Darnell: “I got a picture of some fake crack and a picture of some pills. And I think we should stay away from that and focus on the good in front of us that is going to keep us on the straight path.”



**Figure 3 Sugar to Depict Crack**  
(Mooney, 2022)



**Figure 4 Pills to Depict Drugs**  
(Mooney, 2022)

Jenay: Okay, stay away from stuff like drugs such as crack and pills.

Darnell: Yeah, definitely unless like I need medication if I get sick or something with say like a cold or something. But other than that we should stay away from drugs.

Jenay: I get exactly where ya coming from. So, who wanna share next?

Robert: I'll go.

Jenay: Wait! Thank you, Robert. I appreciate that but let's let a research team member speak that we ain't heard from in a while and I promise I'll come right back to you. What about you BonQueQue?

BonQueQue: "Okay, so I got this one of whenever I hit Melanin, well the photo is technically staged but yeah."

Jenay: "Yes, staged but wanna say more about the photo and what it represents in terms of what you wanna stay away from as you pursue college as a rural Black student?"

BonQueQue: "Well, it represents fighting. And I gotta stay away from fighting and drama because that would be really bad cuz I could get arrested and that would go on my record. Then I wouldn't be able to go to college and stuff."

Jenay: I wouldn't say that you wouldn't be able to go to college. Well, first I wanna rebuke that from happening altogether. Cause you will go to college and achieve your dreams of becoming an actress. And let's go along with the scenario you shared with us though, if it happens, it's more so about how do you get yourself out of the trouble you've gotten into, to get back on track with your college journey. Cause we all take pivots in life, it's a matter of how we handle the pivot. We might fall down but we can always get back up and keep going in life. Or how do you feel like you can prevent this from happening?

BonQueQue: "Staying away from negative people, yeah just staying away from negative people and also hanging with people who stay away from negativity."

Jenay: Yeah, I agree. Choosing your friend group wisely matters a lot in terms of the people that can support you and influence you positively. Goes back to what Robert said not too long ago about hanging around people with similar morals and values. Okay, Melanin what you wanna say? I know you got something good, talk to us!

Melanin: "Yeah, so I have this picture I took of pills to represent drugs. Cause, you know in college people move away from home and sometimes decide they wanna get hooked on drugs. So, yeah I'm gonna try to stay away from that cuz I watched *Grown Ish* or was it *Black Ish*; I honestly forgot. But like anyways the girl on there was taking some pills every day to keep her awake or something. And even though it helped her, it doesn't help her in the long run. I'm just not gonna do it. Cause I know there can be some bad side effects and I don't wanna get caught with them cuz that could get me kicked out of school or something. So, yeah like I said, I'm just not gonna do it."



**Figure 5 Pills to Depict Drugs**  
(Pearl, 2022)

Jenay: Okay, and you feel like staying away from that will help you stay on the right path?

Melanin: “Yeah, I’m gonna stay away from that. You know, I’m gonna be on the right path and I’m gonna have God in my life. Well, He’s in my life now, but you get what I’m saying. I’m still gonna pray and make time for church and hopefully find a church family wherever I go to college.”

BonQueQue: Yes, girl! Gotta have God in your life!

Eli: Yeah, most definitely! No doubt about that.

Robert: Yeah, God is important to have forreal!

Jenay: I feel exactly where y’all are coming from. And I also wanna say that it doesn’t make a person any less of a believer for being a drug addict. Say for instance, even if someone identifies as a non-believer, we know that life happens, meaning that pivots happen, but like my grandma used to say, ‘once you make your bed might as well lie in it.’ So, yeah Melanin I understand the point you’re making though in saying that you wanna avoid drugs altogether so that you don’t have to worry about that, which I completely understand.

Melanin: Yes, so I’ll just stay away from it and stay focused on the positive.

Jenay: I completely understand. Let’s hear from Eli. I know you said drugs to kick our conversation off. Anything else you wanna add that you will stay away from as you pursue college as a rural Black student?

Eli: I said drugs but I wanna say that I think we should stay away from marijuana or weed. Cause you don’t want it to lead to something else, like an addiction or a different drug if you have the mindset that you should try something new. So, staying away from that. Gotta stay away from drugs.

Melanin: Yeah, kinda like what I was saying about staying away from drugs. We should stay away from drugs as we pursue our college journeys as rural Black students.

Jenay: Okay, y'all both agreed to staying away from drugs. Anything else you wanna add Eli?

Kevin: Well, wait, I wanna say that we should stay away from drugs or weed especially, unless we have a prescription for it or if we have a prescription for any type of medicine then I think that's okay. And all drugs aren't bad for you, just gotta know what to stay away from and not become dependent on certain drugs that can lead to an addiction. Y'all do know that we learn about this when we take them sex education and drug education classes when the people from the community come and talk to us, I think they are the health educators from the Resourceful County Health Department? I think it started in ninth grade or wait, maybe even middle school, in eighth grade, but yeah.

\*Eli nods head in agreement\*

Eli: Yeah, I know what you talking about Kevin and now I wanna talk more about pushing back against stereotypes. For example, like tattoos, cause I know you can't get certain jobs, well certain jobs won't allow you to have tattoos.

Jenay: So, this is kinda tied to the earlier point of pushing back against stereotypes. But for tattoos specifically, what I hear you saying is you're pushing back against stereotypes in terms of what it means to be a Black person having tattoos. And having tattoos shouldn't stop us from getting a job or being accepted into college. I absolutely agree.

Eli: Yes ma'am.

Jenay: MiMi, thought I was gone forget to call on you, didn't you? Nope, you knew it was coming! So, what are you staying away from or pushing back against as you pursue college as a rural Black student?

MiMi: \*laughing\* Oh, you never forget so I wasn't worried about that!

Jenay: Glad you know! Go ahead tell us what ya thinking.

MiMi: "Okay, I gotta picture of Fs on tests in red writing because if you have bad grades, you can't go to college. You're not gonna get accepted cause your GPA can't be low and stuff like that. And, I'm staying away from fighting cuz fighting can go on your record. And I guess if you have a bad record, that can keep you from going to college. And this picture of fake crack which is really just sugar, cause it represents drugs, def wanna stay away from that."

Jenay: I wanna ask you about that first one; your first picture of the Fs. Cuz in life we know that we all make mistakes. Say if you make a F, how can you learn from that and still know that you wanna pursue college and will go to college? Cause people go to college and they sometimes don't do their best and don't make the best grades, but they still persist. I know for me when I was in college I struggled my first year cause I was afraid to ask my professors for help so I suffered in silence. It wasn't until my dad encouraged me to go to my professors' office hours

that I saw a change for the better. So, what does it mean if you make a lower grade and you still wanna go to college, what does that mean?

MiMi: You gotta do better.

Jenay: Exactly! And you don't just give up cause of one or two bad grades; you keep pushing to be better and do better and also making sure that you know that your teachers are there to help you. Not only your teachers but your support system and your community, whoever is a part of your community can support you. Cause we all gotta support system in here!

\*Bell rings to transition to next class or first lunch\*

MiMi: Yes, yes ma'am. Oh, y'all the bell just rung.

Melanin: "Oh, we not gonna finish? Well, I got first lunch so I can continue, you know, I got lunch. And we also got five minutes in between the first bell and the next bell."

\*Everybody grabbing their backpacks to head to lunch or class\*

Jenay: "Well since everybody can't stay let's end here today but before y'all go let me share the common themes for the second half of today's conversation. Or better yet I'll let y'all share!"

Robert: I know a lot of us said we are staying away from drugs as we pursue college.

Jenay: Yes, drugs is a common theme. Okay, anybody else?

Darnell: Negative stuff, staying away from negative stuff.

Jenay: Yes, negative stuff and negativity.

Melanin: And stereotypes! We are pushing back against negative stereotypes about us as Black people or specifically as rural Black students.

Jenay: Yes, so what we are staying away from or pushing back against as we pursue college as rural Black students is negativity, stereotypes, and drugs. Thank y'all for today! I ain't trying to make y'all late for class and lunch so I'll let y'all go and we'll move forward with discussing the action plan now that everybody done shared about their pictures. We'll also revisit the common themes too as we consider our action plan. Oh, wait y'all going on the holiday break, ain't y'all? So, we'll pick up our conversation week after next! Enjoy good vibes and good food next week and be safe. Eat plenty of turkey and dressing! If anybody is traveling over the holiday, safe travels to ya! And I will see y'all the last week of November!

Kevin: I don't know about dressing, but I'm definitely gone tear up some mac and cheese! With the lil crisp on the top too! And might as well throw some candied yams in there!

Melanin: Yeah! That sound about right! Bye Ms. Jenay, see you after the break!

Jenay: Alright y'all, see you after the break! Be safe and enjoy yourselves.

\*Second bell rings to start lunch or class\*

\*Stops recording and instrumental remix of *Friends* x *Lean On Me* fades\*

### **5.1.2.1 Adult Co-collaborator's Episode 2 Reflection**

As a research team, we unpacked the necessity of role models, representation mattering, and how success is achieved with our biggest supporters from the sidelines and those in the field with us, the sidelines being the communal support or indirect support and the field being daily life or the direct support, both which push us to achieve our goals of pursuing college as rural Black students. Role models support the rural Black students in our study as resources embodying positivity that the co-collaborators look up to and lean on for motivation and support. From coaches to parents to community members, support shows up in different ways that contribute to shaping rural Black students' access to higher education in our study. Representation mattering is essential to seeing and understanding that the "If you can do it, I can do it" mentality can come to fruition. All it takes is one person to plant a seed in the minds of our rural Black students, who then have the potential to plant the next seed to achieve a ripple effect of success. With community as a motivating factor, much can be achieved, and community helps us stay rooted in our purpose and focused on our goals that support us going to college as rural Black students.

Staying focused may come with distractions or pivots thrown in the pathways of our student co-collaborators in their pursuit of college. Distractions we discussed include negativity and stereotypes. Negativity that they hope to steer clear of are fighting and drugs. To avoid fighting, the students shared that it is important to be mindful who we surround ourselves with, in being in good company, centering ourselves around those with similar morals and values who



focus on the positive. Sharing space with individuals that lean on positivity and stay away from negativity is one of many ways to stay focused on our goals as rural Black students to pursue college. Stereotypes are for pushing back against, specifically negative stereotypes, which we as rural Black students hope to continue challenging while disrupting the deficit narratives of this student population. A rich conversation was shared by the research team where we addressed the importance of pushing back against stereotypes to be the change agents of our own lives in shifting the narrative to an asset-based and critical approach. Rather than blame us as rural Black students, the onus needs to be placed on the systemic and institutional barriers that permeate our society, specifically our communities, such as elitism, classism, and anti-Black racism (Romero, 2020). Additionally, it was critical to address how Black life is painted as a struggle from society's point of view but pushing back against the stereotypes through our actions helps change the narrative. This shifts Black life from struggle to strength (M. Jones, personal communication, November 15, 2022). Therefore, Black life as rural Black students accessing college is changing in Resourceful County, Georgia with the support of role models, representation that matters, and pushing back against negativity and stereotypes.

## **5.2 Chapter Summary**

This chapter addresses the findings to the first research question for the present study, how do rural Black students interpret the notion of college-going culture and what aspects of their lives and their communities are supportive for college access? The first research question is answered through the photovoice focus group discussions and analysis meetings in our shared conversations as a research team. We unpack the need for family, support systems, God, role

models, and representation mattering. The necessity for family—immediate, extended, and chosen—along with support systems reveals the influence of familial capital as defined in the present study. Leaning on God reveals the influence of spiritual capital and role models as well as representation mattering reveals the influence of social capital and navigational capital as outlined in Yosso’s (2005) CCW model. In addition to the prior mentioned, this chapter addresses the importance of motivation to achieve success while pushing back against negativity and stereotypes. Pushing back against negativity and stereotypes reveals the influence of resistant capital by the rural Black students in our study. Together, each of the elements we discussed as a research team encompass the role of the broader rural community given the context of the high school and people and resources within Resourceful County, which reveals the significance of Perna’s (2005) college access and choice model.

## 6.0 Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings for the second series of our podcast, *YPAR Is for the Young & Revolutionary: Rural Black Youth Edition*, featuring each of the student co-collaborators on our Montpelier High School Research Team. This series addresses the key findings which answer the second research question: In what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education? The key findings revealed the necessity for using YPAR as a critical methodology to support rural Black students' access to higher education. Findings include the student co-collaborators' interests in joining the research team, knowledge gained from their YPAR experiences along with key takeaways, and the school administrators' inability to advocate equitably for the student co-collaborators' access to higher education. To understand the student co-collaborators' experiences with youth participatory action research (YPAR) individually, all student co-collaborators had three one-on-one conversations. Having the shared identities of being rural, Black, and a student, between all student co-collaborators was supportive in sharing authentic conversations. Creating a sacred space as a research team was also crucial in the relationships built that fostered genuine and organic conversations between the adult co-collaborator (me) and student co-collaborators.

All student co-collaborators had a beginning, mid-point, and final one-on-one conversation that was shared with me as the adult co-collaborator. The beginning one-on-one conversations centered how each student co-collaborator made sense of YPAR and for me to understand initial reactions of their experiences. For the mid-point one-on-one conversations, I delved deeper into how the student co-collaborators felt about their individual YPAR

experiences after concluding data collection and analysis for our study, which was prior to the action plan. The final one-on-one conversations occurred for me to fully understand how all student co-collaborators made sense of their YPAR experiences following the implementation of the action plan. Together, the three one-on-one conversations shared with each student co-collaborator revealed how rural Black youth on our Montpelier High School Research Team understood and made sense of their involvement with YPAR from the beginning of our study to the end.

As the adult co-collaborator, I was able to witness firsthand, the growth that transpired in each of the student co-collaborators over the course of our entire study. I readily recognized their growth on the research team both individually and collectively. The one-on-one conversations were shared individually with each student co-collaborator, but the podcast episodes will be written featuring all co-collaborators collectively due to the nature of common themes that emerged across the conversations. I present to you our second series, *YPAR Is for the Young & Revolutionary: Rural Black Youth Edition*, addressing the significance of the student co-collaborators' YPAR experiences in our study, revealing the overlap and commonalities in and across their experiences.

## **6.1 Series 2 – YPAR is for the Young & Revolutionary: Rural Black Youth Edition**

### **6.1.1 Episode 1: Committed to the College Conversations – Rural YPAR Project Interests**

Episode Notes: The Montpelier High School Research Team talks research interests and what experiences helped them commit to the research team. From fun experiences, to being trailblazers as the first group of students to engage in youth participatory action research (YPAR) within the high school, to having a space just for Black students that doesn't happen often, the

student co-collaborators share their interests on the research team. As a research team, we have created our own family. So, as you read this conversation, enjoy an instrumental remixed version of the O'Jays (1975) *Family Reunion* X Sister Sledge's (1979) *We Are Family* as it plays on repeat in the background.

Melanin: So, Ms. Jenay what are we talking about today?

Jenay: Hold on Melanin! We gone get there. I wanna check in first to see how everybody is doing. So, how is everybody doing?

BonQueQue: Good, good.

Eli: Good! I feel like when we meet as a research team, time be going by real fast but then when we don't meet it seems like time be dragging.

Kevin: Forreal though! I agree with what Eli said.

\*Everybody looks at each other and nods heads in agreement\*

Jenay: Now that everybody done checked in let's address what today's topic of conversation is gonna be. So, today we will talk about what interests you in the research project and what made you decide to participate in our research. With that being said, who wanna kick the conversation off?

MiMi: Ms. Jenay, can you please remind us of the question again? I know you just said it, but I forgot already, I'm sorry.

Jenay: It's okay! I don't mind repeating it and I'll probably repeat it throughout our conversation as we're talking and it's also written on the whiteboard under our agenda for today. "So, what brought you or y'all to the research project or what interests y'all in the research project?"

MiMi: Okay, gotcha! I'll go first. Well, no wait let me think about it a lil more, so I'll let another research team member answer while I think on what I wanna say.

Jenay: That's cool! I'll come back to you. What about you BonQueQue? What interests you in our research project?

BonQueQue: "Cause I appreciate how you were telling me about, well sharing with me and the research team about how our research will help Black rural communities. And, since I don't know much about what it's like to hang around just Black students since I have a mixed friend group when it comes to race, I thought this experience would be cool, and I want to help out and be a part of our research since it's just Black students."

Jenay: "So, you feel like being around a group of Black students with different perspectives would be cool and also provide space to let your voice be heard as a rural Black student?"

BonQueQue: “Yeah, yes ma’am to see how it is to hang out with just Black students and to see how we think differently but also how we think alike in some ways when it comes to going to college and our journeys.”

Melanin: Mine is kinda similar to BonQueQue’s so I might as well share mine next!

Jenay: Okay, Melanin! Let’s have BonQueQue finish sharing her thoughts first though if that’s okay with you?

Melanin: Yes ma’am! Just when she spoke it sparked something in me and made me think about why I joined or decided to be a part of our research team.

BonQueQue: Well, that’s really all I wanna say Ms. Jenay! So, I’ll pass the mic to my fellow team member Melanin.

Jenay: Okay then BonQueQue. Thank you for sharing! “Love it! Cause what you said shows the beauty in diversity and how we think similarly as rural Black students and how we think differently in some ways considering how our community supports us going to college.”

Melanin, we’re ready to hear from you! What was it that you were gonna say that you feel like it connected to BonQueQue’s point?

Melanin: “See, I was so happy when the first paper came and it read ‘Black students’ and you know we’re always doing projects for class and stuff and I feel like we don’t really get the chance to get our voices out there as rural Black students. So, when the paper read ‘Black students altogether’, I felt like we finally are being given the chance to say what we really mean to say without holding back.”

Jenay: “Okay, do you wanna say more about what you mean by ‘finally being given the chance to say what we really mean to say without holding back’?”

Melanin: “Well, I’ve always been vocal, but I feel like it’s always been in mixed company with a lot of white students in the high school, then us as Black students and other minority students including Hispanics, and Asian Pacific Islanders.” Like we don’t get the opportunity to just be in a space that is just for us as Black students. It seems like our perspectives get watered down by the white student population since its more of them in the school and fewer of us.

Jenay: “Ya know you mention this a lot, in today’s conversation and in prior conversations about how you feel about being a Black student and not really having a problem being vocal when you’re in a classroom with students of different races prior to our research project but now you feel like you ain’t gotta hold back in this space with just us as Black students? Wanna say more?”

Kevin: Ms. Jenay, can I please say what I think I hear Melanin saying?

Jenay: Sure, go right ahead. Is that okay with you Melanin? Wanna phone a team member?

\*Melanin ponders and nods head in agreement\*

Melanin: Yes ma'am, that's fine. I feel like it will help me think about how I really wanna say it too after Kevin shares his thoughts.

Kevin: Well, I feel exactly where Melanin is coming from if we are being honest. So, what I hear her saying is that "the white students' voices take priority over our voices as Black students because we're considered a minority but because we have this Black space with just us, we ain't gotta worry about not being heard."

Jenay: Would you agree with that Melanin?

Melanin: Yes, absolutely. And, to add to Kevin's point, thank you for that Kevin! Like I was saying to add to the point he made "white folks or the white students just take up a lotta space but having this space with just us is why I told my mama, 'Oh, mama you gotta sign this paper so I can be a part of this space and the research team. Soon as I saw that it read Black students, I asked my mama if she would sign it. And when I tell you she don't sign anything I bring home, I mean nothing but she was willing to sign this and I think that speaks volumes to her knowing that it's important for my voice to be heard in a shared space with only us. And then I told MiMi that she gotta get hers signed too because our voices gotta be heard. So, I'm glad I could encourage her to get hers signed, so we could both be a part of our research team."

Jenay: Yes, yes agreed! A space created for us by us.

Kevin: "And plus we make the space what it is! All of us bring different perspectives and in some ways share similar ways of thinking but it's a space we get to call ours."

Jenay: Y'all better say that! This is a rich conversation. And MiMi, I didn't forget about ya? You ready to share now? I know we discussed a lot, so I'll share the question again. So, what interests you in the research project or made you wanna be a part of the research project?

MiMi: Well, Melanin did encourage me, so I will give her that! So, shoutout to you Melanin for pushing me to get the papers signed by my Mama. I'm kinda glad that Melanin encouraged me to get the papers signed that we took home.

Jenay: Okay, and why so?

MiMi: "After I read everything and got the papers signed, I thought it was gonna be fun and entertaining and give us something to do."

Jenay: What do you mean by "give us something to do?"

MiMi: "Well, we haven't done a lot cause we just getting started but I like it cause our research is helping me think about what I wanna do when I go to college. And, before our research project, I knew I wanted to go to college, but I feel like our research is helping me more cause when I go to college I wanna do something with forensics science or be a doctor or nurse."

Jenay: “And how do you feel like our research is contributing to you becoming a doctor, nurse, or forensic scientist?”

MiMi: “Cause at first going to college was something I thought of as a dream, but I feel like our research is helping me think about how I can bring the dream to life. So yeah, I really like our research cause it’s helping me in a lot of ways to think more about my future after graduation even though I’m in tenth grade.”

Jenay: Well, everybody in here know time flies, like Eli said earlier when we first came in here, but you do have some time. “So that’s good to hear that our research has you thinking about you becoming that doctor or nurse.” Eli, what about you?

Eli: Ma’am? Can you please repeat the question?

Jenay: Yeah! And y’all don’t forget it’s on the whiteboard too.

Eli: Oh, yeah. Nevermind, I got it! “It seems like a cool experience or like it helps me experience something new. Cause to be real, I really wasn’t thinking about this, well college was in the back of my mind and was gone be a last-minute thang if I decided to go but our research got me thinking about college being a reality with help and support from our community. And our research also reminds me of what to stay away from so that I can achieve my goals.”

Jenay: “That’s real! I appreciate how honest you are about how our research is helping you grow as a person in the way you think about community and about your future. Kinda similar to what MiMi just said about college being a dream then becoming a reality. Wanna add more?”

Eli: “Well, I feel like it’s, like our research is helping me find out more about us as Black people and our history. And well really, it’s helping me learn about how the real world is for Black people and what we have to go through to complete our goals.”

Jenay: “Well when you say, ‘real world’ what do ya mean?”

Eli: “Our research is helping me learn about how other Black people feel, well Black youth in terms of how we think about college and life honestly.”

Jenay: Yeah, and that’s kinda connected to what Melanin said earlier and then Kevin mentioned it too about how we have this space just for us as rural Black students that helps us think about our college journeys and like you just said about life.

\*Everybody looking at each other and whispering ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’\*

Jenay: Okay, Darnell, we haven’t heard from you today. What are your thoughts?

Darnell: Like about why I joined the research team or decided to become a part of our research project, that’s what you mean?



MiMi: Now, you know that's what we been talking about!

Kevin: Don't even do that now MiMi because you didn't know or remember either. But yeah Darnell, don't pay her no attention that's the question we been talking about today.

Robert: Y'all know Kevin always cracking jokey jokes. Stay doing that!

\*Everybody laughing\*

Darnell: Alright, appreciate it bruh. Got ya! So, the reason I decided to become a part of our research team? "Just so I could do something different from my usual schedule of going to my normal four classes and then going home. I thought it would be a cool experience too."

Jenay: "So, to switch it up a little? And do you wanna say more about why you thought it would be a cool experience?"

Darnell: "Well, cuz I never really thought about how the community supports us going to college, I really just thought about the high school. So, I like that our research has me thinking about all the ways that our or my community supports me in achieving my goals."

Jenay: "Got you! So, our research really helps you consider the role of community?"

Darnell: "Yeah, pretty much."

Jenay: That's what's up! Whew, y'all a lot has been shared today but y'all know we be pressed for time. So, let's keep the conversation going. Kevin and Robert, it's on y'all now. What ya know good? Talk to us!

Kevin: Well, I been talking the whole conversation, so I'll let my lil cousin go first!

\*Robert side eyes Kevin\*

Robert: Lil cousin? Boy quit playing with me, it's only a few months in between us. You ain't that much older than me. Be forreal! I'll share though. "I just feel like it's important that we know what's on our side and what's at stake in helping us be successful to get where we want to go in life."

Jenay: "Do you mean as a rural Black student or just in general?"

Robert: "Yeah, as a rural Black student or as a student really, so both."

Jenay: "Wanna say more about that?"

Robert: "Like, either way as a student, as people we need support and need to know what helped us get where we are in life and the positive ways that we can give back to the people coming behind us and then that will help us help each other to become successful."

Kevin: Well, Ms. Jenay what Robert said is a perfect set up for what I was gonna say or add to today's conversation.

Jenay: Go right ahead then!

Kevin: "I want to go to college to be a photographer in film so I felt like our research project would help me understand research more and support me in going to college and learning more about what it means to go to college as a rural Black student. And I know it's only the beginning, but I really like what I'm learning so far about how research can look different."

Jenay: "Okay, wanna say more about how research can look different? What do you mean by that?"

Kevin: "Like I've done research before, but I feel like with our research since its just for us, for rural Black students, I feel like I have a space to really share my thoughts cuz we don't get spaces like this often with just Black students. And I feel like I'm able to learn about our research team members' opinions and I can offer my opinion as well and not have to hold back on what it is I really wanna say."

Melanin: Yeah, Kevin. Ours kinda overlaps if you think about it. And it goes back to what you said earlier about us having a space to call our own as rural Black students.

Jenay: Beautiful, just beautiful! And guess what else? Perfect timing cuz the bell is about to ring in a few seconds. So, anybody notice any common themes from today before we head outta here?

Eli: See, I told y'all time be going by fast when we meet as a research team.

\*Everybody looking at each other and laughing\*

Robert: Yeah, I would say having a space for just us, learning about our community being more than just our high school, and being a part of our research project as a cool experience or something that seems really fun.

Eli: Oh yeah, to add to learning about how our community supports us is also thinking about how our college dreams seem more like a reality because of our research!

\*Bell rings\*

Jenay: Alright, I'll see y'all!

\*Everybody waving or hand gesturing the peace sign\*

Melanin: Bye, Ms. Jenay!

BonQueQue: See ya later, Ms. Jenay!

\*Recording stops and instrumental of *Family Reunion X We Are Family* fades\*

#### **6.1.1.1 Adult Co-collaborator's Episode 1 Reflection**

The student co-collaborators unpack their commitment on the research team and how their involvement with our research team contributes to their growth to support their critical thinking and increase their access to higher education. Shaping their own access to higher education comes with a grand price of opening doors to their futures as change agents and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences. Our research helps them understand the importance of community and how the community plays a role in supporting their college journeys. In addition to being change agents and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences, it is critical to name that the rural Black students in our study are also experts of their own lived experiences in serving as co-collaborators to change the narrative that impacts their lives daily. Through this approach, rural Black students lean on their navigational capital and social capital (Yosso, 2005) to shape their access to higher education while showing great commitment to the research team.

In our shared space, the student co-collaborators addressed the importance of being able to have conversations solely amongst ourselves as rural Black students and how having this space is necessary to cultivate conversations regarding our college pathways. Additionally, student co-collaborators shared that a space created by us and for us is crucial because spaces like this don't happen often. Having this space allowed us to think together and talk through several conversations involving shared ideas along with differing opinions, all of which was achieved with genuine rapport and in a respectful manner. Having a space rooted in Afrocentricity (Asante, 2003) allowed us to share tough conversations wrapped in joy, laughter, sadness, and anger, often reminding us of our safety we felt with one another. Therefore,

fostering and sustaining Black spaces within rural communities is crucial to support Black students in shaping their access to higher education.

### **6.1.2 Episode 2: The More You Know – Putting the Ripple in Ripple Effect of Knowledge Gained**

Episode Notes: The knowledge you gain with the community you build creates a ripple effect in passing the knowledge from one rural Black student to the next. One rural Black student to the next can turn into one generation to the next to help shape access to higher education for the rural Black students in the present study and the students who come behind them whose access to higher education they have the potential to shape to increase rural Black students' presence in higher education. Share the wealth of knowledge you gain and be that change! In our reminders of being that change, we offer instrumental versions of Nina Simone's (1970) *Young, Gifted, and Black* and Sam Cooke's (1964) *A Change Is Gonna Come* as background music throughout our conversation.

Jenay: Hey everybody! Today, we gonna talk about the knowledge that y'all feel like y'all have gained from being engaged in our YPAR project and address any key takeaways or one-word reflections. Sound good to everybody?

Kevin: Sounds good to me!

Melanin: Same here!

\*Everybody looks at the agenda on the whiteboard and says, 'Yes ma'am, let's get it!'

Jenay: Okay then! Let's get right into it.

Robert: I don't mind sharing my perspective first. "Alright, so the knowledge I'm gaining from here, say for instance that somebody starts here at Montpelier High School with their football career or something, and then they go to college to become even more successful after a successful high school career, they look back, and are like, 'Look where I started and look where I am now.' And I feel like they'll want to come back, sponsor a club or a sports team and have one thing lead to another, and then the population of the school can probably change. Or seeing that person being successful in giving back to our hometown might light a fire in another person from our hometown and kinda create a ripple effect of successful people that give back to who gave to them when they were coming up."

Jenay: "Okay, you said the 'population of the school can probably change,' what do you mean by that? Wanna elaborate?"

Robert: "Well, now that our research got me really thinking about community, the community could start being more supportive and investing to the people, well the rural Black students from

our hometown more. Say for instance, the community could pay for student clubs and organizations to go on college visits, like visiting HBCUs, see what it's like to be in college and stuff like that.”

Eli: Kinda like what we wanted to do for our original action plan was to visit an HBCU here in Georgia, and the community, our community can pitch in and support. I may as well go next since I added to what Robert said.

Jenay: Go on then! Speak your piece!

Eli: “I feel like our research is helping me take things more seriously, and you know as young people, we don't take things as serious as it should be taken.”

Jenay: “So, what do you mean by ‘our research is helping you take things more seriously?’”

Eli: “It's helping me think about my college journey more seriously, and our research is giving me more things to think about that I have to do to get to college and the things I need to do to get into college. And I really never thought about how the community supports me going to college until now. So, my way of thinking about college went from a brainstorm to deeper thoughts with me considering what it is that I need to do to go to college and our group conversations as a research team is really helping me too.”

Jenay: It kinda connects back to what Robert said about really thinking about the community and how our community can support us but also support rural Black students who come behind us. That ripple effect of successful people from our hometown.

Eli: Yeah, in a way but I'm more so speaking to the fact that “I feel like our research is really helping me understand how rural Black students like us are able to go to college. Like it's more than just a dream and is becoming real.”

MiMi: Yeah, Ms. Jenay. I gotta say I agree with Eli. And I think I mentioned that the other day too about how our research is helping me think about my college journey more seriously. Got me thinking about who is really supporting me and helping me turn my college dream into a reality. Cuz I'm gonna become a doctor!

Jenay: Oh, yes ma'am. Absolutely! We know that! You will be Dr. MiMi Jones. If we don't hype ourselves up, who will? We gotta go hard for us!

Melanin: Yeah, so MiMi will be the medical doctor and I'm gonna be our neonatal nurse.

Jenay: C'mon! Y'all better speak it into existence! Melanin, wanna share your thoughts next and say the knowledge you've gained in being a part of our research team?

Melanin: Hmmm I'm still thinking! “How do I wanna say it? I'm trying to word it correctly.”

Jenay: Wanna come back to you later?

Melanin: “No, I know just trying to see how I wanna say it. Yeah! Okay, so I know how I wanna say it now. See, we all learned, well, I’m pretty sure almost every Black person in here learned that we shouldn’t talk back to the police or do anything crazy. That’s what we had to learn growing up, while white people didn’t have to learn this because ya know, white privilege and stuff. And I think that, you know, learning that we don’t have to feel like we’re doing this alone cuz we’re all a part of the Black community. I like that we got together as a research team, because, you know, it’s better to do this in a group cuz when you’re by yourself, I feel like it’s not as motivating as being in a group, being able to speak your mind and also hear from rural Black students that think like you but also think different too.”

Kevin: Yeah, to Melanin’s point and I might’ve said this earlier too is that we really make the research team what it is cuz we all contribute a lot to this space, helping each other with our thoughts and being supportive to get our ideas out there. We have made our own lil family forreal! And that’s a bond we’ll forever have.

Melanin: We get to speak our mind in here and that’s what I appreciate about our space being just for us. Cuz for one, spaces like this don’t happen often and for two we get to say what we wanna say and be heard in knowing that it truly matters to everyone in here!

Jenay: That’s right! Don’t y’all gotta name y’all call our space? What is it? See if I can remember, Blackity Black Black!

Melanin: Almost, Ms. Jenay! You almost had it but its Black on Black on Black! Maybe what you said can be the nickname or something.

\*Everybody looking at each other and laughing\*

MiMi: A space created for us, by us! It’s only right to name it the best of the best! Black on Black on Black! Blackity Black Black!

Eli: Yessirrrr!

Robert: Alright y’all we get it, let’s get back to the conversation for today. Darnell and BonQueQue y’all are pretty quiet! What y’all think?

BonQueQue: I’m sorry, can somebody say what the question is again?

Jenay: I know one of y’all remember. Help ya research team member out!

MiMi: So, the question on the table is, what knowledge have you gained from being involved with our research team? That’s right ain’t it, y’all?

Robert: Yeah, that’s right.

MiMi: Okay, cool!

BonQueQue: “Knowledge I have gained? Our research is teaching me that there’s, that there’s ya know...It’ll like teach me to, I don’t know...I know what my brain’s trying to say, but I can’t say it.”

Jenay: Take your time to process! Not too much time though now, y’all know we blink our eyes, and the bell will have rung!

Eli: True! Nothing but facts!

\*Everybody saying ‘yeah, yeah, yeah’ and laughing\*

BonQueQue: Maybe go to Darnell then come back to me? Oh no wait, I think I got what I wanna say. It’s coming together. Okay, I’m just gonna say it. “Our research, well it’ll get me to wanna be more successful, and our research is teaching me that it’s important to stay focused, like keeping my grades up and staying outta trouble. And from our conversations together, as a research team, like hearing everyone else talk, well hearing our research team members talk, reminds me that it’s important not to do drugs and stay on the right track.”

Jenay: “What do ya mean by right track? Wanna say more?”

BonQueQue: “Well, I know one of my pictures was to not get arrested and stay away from negativity or people doing negative things, and I feel like that also reminds me to stay away from drugs cuz I know if you do drugs and are around negative stuff that can cause distractions that will keep you from achieving your goals. And I really wanna go to college to become an actress, so I know I gotta stay focused.”

Jenay: Okay, okay! So, we gotta actress, doctor, and neonatal nurse!

Kevin: And a couple of business owners too! Then y’all got me the film artist and professional photographer.

Robert: Yeah, I feel like we all got our own way of what helps us stay focused and on the right track like BonQueQue said. And I think having the right people around us, a strong support system helps us out with that.

Jenay: I hear y’all on that! Staying focused to achieve your goals.

Robert: Yeah, our research is helping us all think about that in one way or the other I feel like, especially the community, our community playing a huge part in our success.

BonQueQue: Yeah, that part! Exactly what you said Robert.

Darnell: Let me add my two cents! Thinking about the knowledge gained as I listen to everybody else. “Basically, you know, what people have been saying on the research team and even I think it too, is that it’s nice to be surrounded by people that feel the same way I feel about certain things.”

Jenay: “Wanna say more?”

Darnell: “Well, what I’m saying is, is that it’s nice cuz everybody is not divided when it comes to the way we think, like yeah we have different opinions and stuff and at the same time it’s pretty cool to see how we can come together and share ideas about what going to college as rural Black students means for us or looks like for us with the support of our community, you know?”

Robert: Yeah, like I was saying that community part. Our community supports us a lot in more ways than we realized, and our research pushes us to think about the role of our community in supporting us going to college.

Eli: Yeah, definitely that community piece!

Jenay: Okay community! Our research has y’all thinking about how our community shows up for y’all when it comes to ya college journeys. That’s real!

MiMi: Let’s let Kevin go last since he always got a lot to say.

Kevin: Hold up now, what you trying to say? Don’t do that!

\*Everybody busts out in laughter\*

MiMi: I’m just saying you always gotta lot to add to the conversation. Always good things! See there, always think somebody coming for you and I was trying to give you a compliment.

Kevin: Oh okay, just making sure! I appreciate it fam!

Jenay: Y’all a trip! Go ahead, MiMi. What you wanna say?

MiMi: “Well, the main part is that I feel like I’m learning about the people on our research team and how y’all think and explain the ways that the community supports y’all going to college and stuff y’all wanna stay away from, stuff like that.”

BonQueQue: Yeah, stuff that we wanna stay away from so that we can stay focused on our paths to college.

MiMi: Yeah, exactly! “Like I’m learning about how we think together as a research team and it’s cool to see how we think in similar ways and in different ways about going to college as Black students, well rural Black students.”

Eli: Agreed!

Robert: Yeah, I agree too.

Kevin: Well, we saved the best for last!



Robert: Man, here you go!

Jenay: Y'all know how to keep the conversation going, that's one thing I'll say! And the conversation doesn't end when you finish cuz we gotta talk about...

Melanin: We gotta talk about our key takeaways or one-word reactions. Ain't that right Ms. Jenay?

Jenay: Yeah, you right. Look at you remembering! I'm surprised, cuz we have discussed a lot today.

Kevin: She didn't remember, it's on the whiteboard! Now let me go ahead and say the knowledge I gained.

\*Everybody joking around and laughing\*

Robert: Ok now y'all, let's get back serious.

Kevin: Yeah, so like I was saying the knowledge I have gained? "Well, I feel like if you don't have support, it's probably not gonna feel the same. Let me not say that, but I do feel like having people that support you and who have your back is important. So, support plays a big part. I learned that."

Jenay: "Support in what ways?"

Kevin: "Having support from our friends and family, and having the homies right there with ya, really having support from our community in whichever way we define community for ourselves as rural Black students to get to college. And I also learned that it's important to share the knowledge we learn from our research project and not just keep it for ourselves cuz I know most of us talk about it with our friends, and I'm pretty sure they'll tell their friends."

Robert: Yeah, the ripple effect of knowledge passed on! Friends and family for me but yeah just passing the knowledge we learn here to our support systems.

Jenay: Yes, I hear y'all on that! Taking what y'all are learning here in our space and sharing it with others who are a part of our community or in our support systems. Anybody else wanna add to the knowledge gained before we transition into key takeaways or one-word reflections?

Kevin: Nah, I'm good.

Melanin: Same here, nothing more to add but y'all know if I think of something I don't mind bringing it back up later in the conversation!

Eli: Oh, trust us, we know!

Melanin: Whatever!

\*Everybody looking at each other and laughing in agreement with Eli\*

Robert: Okay, y'all I went first at the beginning of today's conversation so how about one of y'all share first? Don't let me volunteer somebody!

MiMi: No need to do all of that, I don't mind going and sharing my word that reflects my YPAR experience with our research team and our project in general.

Jenay: Okay then, Miss MiMi! Tell us, we ready to hear it!

MiMi: "Hmmm, one word? I would say, let me think about this. What would I say? I wanna say life changing, but is that one word?"

Kevin: Now you know that ain't one word!

Jenay: Kevin, let her be! MiMi, please continue.

MiMi: "Maybe the word I wanna use is helpful, helpful or life changing."

Jenay: "Okay, helpful or life changing. So, those two can be used together, helpful and life changing. In what ways was our research helpful and life changing? Why those words?"

MiMi: "Our research was helpful cuz it helped me overcome, not a fear, but it helped me overcome some of my anxiety. Well, some of it, not all of it."

Jenay: "Okay, in what ways?"

MiMi: "Speaking in front of people and having confidence doing it! Cause I used to be stuttering really bad."

BonQueQue: I ain't gone lie, I agree with you MiMi!

MiMi: Yeah, cuz talking, well presenting our research in front of the administrators makes me think about my growth.

Kevin: To be honest all of us have grown from the beginning of our research project to now cuz I'm pretty sure all of us were nervous in the beginning cuz we were just getting to know each other better and now we're like our own lil family.

Melanin: Yes, our own family! We have created a bond that I think we will share forever.

Jenay: Absolutely! We family now!

Kevin: I think I wanna add my key takeaway since I heard MiMi, what she said got me to thinking and reflecting on my experience and I know the word I would use to sum up my YPAR experience into one word.

Jenay: Okay, and what is that?

Kevin: “Probably, let me see, I would probably say enthusiasm!”

Jenay: “Okay, and why enthusiasm?”

Kevin: Going back to what I said a few moments ago, “because when we all started, I’m pretty sure everybody was nervous and then we kinda just got right into it, jumped into the research, as we got more into it, we all got a little more passionate and we finished strong.”

Melanin: Yeah, we did finish strong!

Jenay: Absolutely! I agree whole heartedly. Everybody gave their best efforts every day we met as a research team and in our one-on-one conversations! And that’s why I appreciate this space we share cuz y’all make our research project what it is! This is some true heart work. Now, let’s continue our conversation! Melanin, go ahead we’re ready when you are.

Melanin: Well, we all make the space what it is, Ms. Jenay, including you! And so, to keep the conversation going, the word I would use to sum up my YPAR experience with our research team is “change.”

MiMi: Okay, change!

Jenay: “And why change?”

Melanin: “Cause our research is gonna help things change, it’s gonna help history change in our community and especially in our high school. It’s helping us change our ways of doing what we used to do and changing the way we think about our futures in a good way. So yeah, I think it’s changing everything in some kinda way. And I’m not gonna keep it to myself, I’m gonna spread it. So, whatever knowledge I’ve gained I’ll use it to help the next person or the next rural Black student that comes behind me.”

Robert: Goes back to what I said earlier in today’s conversation about the knowledge we gained creating a ripple effect so that we can share with people in our community and who are a part of our support systems.

Jenay: “Yes, ripple effect of spreading the wealth, I love it!”

Robert: And for my word, I would say “successful.”

Melanin: Successful and change kinda go together.

Robert: I mean yeah, they can. For me though, I say successful “because all of the terms, like the vocabulary we learned, how our community supports us and what can help us be successful on our journeys. We also talked about the things that might be distractions that can stop us from

being successful. So, if we focus on the positive and stay away from the negative, that will help us be successful.”

BonQueQue: Staying focused to become successful! I mentioned that when we were talking about the knowledge gained.

Jenay: Yes ma’am, you did! Robert wanna add to anything you said about describing your YPAR experience as successful?

Robert: No ma’am, that’s it. Well, that’s all I had to say about that!

Jenay: Darnell, what about you? How would you sum up your YPAR experience or what word would you use to sum it up?

Darnell: “One word. Enlightening.”

Jenay: “Enlightening. And why enlightening?”

Darnell: “Our research just shows, well it makes you think about stuff, that makes you realize that there’s other people like you who might not know what they want to do yet or know exactly where they want to go but with community, we can support each other in achieving our goals.”

Eli: Yeah, that community piece makes all the difference. Our community really has our backs, we just gotta remember to lean on them and they will support us, especially our families.

Robert: Families are a part of our community, and we also need to think about how we can lean on our larger support systems, all the people and resources in our community.

Eli: True, true. You right bruh! That actually helped me think about my key takeaway. I appreciate you for that!

Robert: Anytime bruh, you know I got you!

Eli: I would sum up my experience with our research team using the word “Black.”

Jenay: “Okay, and why Black?”

Eli: “Cuz our research helped me understand the Black struggle, or that we don’t always have to struggle as Black people and Black students when we lean on our community for support to be able to go to college. And we don’t get spaces like this a lot with just Black students to have the conversations we had as a research team. So yeah, I would say the word Black. And our conversations don’t stop here, we share the knowledge we learned here to share with other folks who look like us, with rural Black students like us that come behind us.”

Melanin: And Eli what you said reminds me of how we mainly had Black people in our pictures, everybody on the research team did. So, not only does our community play a huge part but if we wanna be specific we can say that our Black community definitely plays a role.

Kevin: Yeah, that's true and at the same time, that doesn't mean that the other people in our community who ain't Black don't play a huge role.

Melanin: I didn't say that, I was just speaking to the fact that the Black community contributes to our college journeys tremendously.

Kevin: Yeah, true. I can respect that!

Jenay: Y'all dropping some gems today! The Black community is a huge source of support, I agree wholeheartedly, and we must also remember all people and resources that contribute to our college journeys as rural Black students. So, Melanin and Kevin, y'all make excellent points! Last but certainly not least, BonQueQue, what key takeaway would you like to share or what word would you use to describe your YPAR experience?

BonQueQue: Hmmm, one word? "Interesting."

MiMi: Interesting, okay, okay, I wonder why?

Jenay: I echo what MiMi shared, "Interesting. And why interesting?"

BonQueQue: "Interesting cuz it would be times that we would talk about things and everybody on the research team had different things to say about that topic. Say for instance when we talked about stereotypes, like yes, we all want to push back against negative stereotypes, but we all wanna do it in our own ways as we think about going to college as Black students, well rural Black students."

Darnell: Yeah, BonQueQue, it's like what I said in describing my knowledge gained, cuz it's nice to be around our research team members who think like us and see the same issues we see and wanna address the issues or do something to change it for the better. And we also think differently, which is cool to see how we have a range of perspectives on various topics and share them respectfully.

Robert: Yeah, and BonQueQue what you said adds to my point of us wanting to be successful as rural Black students and knowing who to have around us and what we should try to stay away from, mainly staying away from negativity.

BonQueQue: Yep! I would agree. Cuz while we might think differently and have our own mindsets, it's beautiful to share our space and understand how we think the same.

Jenay: Well, y'all said it all! Ain't nothing much for me to add. I'm kidding with y'all. From the knowledge gained to the one-word reflections to describe y'all's YPAR experiences, a lot was shared today but the main word I would use as a key takeaway is community. Everybody shared about the importance of learning about community on our research team in your own way.

Kevin: Yes ma'am! Community and family, which is what we are in being our own lil family that makes us a part of each other's community!

Melanin: Beautiful!

Jenay: Yes, beautiful, just beautiful!

\*Recording stops and *Young, Gifted and Black X A Change Is Gonna Come* fades\*

### **6.1.2.1 Adult Co-collaborator's Episode 2 Reflection**

The knowledge gained from the student co-collaborators' youth participatory action research (YPAR) experiences created a ripple effect that will pass on from one generation of rural students to the next, rural Black students specifically. On our research team, the student co-collaborators expressed that the knowledge gained includes learning how rural Black students in our study think collectively and individually, understanding the importance of community and leaning on our support systems to access higher education, and why and how sharing a space of safety and security with ourselves as rural Black students cultivates our access to higher education. In addition to the knowledge gained, student co-collaborators shared one-word key takeaways to sum up their YPAR experiences, ranging from enthusiasm, enlightening, change, successful, interesting, life changing or helpful, to Black. Coupled together, the knowledge gained and the key takeaways, are instrumental in supporting the student co-collaborators' access to higher education with them being understood as the change agents of their own lived experiences.

The conversations we shared as a research team did not start and stop within our meetings but continue with the rural Black students' families, friends, and their peers. Extending the conversation supports the next generation of rural Black students in shaping their access to higher education. Moving from the individual mindset to the collective mindset supports shaping access to higher education among rural Black students for generations to come. Leaning on community with a collective mindset creates the ripple effect necessary to increase rural Black

students' access to higher education which transforms rural Black students' minds as well as their communities that the knowledge is passed on to. This supports community coming together as a collective front with rural Black students being the experts and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences.

### **6.1.3 Featured Episode: Admin Ain't Always Advocating for All Students Equitably**

Episode Notes: We are our biggest advocates as rural Black students, but the administrators ain't advocating with the same energy that they do for students who make up the majority at the high school, white students. During one of our action plan meetings, I shared the principal's email response with the student co-collaborators which read, "we will not be able to approve the trip because of many reasons but eleventh and twelfth graders are allowed excused college visits but we do not organize the visits for the students, but a virtual tour is possible." With the initial action plan being denied by the principal, the student co-collaborators shared that they were not interested in a virtual tour option, so we revisited action plans that they shared in earlier phases of our research project. While the action plan meetings we shared as a research team were not recorded, I offer the follow up conversation as a feature on our second series of podcast episodes to call attention to the necessity of advocating for and with rural Black students to access higher education and to include the significance of the initial action plan to visit an HBCU and present to the administrators about why college tours are crucial for all students at all grade levels in the high school regarding early exposure to college. Further, a brief conversation discussing the execution of our action plan is shared. As a form of resistance, we offer Common and John Legend's (2015) *Glory* and Cynthia Erivo's (2019) *Stand Up* as instrumentals that play in the background throughout our conversation.

\*Starts recording\*

Jenay: Good Morning, y'all! What is today? These days be running together, I can't keep up. I just hope everyone is having a wonderful day so far!

MiMi: How ya doing today, Ms. Jenay?

Jenay: I'm a lil tired but pressing my way and happy to be here with y'all! How is everybody doing?

Darnell: Good, good.

Robert: Doing good, just ready to graduate forreal!

Jenay: Listennn, I feel that! We're almost there. Let's keep going. It'll be here before you know it! But everybody doing good?

\*Everybody says good in unison with head nods in agreement\*

Kevin: So, Ms. Jenay what did the administrators say?

Jenay: Okay! We're hopping right into it, I'm here for it. So, the principal did not approve of the college tour of an HBCU.

Melanin: Huh, what?!

Jenay: But she did say that we could do a virtual tour.

Kevin: Don't nobody wanna do a virtual tour! That ain't the same as going to the campus.

Jenay: Well, it's a good thang that y'all already had backup plans in mind just in case we needed something to fall back on.

Melanin: Well, I still think that's crazy that they can't do the college tour of the HBCU cuz I feel like they would've said yes in a heartbeat for the other students or if our study involved them.

Kevin: Oh, most definitely. That's really lame that we can't do the college tour forreal!

Robert: Yeah, and an online tour really ain't the same.

Jenay: So, y'all ain't interested in the virtual tour option at all?

Melanin: Nah, no ma'am. It would've been amazing to visit the campus!

Jenay: Yeah, I agree. And the principal said in her reply that students in their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years of high school get excused college visits.

Melanin: Why wait for just 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades though and why not start earlier? Because the earlier you tour colleges the better, at least in my mind anyways.

Jenay: I really wanted that for y'all and then it would've been a dope experience to come back from the campus and present to the admin about why college tours are important.

MiMi: Not only that but we gotta mix of grade levels on our research team too. So, it would've been a beautiful experience ya know. But I guess. We might as well circle the block and consider one of the Plan Bs we talked about.

\*Everybody makes eye contact with each other and throws up 'Okay' hand gestures\*

Eli: Yeah, nope I ain't down for the online campus tour either.



BonQueQue: Yeah, me either.

Jenay: Sounds to me like the virtual campus tour is a hard nah. And trust me I feel y'all. I'm so sorry y'all I really wanted that experience for y'all.

Melanin: I mean it's not your fault.

Jenay: Yeah, ya right but I still wanted this for y'all, for us, for our research team. I was rooting for the college tour of an HBCU.

Melanin: See, that's why we need people who look like us in positions of power that are willing to advocate for what we need. Folks that will go hard for us!

Robert: Yeah, people who look like us and are willing to go to bat for us! Gotta have both, not one or the other. Well, it's a good thang we gotta Plan B for backup.

MiMi: Yeah, true, like I was saying. Might as well go with one of our Plan Bs.

Kevin: True, true.

Jenay: So, everybody good with the Plan B? I think it was the Question & Answer session with the admin. And I think, what did we say, like to talk about key tips and strategies, and our experiences with the research team. Like we put together a presentation, a visual and then let the admin, we said counselors too. Let them ask questions after we talk through the presentation. So, yeah is everybody still cool with that? And Robert you the one that came up with the Plan B, ain't ya?

\*Robert nods head in agreement\*

Kevin: Yeah, yes ma'am.

MiMi: That's cool!

Darnell: Yeah, that's fine.

Melanin: I'm good with that plan.

BonQueQue: Yes, Ms. Jenay.

Eli: It ain't the college tour but yeah, I'm cool with it!

\*Everybody laughing and nodding heads in agreement\*

Jenay: Okay, we'll start planning for Plan B then! And y'all it's still gone be great don't worry. Pivots happen in life, but we keep going. And we get to show the admin and counselors what it is that we have been doing together for the past three months. Listen, if I ain't learned nothing else

in life I done learned that life throws us curves that we can either dwell in or learn from. And I say this is a learning experience cause we're learning together and from each other. Let's gooo!

\*Musical interlude of Glory X Stand Up fades into the background\*

Kevin: Okay, y'all know me! I get straight to the point. How y'all think we did presenting to the administrators and counselors?

Melanin: Y'all know what? If I'm being honest, the administrators shocked me. They did better than I thought they would!

Kevin: Yeah, I ain't gone lie they did surprise me cuz at first, I was thinking to myself whether or not they were gonna show up cuz they came in late and what not. That was gonna be disappointing if they didn't come. Well, the counselor was on time but everybody else was a lil late to our presentation. I'm glad they came, I appreciated them coming.

BonQueQue: Yeah, and we owned the show!

Jenay: Y'all really owned the show and I am so happy I could support y'all as you owned your brilliance and confidence!

MiMi: Well, it's because you pushed us and encouraged us Ms. Jenay!

Kevin: Yeah, we all make the research team what it is, including you Ms. Jenay, and I'm glad we did our thang! Now if I would've been asked to do this when we first started meeting as a research team, I don't think I could've did it to be real with y'all.

MiMi: And why not? Didn't you say you do research in class and present in front of them? I remember you saying that during one of our conversations. What's the difference now?

Kevin: Yeah, but them are students like us. We presented to the admin for our research! I was a lil nervous, that's all.

MiMi: Oh, yeah! I feel you on that. I can definitely say that being on our research team helped build my confidence when it comes to speaking and presenting. We did our thang though!

Jenay: I'm here for the enthusiasm and I feel like y'all bring that energy to our research team conversations every day we meet! And it definitely showed in our presentation! Y'all did that. Y'all about to make me shed a tear in here!

\*Tears swell in my eyes and everybody is smiling\*

Melanin: It's okay to cry, Ms. Jenay! We all know they're tears of joy, and we all cry sometimes!

Robert: Yeah, ain't nothing wrong with shedding a few tears! And now that they have seen our presentation, and see what our research is about for themselves, maybe they'll be like, 'Okay, yeah that was good, let's let 'em have the pizza party!' Ain't nothing wrong with asking again, Ms. Jenay.

Jenay: I'll ask again and let y'all know what they say! We should definitely celebrate this heart work that we have done, and what better way to celebrate than having the pizza party y'all have been talking about! Hopefully, they agree. I want that for y'all, for us!

### **6.1.3.1 Adult Co-collaborator's Featured Episode Reflection**

The featured episode reflects the ways systems of oppression permeate society, specifically within the rural school district, Resourceful County's School District (*pseudonym*). The high school administrators, both white women serving as principals, showed great disinterest in our research through their actions and strong language. Their interests in our research began and ended following the recruitment of student co-collaborators, which was a maximum of three days. In my one-on-one meetings with the principals, they were often rushed and there was a feeling of being tolerated. To confirm these feelings, on my last day of data collection in the high school as I prepared to walk out of the double doors, the head principal stopped me, interrogated me, and proceeded to say, "Isn't your research supposed to be about bridging the gap between the community and supporting rural Black students going to college?" She further stated, "your entire dissertation is a lie due to a student in y'all's study being written up and having in school suspension numerous times." The assistant principal, who was standing right beside her, nodded her head in agreement with each of the principal's statements as if she were her puppet. First and foremost, I do not understand the correlation between the two because for me there is no correlation, but I do understand the violence that is systemic racism and elitism. In this moment with the principals, it showed the continuous perpetuation of white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and elitism, with the principals seeing me and my research team members as inferior to them. In addition to my existing feelings, the student co-collaborators shared with me numerous

times throughout our study that the administrators seem to be disinterested in our research. They shared that it was evident with the lack of enthusiasm in the administrators' voices, specifically when front office personnel called them over the intercom to meet with me as a research team. Also, when the rural Black students passed the administrators in the hallways or would see them in our confidential meeting space, as administrators were exiting and we were entering, administrators showed no genuine interest in the research and oftentimes failed to greet us. From my individual experiences and the student co-collaborators' experiences combined, it is evident that the principals view me as a threat and that they also view my students through a deficit mindset. Both ideas shared reveal why the practice of YPAR is necessary in shaping rural Black students' access to higher education, which are to allow this student population to be the change agents and experts of their own lived experiences and that in being understood as such rural Black students must own the power to shift their narratives to focus on an asset-based and critical approach.

Additionally, the conversation I shared with the student co-collaborators about our presentation to the administrators, reminded me of the administrators' disinterest in our research, but in spite of the administrators' mindsets, specifically the principals' deficit mindsets, we owned the show as a research team. While we showed up to the presentation and put our best efforts forward as a research team, I remembered that just a few days before our presentation, the head principal responded to my email request of a pizza party asking that I "please send a complete list of all students who have continued to be involved in the research project and will then make decisions about the pizza party." This in many ways equates to policing a pizza party and therefore policing students, which reminds me that the principals will continuously perpetuate harm and remain complicit in the systems of oppression that benefit them, much like

they remained complicit in anti-Black racism, elitism, classism, and white supremacy on the last day of data collection. It was not until after we engaged in our action plan, presenting our research to the administrators and counselors as well as a Question & Answer session, that the head principal agreed to allow me and the student co-collaborators to host a celebratory pizza party. Each of my interactions with the principals are by no means coincidences but instead are prime examples as to why YPAR is significant in understanding youth, specifically rural Black youth in our study, as the experts of their own lived experiences. Therefore, YPAR serves as a practice that supports rural Black students in combatting the deficit narratives, much like the principals had, and using their voices in being Black youth as their power in shifting the narratives to an asset-based and critical approach.

## **6.2 Chapter Summary**

This chapter addresses how youth participatory action research (YPAR) supports rural Black students in shaping their own access to higher education. The chapter answers the second research question for this study, in what ways does using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice support rural Black students' access to higher education? I begin the chapter by addressing the research interests that drove commitment among the rural Black students serving as co-collaborators. Next, I address the knowledge gained by student co-collaborators along with one-word key takeaways or reflections and how such creates a ripple effect of the passing of knowledge from one generation of rural Black students to the next. Finally, I address the role of the school administrators and their lack of interest in our research along with their inability to advocate equitably for all students. Following each finding that is

presented as a podcast episode, I offer a reflection from my perspective as the adult co-collaborator in the present study. The podcast reflections contribute to unpacking the details of each podcast episode.

## **7.0 Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion**

Within this final chapter I offer a discussion, implications, and a conclusion. I begin the chapter by addressing several discussion points that confirm or extend the previous literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Each of the discussion points is applicable to the first research question, which addressed the role of the broader rural community as supportive for college access among Black students (answered in Chapter 5 of the findings), or the second research question in this study, which addressed how youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice supports or potentially increases access to higher education for rural Black students (answered in Chapter 6 of the findings). Following the discussion, I offer implications based upon the findings for the present study. I address implications for practice, policy, and future research. Finally, I end this chapter with my concluding thoughts regarding the purpose of the study and how our research adds to the field of higher education.

### **7.1 Discussion**

This study served the purpose of examining and addressing the role of the broader rural community and the role of youth participatory action research (YPAR) in supporting Black students' access to higher education. While previous literature largely acknowledges the role of high schools in supporting access to higher education among rural Black students (Castro, 2021; Means et al., 2016), this study sought to include the broader rural community as it encompasses the high school. In this study, the findings confirm the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The first

discussion point, which confirms the literature, is that it is vital to include the role of the broader rural community in shaping access to higher education among Black students. Second, the findings confirm previous literature in that role models are a central component in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education. Third, previous literature is confirmed through the findings by understanding that Black families play a vital role in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education. Fourth, the findings extend the literature by acknowledging rural Black students as the change agents of their own lived experiences to shape their access to higher education, given the context of their broader rural community; YPAR is a critical methodology that reinforces this. Fifth, the literature is extended through the findings in the study by acknowledging that critical methodologies such as YPAR can challenge negative stereotypes and change the deficit narratives of rural Black students to increase their access to higher education. The discussion points will be addressed in further detail below.

### **7.1.1 The Role of the Broader Rural Community in Shaping Rural Black Students Access to Higher Education**

Previous literature addresses the significant roles that high schools play, impacting access to higher education among rural Black students as it relates to college-going culture (Castro 2021; Means et al., 2016). Considering the ways in which college-going culture permeates communities, rural high schools are only a single factor that influence this student population's access to higher education. In addition to the high school, it is vital to consider the role of the broader rural community as it contributes to shaping access to higher education among rural Black students. Previous literature addresses the role of high schools (Castro 2021; Means et al., 2016), families (Chambers et al., 2021; Combs et al., 2020), peers and friends (Means et al., 2016) in supporting rural Black students' access to higher education. Each of these components



that play a role in contributing to college-going culture within the students' communities is addressed individually within the literature. The findings in this study confirm previous literature concerning the role of the broader rural community encompassing the high school, families, friends, peers, coaches, community members, and resources within the community such as local organizations. Within the present study, I address how each of these factors work together within the broader community to support rural Black students' access to higher education. Addressing how they support rural Black students' college-going culture experiences within the broader community reveals how each of these components coexists to increase access to higher education for rural Black students.

### **7.1.2 Role Models Are Essential for Rural Black Students' Access to Higher Education**

Role models are essential members of rural Black students' support systems who contribute to this student population's access to higher education. This study confirms previous literature in that role models such as parents and peers offer huge sources of support to rural Black students to shape their college journeys by increasing their access to higher education (Crumb et al., 2022; Means et al., 2016; Means, 2019). The rural Black students serving as co-collaborators in this study shared how having parents, coaches, peers, and friends who look like them are a source of motivation that contribute to their overall success. One of the student co-collaborators, Melanin, often shared how seeing herself in someone else who looked like her was crucial to her success. Additionally, Robert, as a student co-collaborator in the study, shared how power existed in having an "If you can do it, I can do it" mentality. In their own ways, all student co-collaborators shared how the role models in their lives are instrumental in their college-going journeys.

Role models as resources ties directly to the common theme of representation mattering, which was prevalent during our study. The student co-collaborators would often express the value in seeing others who look like them in their dream careers and how this drives their motivation and aspirations to turn their dreams into their lived realities. For example, in a one-on-one conversation with BonQueQue she shared the following, “You know Ms. Jenay, I see you pursuing a Ph.D., this might inspire me to do the same one day” (B. Harris, personal communication, November 16, 2022). Additionally, during the Question-and-Answer session of our action plan with the administrators, the Black woman school counselor shared her personal narrative as a rural Black student with me and the student co-collaborators. Following our conversation with the administrators, the student co-collaborators shared how Mrs. Cartwright’s (*pseudonym*) narrative adds to our theme of representation mattering. The theme and narrative shared by Mrs. Cartwright confirms previous literature regarding representation mattering (Madhavan & Crowell, 2014) in that rural Black students lean heavily on the support of their role models who look like them for support in accessing higher education.

### **7.1.3 The Role of Black Families in Shaping Rural Black Students’ Access to Higher Education**

Black families are essential to everyday life as sources of strength, power, and wisdom. The findings in this study confirm previous literature addressing the role of Black families in shaping rural Black students’ access to higher education (Means et al., 2016; Stephens, 2020). Black families—immediate, extended, and chosen—play a crucial role in this student population’s college-going culture experiences by supporting as well as increasing their access to higher education, largely encompassing rural familism (Crumb et al., 2022). The findings in this study address the significance of Black parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, church members,

and numerous loved ones that contribute to rural Black students' access to higher education. Among the many people in Black families who serve as resources for rural students in accessing higher education, Black mothers play significant roles in supporting their children's college-going journeys. In our study, the support Black mothers give through nurturing their children with love, support, and kindness is vital to rural Black students' success in accessing higher education. From covering their children in prayer and texting words of encouragement throughout the school day to making sure their child gets exactly what they need to be successful in high school and upon graduating, Black mothers are essential to Black families, specifically rural Black students in our study.

#### **7.1.4 Why YPAR Is Necessary to Viewing Rural Black Students as the Change Agents of Their Own Lived Experiences**

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice is a critical methodology that supports youth in shaping the lived experiences that impact their daily lives (Camarota & Fine, 2008). As a practice that was brought to Resourceful County, YPAR transformed the lives of seven rural Black youth by enhancing their critical thinking to support them in shaping their own access to higher education relative to their college-going culture experiences in their broader rural community. Previous literature uses critical methodological approaches such as ethnography to address college-going culture experiences among rural students within the confines of their high schools (Welton & Williams, 2015). This study extends the literature by using YPAR as a critical methodology to address rural Black students' college-going culture experiences, encompassing the high school as a part of the broader rural community. It is significant to include the role of the high school that contributes to shaping rural Black students'

access to higher education, but it is equally important to include the role of families, community members, and resources such as local organizations.

The findings reveal the ways in which rural Black students consider community as pivotal in supporting their college journeys. Student co-collaborators in this study shared that prior to our research, they only considered the role that the high school plays in shaping their access to higher education. In participating in our research project, they came to understand the role that their support systems, comprised of family, peers, coaches, and teachers, also play in influencing their access to higher education. Therefore, our study extends the literature to include rural Black students as knowledge holders and change agents of their own lived experiences to shape their access to higher education considering the role of the broader community. As change agents, the Black students in our study are trailblazers in Resourceful County, as the first group of students to use the practice of YPAR to shape their college-going journeys.

#### **7.1.5 Challenging the Deficit Mindset and Creating a Counterstory Using YPAR**

As a critical methodology, youth participatory action research (YPAR) is central to combatting traditional research in that it engages a community-driven approach centering the lives of those who are directly impacted by the research phenomenon under study (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). In the present study, rural Black youth play a crucial role in shaping their own access to higher education. Previous research addresses this student population through a deficit lens in terms of what they are lacking, which places the onus on the students rather than the systems and structures of domination, namely white supremacy, elitism, classism, and anti-Black racism, that create barriers for the students (Romero, 2020). Using YPAR is essential to challenging the deficit narratives of this student population and instead offering an asset-based

and critical approach. Not only is the narrative shifting to acknowledge that the systems are to blame but the narrative is also being rewritten by the students themselves. The shift in narrative, or counterstory, combats the deficit narrative around this student population (Byun et al., 2012) and challenges the notion that rurality equates to whiteness (Romero, 2020). Therefore, this study extends the literature to encompass the need for YPAR as a practice among rural Black students in considering the context of their broader rural community which encompasses the high school.

## **7.2 Implications**

Based upon the findings, the present study includes implications for practice, policy, and future research. The first implication for practice includes centering the voices of rural Black youth by asking this student population what supports them in accessing higher education given the context of their broader rural community. The second implication for practice involves understanding that rural Black students are the experts of their own lived experiences, and in understanding this, gatekeepers such as the Board of Education staff members and school administrators need to be willing to stand on the front lines and advocate on their behalf to support this student population's access to higher education. The third implication for practice involves rural experts and gatekeepers such as administrators in rural schools working alongside rural Black students to support as well as increase their access to higher education.

Regarding implications for policy, it is imperative that rural Black students be included as knowledge holders and experts of their own lived experiences when decisions are being made regarding their access to higher education, which impacts their daily lives. In addition to this

implication, the second policy implication requires that rural Black students have gatekeepers who look like them, such as policymakers and school administrators, willing to use their voices and advocate on the students' behalf, in understanding that representation matters to increase this student population's access to higher education. Furthermore, having gatekeepers in positions of power who identify with multiple marginalized identities (i.e., rural, Black, low-income backgrounds, etc.), and who are willing to advocate for and with rural Black students, can help shape policy at the local level regarding the students' access to higher education.

As it relates to the implications for future research, the first implication is to continuously push researchers to challenge the deficit narratives about rural Black students in the literature. In doing such, it is vital to urge researchers to engage in non-extractive collaborative research efforts with rural Black students, which centers their needs in accessing higher education. One way to engage in this work as researchers is to employ youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a critical practice or methodology to examine and address rural Black students' access to higher education while considering the role of the broader rural community as it encompasses the high school. For the second implication, I invite researchers to use photovoice, an arts based qualitative research method (Wang & Burris, 1997), to center the voices of rural Black students through this student population's use of photography to implement an action plan that supports their access to higher education. The third implication challenges researchers to use the power of counterstorytelling to combat the dominant narrative that rurality equates to whiteness (Romero, 2020) and push back against the deficit narrative of rural Black students in the literature (Castro, 2021), shifting from the deficit mindset to an asset-based and critical approach regarding how rural Black students access higher education. The fourth implication challenges researchers and rural experts to consider ways to further employ Yosso's (2005)

CCW model and Perna's (2006) college access and choice model to support rural Black students' access to higher education.

### **7.2.1 Implications for Practice**

To ensure that rural Black students are the change agents of their own lived experiences, I offer implications for practice. The implications for practice are important to increase rural Black students' access to higher education and are central to their college-going culture experiences.

#### **7.2.1.1 Placing Rural Black Students' Voices at the Center to Support Their Access to Higher Education as Experts of Their Own Lived Experiences**

In increasing rural Black students' access to higher education, the needs of this student population are crucial to consider. To consider their needs, I challenge kindergarten through twelfth grade educators and administrators across rural school districts to establish junior advisory boards that include Black students, to ensure that their voices are represented where decisions impacting their daily lives are being made regarding their access to higher education. Within the higher education realm, I push gatekeepers including faculty, staff, and administrators, to invite student buy-in from rural Black students by offering tools such as roundtable discussions or community meetings that empower students to make decisions pertaining to their access to higher education, with the students being in the room with those in positions of power to impact change. Offering these practices within kindergarten through twelfth grade education as well as in higher education supports rural Black students in allowing their voices to be heard as experts and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences.

Additionally, such practices challenge those in positions of power to advocate equitably for and with rural Black students to support their access to higher education.

In offering the knowledge above, the first implication for practice, placing the voices of rural Black students at the center of their own lived experiences, gives them the autonomy to be understood as the knowledge holders who directly influence their college-going culture experiences. To ensure that their voices are central to shaping their access to higher education, it is vital to consider the people and resources in their community. The people and resources in their community serve as advocates for them along with rural Black students serving as advocates for themselves to contribute to the change necessary for increasing their access to higher education. Additionally, it is important to remember that as rural Black students navigate their college-going culture experiences within their broader rural community, institutional and systemic barriers impact their access to higher education. In acknowledging such, it is vital to understand that rural Black students should not be blamed for the barriers they face, but instead the systems of oppression such as elitism, classism, and anti-Black racism are to blame (Romero, 2020). Therefore, this student population's success depends on their being their own advocates as well as their having people in their broader rural community to advocate on their behalf to ensure that their access to higher education is driven by equity and inclusivity.

To further solidify the knowledge addressed above, the second implication, rural Black students being the change agents of their own lived experiences, acknowledges that it is crucial to understand that this student population are the experts on these experiences. As experts, they know and understand what it requires to change or increase their access to higher education when presented with the necessary resources to shape their own college-going journeys. As students, they may benefit from support in the case that they are not knowledgeable about what



to ask for to access higher education. While knowledge holders are also experts, this does not equate to rural Black students knowing all the people and resources that can assist them in shaping their access to higher education. Therefore, when students are seen as knowledge holders and experts, learning always occurs. Hence, when rural Black students are presented with the practices and tools to be successful by those in positions of power, namely gatekeepers, this supports this student population by centering their voices and empowering them to know what to ask for and whom to ask in supporting their access to higher education.

### **7.2.1.2 Community Equates to Collaborative Efforts on All Fronts**

To support rural Black students' access to higher education, community must equate to collaborative efforts and a collective mindset. Collaborative efforts and a collective mindset do not have a rule book but should include rural experts and gatekeepers within rural schools and communities coming together to make college more accessible for this student population. Rural experts including researchers and gatekeepers such as school administrators should consider the needs of rural Black students holistically in all their identities. Considering this is essential to understanding that systems of oppression are at play that cause barriers for rural Black students. To navigate such barriers, it is vital that the collective mindset of rural experts and gatekeepers within the schools and communities situated in these contexts are on one accord.

Of utmost importance is that the rural Black students' voices are central to meeting the needs of the students. To meet the needs of rural Black students, I challenge rural experts and gatekeepers within rural schools and communities to acknowledge the identities of this student population, understanding that their identities extend beyond race to include identities such as social class, first-generation status, gender, and many more identities that are historically marginalized. Understanding this supports rural experts and gatekeepers in meeting the needs of

this student population in accessing higher education. Additionally, it is important to understand that collaborative efforts within one rural school district and community does not equate to a one-size-fits all approach for all rural communities but instead diversity exists across these contexts (Romero, 2020). Hence, the needs of rural Black students in one school district does not mirror the needs of rural Black students across all school districts, as it relates to supporting them in accessing higher education.

### **7.2.1.3 Creating College-Going Culture Among Rural Black Students**

College-going culture often establishes itself within school districts as is the case for the Resourceful County School District, specifically Montpelier High School. The concept of college-going culture has been defined in numerous ways. Based on the findings in the present study, I have redefined college-going culture for the rural Black students in our study. To redefine college-going culture, it is important to acknowledge that in some ways it is due to me being able to create college-going culture in addition to the already existing college-going culture within the high school. For example, I was able to create college-going culture for the research team through pushing the student co-collaborators to consider the significance of their broader rural community in supporting them to access higher education. Each of the student co-collaborators often shared how they would only think of the high school as a source of support that impacts their access to higher education, but because of our work as a research team their scopes have broadened to include the high school, families, community members, programming, local organizations, and a plethora of resources that contribute to the rural Black students' college-going culture within our study. As an implication for practice, I challenge the administrators, staff, and students of rural school districts to be open to implementing new ways of college-going culture as they arise in understanding that college-going culture does not have

to be a monolithic approach. In understanding that college-going culture is not monolithic it is vital to understand that those who establish college-going culture within rural school districts can hold shared power while combatting a hierarchical structure. Approaching college-going culture in this way allows the voices of students to be heard in changing a culture that impacts their daily lives. Hence, I challenge administrators and staff to embrace college-going culture as an ever-changing concept that is to be understood as flexible in nature rather than fixed, which should center and include the voices of those most impacted, the students.

### **7.2.2 Implications for Policy**

For change to occur at the local level, it is crucial to understand that rural Black students are their own best advocates in terms of their knowing their needs, which supports their access to higher education. Moreover, rural Black students are more likely to develop into their own best advocates when they have people who look like them in positions of power willing to advocate on their behalf. To address this, I present the implications for policy.

#### **7.2.2.1 Rural Black Students Are Their Own Best Advocates**

To understand that rural Black students must exist as their own best advocates, policymakers at the local level, including school and county-wide policymakers, need to invite this student population into the rooms where decisions are being made. Rural Black students are the experts and knowledge holders of their own lived experiences, which means that they understand and can assess their needs better than any policymaker. Inviting rural Black students into the room is the first step to including their voices in the change. The next step is inviting rural Black students' voices to be heard at the table where decisions regarding their access to

higher education are being made. Following the previous step, it is important to ensure that rural Black students' voices are implemented in the change that is necessary to increase their access to higher education. To achieve each of these steps, I challenge local policymakers within and across rural school districts to invite rural Black students as representatives to attend meetings and offer their insights where topics regarding this student population's access to higher education are being addressed. Therefore, in rural Black students serving as their own best advocates, it takes a collaborative effort between policymakers and this student population for rural Black students to shape their college journeys in their broader rural community.

#### **7.2.2.2 Why Representation Matters During Decision Making**

Representation far exceeds someone looking like you. When considering the decisions that are made regarding rural Black students and their access to higher education, it is vital to have someone who looks like us but even further, it is crucial to have someone who is willing to advocate on our behalf, both when we are absent and when we are present. For example, as it concerns decision making around school policy, rural Black students should have an advocate in a position of power on the Board of Education who calls attention to their needs in shaping their access to higher education. In the case that rural Black students are not present, the advocate whose representation matters should be willing to invite the students as well as invite their parents or guardians into the room. In this manner, the voices of rural Black students and their parents or guardians are being centered in the decision making that affects their future. For change to occur, it is vital that rural Black students have advocates in positions of power who look like them and are willing to advocate on their behalf. Additionally, having individuals in power who look like them supports rural Black students in serving as their own best advocates.

### **7.2.3 Implications for Future Research**

For future research, youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice can support rural Black students' success by recognizing them as knowledge holders and change agents of their own lived experiences. YPAR takes a community-driven approach to increase rural Black students' access to higher education. In offering knowledge for researchers, I address the implications for future studies as follows.

#### **7.2.3.1 Challenging the Deficit Narratives of Rural Black Students in the Literature: The Practice of Using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a Critical Methodology**

The deficit narratives of rural Black students need to be combatted in the literature (Castro, 2021). I challenge researchers to shift their approach which addresses rural Black students from a deficit lens to an asset-based and critical approach. For such a shift to occur, it is vital that collaborative efforts be made between researchers and gatekeepers within rural communities in centering the needs of rural Black students. Further, it is crucial that researchers and gatekeepers make a strong commitment to challenge systems of oppression that cause barriers for this student population in accessing higher education. Systems of oppression that need be challenged include elitism, classism, anti-Black racism, among many more. In challenging these systems, it is important to understand that the blame be placed on the systems that rural Black students must navigate rather than placing the onus on this student population (Romero, 2020). Taken together, challenging the deficit narratives of rural Black students in

accessing higher education offers the opportunity to engage in community-driven research such as employing the practice of youth participatory action research (YPAR).

Youth participatory action research exists as a promising practice to support rural students' access to higher education (Means et al., 2020). In addition to being a promising practice, YPAR is a critical methodology that is used to allow youth to serve as change agents of their own lived experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). To combine the ideas of YPAR existing as a promising practice (Means et al., 2020) and a critical methodology (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), it is vital to understand that YPAR is also a collective approach to research that combats traditional research through a shared power approach in understanding the youth as knowledge holders along with the adult researchers (Call-Cummings et al., 2020). Therefore, I challenge researchers to use YPAR to center the needs of rural students, specifically rural Black students in shaping their access to higher education. Centering rural Black students as the focal point of their own lived experiences allows them to advocate for themselves and have their voices included within the literature in the way that they wish for their stories to be told. Additionally, YPAR as a practice allows rural Black students to change their own narratives, shifting from the deficit mindset often included in the literature (Byun et al., 2012) and away from the dominant narrative that rurality equates to whiteness (Romero, 2020). The narrative shift or counterstory allows rural Black students to place blame on the systems and structures of domination at play rather than allowing the deficit mindset to continue. This places power in the hands of rural Black students, which is why researchers should use YPAR as a promising practice and critical methodology to examine and address the college-going culture experiences of this student population given the context of their broader rural community.

### **7.2.3.2 Using Photovoice to Enact Change Through Action Plans Implemented by Rural Black Students**

Rural Black students are understood as the change agents of their own lived experiences. In their being understood as such, employing photovoice as a research method allows this student population to capture their daily experiences through photography, which impacts their access to higher education. Additionally, photovoice contributes to supporting rural Black students in implementing an action plan to potentially increase their access to higher education. Photography often captures what words may not. Within our research team meetings, the student co-collaborators would often share how capturing pictures as a form of research was supportive in telling their narratives. For example, Kevin shared, “You know, Ms. Jenay. I have done research before, but it’s only been about facts using words. Well, our research is about facts too, but we get to include photography which makes it fun and more exciting than past research experiences” (K. Smith, personal communication, October 25, 2022). Therefore, I challenge researchers to engage in photovoice as a tool for rural Black students to capture photos of their experiences impacting their daily lives in accessing higher education which can be turned into actionable knowledge.

### **7.2.3.3 Engaging the Art of Counterstorytelling**

Counterstorytelling is often used to combat dominant narratives as well as deficit narratives within research. The art of counterstorytelling creates room for the narratives of those whose stories are not often told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, rural Black students’

narratives are often overshadowed by the dominant narrative of rurality equating to whiteness (Byun et al., 2012; Byun et al., 2015). Further, the narratives of this student population that exists in the literature is historically addressed through a deficit lens (Castro, 2021). More recently, researchers have included the narratives of rural Black students in the literature from an asset-based and critical approach (Means et al., 2016; Crumb & Chambers, 2021). Not only are their narratives being included but rural Black students are also invited into the conversations about their own lived experiences (Means et. al, 2016). This allows for their narratives to be told in the manner in which rural Black students wish for their voices to be heard and acknowledged in the literature. Within the present study, in many of the conversations I shared with the student co-collaborators, they would mention how having spaces for just them as rural Black students to share their perspectives was minimal. Additionally, the student co-collaborators would mention how their narratives are often told from the lens of people such as administrators who are in positions of power, but the student co-collaborators would rather their stories be told through their own lens because there is no one better to tell the story than the source themselves. To further solidify the previous mentioned, administrators within the high school, namely the principals, would often speak with me about my students from a deficit lens and through the white gaze. Therefore, I challenge researchers to continuously challenge the dominant and deficit narratives of rural Black students in the literature by inviting this student population into the conversations to share their narratives. Inviting rural Black students to be the tellers of their own narratives is crucial in supporting them as they combat the deficit narratives in the literature and in being tellers of stories that reflect joy. Offering stories about rural Black students from rural Black students in the literature that reflects their joy allows such narratives to stand on their own and not in opposition to systems of oppression.



#### **7.2.3.4 Theoretical Frameworks Framed Through Various Theoretical Considerations**

Within the present study, Yosso's (2005) CCW model supported a racial analysis while Perna's (2006) college access and choice model supported a spatial analysis in examining and addressing the role of the broader community in impacting rural Black students' access to higher education. As an implication for future research, I challenge researchers and rural experts to consider how Yosso's (2005) CCW model can continuously expand to include various forms of capital that are not considered in the original model. Continuously expanding the model reveals additional forms of capital that serve as assets for Students of Color and Communities of Color in accessing higher education, rural Black students' specifically as it relates to expanding and revealing more knowledge in addition to the findings revealed in the present study. For example, in Acevedo and Solórzano's (2021) proposed CCW model, spiritual capital is an addition to Yosso's (2005) model, which is a form of capital that refers to one's spiritual beliefs or connections that are much bigger than oneself. In our study, the student co-collaborators and me as the adult co-collaborator formed a genuine rapport due to spiritual capital playing a significant role. Student co-collaborators often expressed their beliefs in God through our shared conversations and I would often agree with their expressions, which was one of many ways that allowed us to connect organically. Therefore, I challenge researchers and rural experts to continuously expand Yosso's (2005) CCW model to include various forms of capital that offer support in rural Black students accessing and matriculating within higher education. As it relates to Perna's (2006) college access and choice model, I encourage researchers and rural experts to consider the model in its entirety and how each of the layers, when considered, impact access to higher education among rural Black students. For future research, in employing both models together, I challenge researchers and rural experts to explore more personal and social identities,

specifically those that are in many ways viewed as salient (i.e., first-generation status, social class, sexuality) that exceed rural and Black. Employing the models in this way could reveal how such identities impact rural Black students' access to higher education while understanding that systems of oppression and structures of domination are deeply rooted in society. Therefore, this approach reveals the need to incorporate rural Black students' voices in the literature from an asset-based and critical approach.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

Rural Black students should be the change agents of their own lived experiences. Using youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a practice in tandem with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model and Perna's (2006) college access and choice model in this study was essential to understanding rural Black students' college-going culture experiences in their broader rural community. Yosso's (2005) CCW model revealed the various forms of capital rural Black students lean on to navigate their college-going culture experiences in shaping their access to higher education, while Perna's (2006) college access and choice model revealed the importance of the high school and community context. Combined, the models draw upon a racial analysis and a spatial analysis to increase rural Black students' access to higher education.

Researchers should employ YPAR as a critical methodology to examine and address the needs of rural Black students in supporting them as experts of their own lived experiences to access higher education. While high schools exist within students' communities, they are only a single factor that contribute to this student population's access to higher education in pursuit of their college journeys. In addition to high schools, the role of families, community members, and

resources such as local organizations are equally important to support and shape rural Black students' access to higher education. Therefore, YPAR is necessary to center rural Black students' voices with them being the experts of their own lived experiences, hence having power to change their narratives within literature from a deficit focus to an asset-based and critical approach.

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