“Does That Make Me the Police?”: Studying Toward Abolitionist Teacher Praxis

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Everything that is worthwhile is done with other people.

—Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*

Abstract

In their scholarship on the connections between schools and prisons, education researchers have recently taken up the theoretical frameworks of abolition and abolitionist teaching, but have yet to conduct studies with abolitionist teachers. Drawing inspiration from praxis-oriented, critical ethnographic, and participatory research, as well as the long tradition of study groups in grassroots revolutionary struggles, this qualitative research takes up *abolitionist teacher praxis*, utilizing a study group with K-12 teachers to explore how they engage with abolitionist theory and how abolitionist theory informs their thinking and practice.

The question driving this research is, *how do abolitionist teachers think about abolition as it relates to their work as teachers?* I recruited three teachers who were self-described abolitionists working in K-12 public schools in the Twin Cities area to participate in a study group focused on police and prison abolition. During eight group study sessions and two interviews with each participant, we discussed shared readings and talked about how abolitionist ideas informed our thinking about schools and our practice as teachers.

I find that participants wanted to create a culture of community in their schools and classrooms, but felt unsure of how they could teach without replicating policing. To make sense of this dilemma, I take up abolitionist theorizing on policing. An understanding of policing as a form of power aimed at *the fabrication of capitalist social order* helps explain why policing and community are antithetical and why schools are contradictory spaces. I argue that when teachers work to build a communal social order, they are not doing the work of policing. I also find that participants felt a tension between

teacher authority and classroom community. I argue that when teachers draw on competent rather than coercive authority, and when they emphasize relationships over rules, they help build, rather than contradict, classroom community.

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Introduction

In mid-May 2020, as Covid-19 raged through Minnesota's prisons, a handful of fellow community organizers and I met over Zoom to plan the next installment in what had unfortunately become a necessary series of protests across the Twin Cities area. Minnesota's Department of Corrections had stubbornly refused to release large numbers of incarcerated people despite the grave danger they faced during the pandemic. We had previously staged "honk-in" protests outside of nearby state prisons, but this time my comrades from Twin Cities Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee and I decided to bring the pressure directly to Governor Tim Walz. We had no idea that, by the time the protest took place in early June, the Twin Cities would be the epicenter of a national uprising for racial justice and against policing. Instead of our usual turnout of a few dozen people, over 1,000 showed up to march at the Governor's Mansion in support of our demands, which included divesting from police and prisons and investing in communities (Thiede, 2020).

This protest, like all of our organizing work, was informed by an abolitionist framework and part of a broader abolitionist movement. *Abolition* is a political vision with the goal of creating a world free from oppression and exploitation (Kelley, 2020). Abolitionist movements prioritize the elimination of imprisonment, policing, and surveillance as an essential and strategic catalyst for bringing about this broader social transformation (Critical Resistance, n.d.; Rodríguez, 2010). Drawing on the legacies of 17th, 18th, and 19th-century slavery abolitionists, police and prison abolitionists point to the histories of these institutions to demonstrate that they exist primarily to reproduce racial capitalism and maintain hierarchies along lines of race, class, gender, ability, and

nationality (Davis, 2003; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Kelley, 2020). Abolitionists believe that implementing reforms, such as community policing or implicit bias training, will not change these underlying purposes, and therefore seek to shrink the size and scope of policing and imprisonment. At the same time, abolition is a world-building project focused on creating institutions and practices that support collective life. In June 2020, after a year and a half of organizing for prison abolition and studying and writing about the intersections of abolition and education, I was amazed to see this framework suddenly spread from radical movement spaces and the margins of academia to the demands of large-scale protests and into mainstream media (e.g., Kaba, 2020).

Abolition was also gaining traction as a framework within the field of education. Building on the analyses produced by grassroots organizers (Warren, 2021), education researchers have long noted connections between school systems and systems of policing and imprisonment, most commonly describing these connections as a *school-to-prison pipeline* (e.g., Wald & Losen, 2003). Researchers working within the pipeline framework often document overly punitive school policies and practices that disproportionately target students of color and students with disabilities, and they note that students who are punished in school are more likely to eventually experience incarceration as youth or as adults. More recently, the abolitionist framework has widened the lens, taking into consideration the ways in which schools themselves can be carceral spaces and can reproduce race and class hierarchies (Meiners, 2007; Sojoyner, 2016), but also how teachers might play a role in a larger movement against policing, imprisonment, and all forms of oppression. Abolitionist scholars have called on educators to shift from punitive to restorative discipline practices, to create spaces of joy and healing for students of

color, and to cultivate students' critical consciousness by teaching about histories of resistance to oppressive systems (Love, 2019; Rodríguez, 2010; Shalaby, 2017). This dissertation aims to expand the nascent literature on abolition and education by exploring *abolitionist teacher praxis*—how teachers engage abolitionist theory and how abolitionist theory informs their thinking and practice.

How I Came to This Work

I was neither born nor raised an abolitionist. My journey toward abolitionist thought began while I was a high school math teacher in Boston, from 2012 to 2017. As my time in the classroom wore on, I became increasingly aware that structural racism and poverty were impacting my students' lives in and out of school in ways that could not be overcome by mathematics pedagogy, no matter how hard I worked on my curriculum and lesson plans. My years as a teacher were also marked by the blossoming of the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement pushed me to deepen my critical consciousness of racism, policing, and incarceration, and to begin to engage in community organizing. I ultimately decided to leave the high school classroom and pursue graduate study to try to sharpen my understandings of power, capitalism, White supremacy, and theories of change.

In August 2018, days before I moved to Minneapolis to begin a Ph.D. in education, incarcerated organizers across the United States declared a nationwide prison strike (Goodman, 2018). I had recently begun to read about abolition, and hearing stories from incarcerated people about the mundanely cruel and torturous conditions of their day-to-day lives had convinced me that no reforms could possibly make prisons humane. Wanting to find a new organizing home in a new city, I sought out the Twin Cities chapter

of Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, an abolitionist organization supporting the prison strike. I thus started graduate school and abolitionist organizing simultaneously, and the two experiences became inextricably intertwined. As I dove deeper into abolitionist thought from the perspective of both organizer and academic, the framework of abolition began to radically shape my analysis of the world around me, and of education in particular. My graduate studies became focused on developing my own abolitionist analysis of schooling and teaching.

Much of my analysis drew on my own experiences as a teacher, but I was beginning to think about schools very differently than I had when I worked in one. The further I got from the high school classroom, the more I wanted to learn from K-12 teachers how they thought about abolition, given that they had to try their best to put these ideas into practice within classroom contexts riddled with contradictions. How would abolitionist teachers live out their politics given the tensions and limitations they had to navigate? The topic of abolitionist teacher praxis thus became the focus of this dissertation.

The Study

The question driving this research is, *how do abolitionist teachers think about abolition as it relates to their work as teachers?* To pursue this question, I recruited three teachers who were self-described abolitionists working in K-12 public schools in the Twin Cities area to participate in a study group focused on police and prison abolition. Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I read *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* by Mariame Kaba, and we met as a group for seven 90-minute study sessions between June and August 2022. During these study sessions, we discussed

what we had read and talked about how abolitionist ideas informed our thinking about schools and our practice as teachers. I also interviewed each participant in May 2022, before the study group began, and again in September or October 2022, after its conclusion. Finally, we met for one follow-up study session in February 2023, for which participants read a draft of Chapter 4 of this dissertation, which I then substantially revised based on our discussion.

Through reading and dialoguing, we sharpened our analyses of the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and our understandings of abolition, and we thought critically together about how to teach in alignment with our analyses and values. Our discussions revealed that abolitionist teaching is no straightforward task: the day-to-day realities of teaching mean that we must navigate complex questions that have no easy answers. In particular, as Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I developed critiques of policing, we struggled to sort out which aspects of our work as teachers were replicating policing. As Hope asked during our closing interview, "If I'm the one who gets to decide what is okay to do or not do, or say or not say, does that make me the police?" Chapters 3 and 4 approach this question in two different ways.

In Chapter 3: Polic*ing*, Community, and the Fabrication of Social Order, I explore participants' understandings of the institution of *the police* and the phenomenon of polic*ing*, especially in schools. I find that participants understood polic*ing* primarily through the language of *control*, especially when that control is enacted through the imposition of rules, which are enforced through surveillance, punishment, or coercion. I take up participants' desire to create a *culture of community* in their schools and classrooms, which they saw as part of the work of creating the conditions needed for a

world without police and prisons to be possible. They saw policing as antithetical to community, and schools as contradictory spaces where policing and community existed simultaneously. To make sense of this contradiction, I dive deeper into the concept of policing, with help from abolitionist scholarship. An understanding of policing as a form of power aimed at *the fabrication of capitalist social order* helps us to comprehend why policing and community are antithetical, to understand why schools are contradictory spaces, and to refine our understanding of policing in schools as "control."

In Chapter 4: "It's Very Closely Tied in With the Police State": Navigating Teacher Authority, I zero in on the tension participants felt between teacher authority and classroom community. While the difficulty of navigating their use of authority sometimes led participants to feel "stuck," our discussions led to ideas that distinguish some forms of authority from policing, thereby pointing toward possible ways to move forward within the messy and ambiguous terrain of teaching. Our discussions also brought to the surface potential challenges for the implementation of an abolitionist approach to restorative justice within schools.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide readers with the background that contextualizes these findings. Chapter 2 details the methods I used to collect and analyze data for this study and explains the decisions that informed those methods. Chapter 1 reviews four loosely-defined areas of scholarship that my analysis draws on most heavily: research on the PIC and abolition; Marxist scholarship on schools, the state, and reproduction; research on the school–prison nexus; and scholarship on abolitionist teaching. Previous scholarship on abolitionist teaching has often lacked deep engagement with theoretical work on the PIC, the state, and racial capitalism. The result is, at times, a lack of grounding in abolitionist

frameworks or revolutionary politics, an inattention to the structural limitations on radical teaching, and a narrowing of the abolitionist project to teaching for "social justice." A major intervention of this dissertation is to ground scholarship on abolitionist teaching more firmly in abolitionist thinking.

Why "Praxis"?

This insistence on the inseparability of theory and practice motivates my emphasis on abolitionist teacher *praxis*. Paulo Freire (1996) defines praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 33). For Freire (1996), reflection and action are "in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (p. 68). In other words, practice must be informed by theory, and theory must be informed by practice.

For this study, I intentionally selected a text that was focused on police and prison abolition, rather than one focused on abolitionist teaching, because a major aim of the study was to begin with a firm grounding in PIC abolition as a framework, and then elicit teachers' own ideas about how abolition informed their thinking about schooling and their practice as teachers. Though I did not observe teachers in their classrooms, our study sessions gave each of us opportunities to tell stories about our past attempts to transform theory into action, and to plan together how we would do so in the future. During our closing interviews and our follow-up study session, which took place during a new school year, Eva, Hope, and Nikki shared about the challenges of putting their ideals into practice. Because we were reflecting on and planning concrete action within specific contexts, the ways we took up theory were deeply informed by practice. We were thus able to speak back to the theory we were reading, in turn creating new theory.

While more and more scholars are articulating abolitionist theories of education, and abolitionist teachers are beginning to document their experiences, no researcher has yet conducted a study with abolitionist teachers. We have not sought to learn from teachers how they develop their abolitionist analyses, or how such analyses inform their practice. This study is unique in that it is situated at this intersection of theory and practice, engaging teachers *as* they wrestle with theory and reshape theory in light of their practice.

Studying Toward Abolitionist Praxis

"Abolitionist" is not a static identity or a final destination at which to arrive; it is a praxis, a way of living and being toward which we must constantly strive (Davis et al., 2022; Rodríguez, 2019). At the beginning of this study, Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I considered ourselves to be abolitionists because we wanted to live in a world without police or prisons, not because we had fully-formed ideas about how to bring that vision into reality. This was the point of engaging in collective study: to develop our thinking and work toward an abolitionist praxis.

I say that we studied *toward* abolitionist praxis because I recognize that such a praxis will never be finally and completely achieved, not because I believe there is a linear or straightforward path to such a praxis. Because abolition is a vision of radical transformation beyond the limits of what the dominant culture deems possible, reasonable, or even imaginable, an abolitionist framework eschews such notions of certainty. Liat Ben-Moshe (2018) describes abolition as a "dis-epistemology, [a] letting go of attachment to certain ways of knowing" (p. 347). She writes that abolitionist thinking requires "letting go of the idea that anyone can have a definitive pathway for

how to rid ourselves of carceral logics" because "it is this attachment to the idea of knowing and *needing to know* that is part of knowledge and affective economies that maintain carceral logics" (Ben-Moshe, 2018, p. 347, emphasis in original). For me, study is not about getting to the "right answers;" it is a process of learning and unlearning in community. In response to what they call "colonial unknowing," Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016) suggest instead "a process of questioning, contemplation, play, and study, specifically, indigenous study" (Thinking With section). Noting "strong resonances with queer studies and disability studies," (Vimalassery et al., 2016, n. 61), they describe indigenous study "as a practice of *thinking with*, not as a process of overcoming or mastery (especially in an academic field sense), but instead as a process in perpetuity, a process of becoming that is also an unbecoming" (Thinking With section, emphasis in original). Drawing inspiration from this concept, I hoped that we would *think with* abolitionist ideas (rather than try to master them) as part of our journey toward *becoming* (rather than *being*) abolitionist teachers.

Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I came together to study in the summer of 2022 because we had to. Like my former students in Boston, our students in the Twin Cities continue to struggle under the weight of structural racism and poverty. Our students, our neighbors, our incarcerated relatives—like us, and like everyone, everywhere—deserve a much better world than the one we currently live in, shaped as it is by violence and unfreedom. We had to come together to figure out how we, as teachers, could make some small contributions to building a new world. We had to come together because, as Mariame Kaba (2021) insists, "Everything that is worthwhile is done with other people" (p. 178).

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This dissertation draws on scholarship in four loosely-defined areas: research on the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and abolition; Marxist scholarship on schools, the state, and reproduction; research on the school–prison nexus; and scholarship on abolitionist teaching. In this chapter, I summarize the concepts in each of these areas that are most relevant to my work. By weaving these threads of scholarship together, my aim is to address the gaps in each, and to create a rich theoretical grounding for abolitionist teacher praxis.

The Prison-Industrial Complex and Abolition

According to Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), the PIC is an "elaborate set of relationships, institutions, buildings, laws, urban and rural places, personnel, equipment, finances, dependencies, technocrats, opportunists, and intellectuals in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors" (p. 272). Gilmore argues against a narrow use of the term, stating that "The heuristic purpose of the term 'prison-industrial complex' was to provoke as wide as possible a range of understandings of the socio-spatial relationships out of which mass incarceration is made" (p. 479). Following many abolitionist scholars, I will use the term "PIC" throughout this dissertation primarily to refer to police and prisons, but with a recognition that these institutions are bound up in a complex web of relations with countless other institutions, people, and places.

Many scholars of the PIC have looked to the histories and political economies of police and prisons in the United States to try to understand how the country came to have the largest carceral system in the world. Detailing the histories of these institutions is not possible within the space limitations of this literature review, but a synthesis of this

scholarship illuminates that a central function of policing and imprisonment has always been the maintenance of racial capitalism (a concept discussed further below). Police and prisons perform this function in a number of ways: by protecting property relations and managing the effects of inequality (bean, 2020a, 2020b; G. L. Jackson, 1990; Neocleous, 2021; Vitale, 2017), by reinforcing racial hierarchy and making labor more exploitable through processes of criminalization (M. Alexander, 2012; Gilmore, 2022; Maher, 2021; Muhammad, 2010; Wang, 2018), by forcing people to work (Neocleous, 2021; Wacquant, 2010; Whitehouse, 2014), by shoring up state legitimacy in the face of crisis (Gilmore, 2007; Hall et al., 1978), and by repressing any attempt on the part of Black and/or working people to resist oppression and exploitation (Abu-Jamal & Fernández, 2014; Berger, 2013; Harring, 1993; Rodríguez, 2006; Williams, 2015).

Movements to abolish the PIC have existed for decades, and these movements have taken many shapes. Joy James (2022) argues that "abolitionism does not exist in singular form" (p. 199), and that it should instead be spoken of in plurality. Abolitionists come from a variety of sometimes conflicting political traditions, including anarchism, socialism, and the many factions within these traditions. Some abolitionists are community organizers, nonprofit leaders, political prisoners, or academics, while others occupy multiple or none of these categories. The knowledges produced within these various social locations can and do differ. There is no one correct idea of what "abolition" is. Even naming which movements are or were "abolitionist" is a challenge; some movements and organizations do not name themselves as such, but nevertheless can be thought of as abolitionist because they critique and seek to abolish conditions of captivity and exploitation. Others may coopt the term when in reality the solutions they seek are

reformist. There is danger in attempting to impose a hegemonic definition of abolition to the exclusion of other ideas. On the other hand, without a definition or some boundaries to what "counts" as abolitionist, the concept loses meaning and is easily coopted. James (2022) chooses to use adjectives to differentiate among various abolitionisms, such as "academic abolitionism" and "celebrity abolitionism," and suggests that what we ought to do is "decide which forms are worthy of our attention" (p. 200).

Just as abolitionist activists subscribe to many political ideologies, abolitionist academics work in every discipline in the social sciences and humanities. They utilize a wide variety of theoretical frameworks, including queer theory, disability justice, Afropessimism, critical Indigenous theory, and more. I draw most heavily on scholarship produced by academics and organizers who draw on Black feminist, Black radical, and Marxist thought. Much of this contemporary abolitionist thought builds on the analyses produced by radical intellectuals imprisoned during the carceral crackdown of the 1960s and 1970s (Rodríguez, 2006).

Rather than attempting to impose a singular definition of abolition, I use this section to state how I conceive of abolition and to explain key concepts as I understand them, even while I acknowledge that my own understandings are partial and in process. For me, abolition is both expansive in its aims and specific in terms of strategy. The abolitionist movement is ultimately "dedicated to eradicating all forms of oppression and exploitation" (Kelley, 2020, p. 15), but "fundamentally and strategically *prioritizes* the prison[-industrial complex] as a central site for catalyzing broader, radical social transformations" (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 15, emphasis in original). On the one hand, abolition is about creating institutions and practices that support collective life and make

police and prisons obsolete (Davis, 2003). This concept of "abolition democracy" (Davis, 2005; Du Bois, 1998) is, to my mind, akin to socialism. On the other hand, abolition is about eradicating the institutions and material conditions that produce "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (Gilmore, 2007, p. 28). In particular, this means the destruction of racial capitalism (Johnson & Lubin, 2017), with a strategic (though not exclusive) focus on one of its core pillars: the PIC. Abolition is therefore a revolutionary politic: both an "agenda for action" and "a revolutionary framework that transforms the way we analyze and understand forces that shape our histories and everyday lives" (Ben-Moshe, 2020, pp. 111, 110). The aim of this study is to explore how this framework informs teachers' thinking and practice.

In my view, the contemporary abolitionist movement is not a singular thing, but rather an "ecosystem," a complex "landscape populated with intertwined networks, campaigns, mobilizations, and organizations" (Davis et al., 2022, p. xiii). This ecosystem is made up of many intersecting (and at times diverging) streams, including contemporary and historical struggles against colonialism and imperialism, feminist struggles against interpersonal and state violence, anticapitalist struggles, and more. Given the historical roots of the term *abolition*, my thinking on abolition draws in particular from a long lineage of Black freedom struggles stretching from the first moment European enslavers imposed captivity upon Africans to the present (Rodríguez, 2019). And while these struggles are international, my analysis focuses primarily on the United States, which is not only my home but also the center of global capitalist imperial domination and home to the world's largest carceral system.

For these reasons, theories of *racial capitalism* are particularly important to

abolitionist scholarship, including my own. And, because "Each element in the PIC is either an aspect of the state (a rule or a government agent or agency) or derives its power (or powerlessness) in relation to the state and its capacities" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 273), theorizations of *the state* are also important to abolitionist thought. While abolitionist scholars do not always agree on how these two key concepts should be defined, I share my own understandings below.

Racial Capitalism

Capitalism is, at its core, a set of relationships (Gilmore, 2007; Marx, 1977) that depend on exploitation—namely, the extraction of surplus labor from workers who do not own the means of subsistence and therefore must sell their labor power in order to survive (Thier, 2020). In order for these relationships to continue to exist, they must be continually reproduced (Althusser, 1971). Many abolitionist thinkers understand these relationships through the framework of *racial capitalism*.

Though the term "racial capitalism" has multiple lineages, its academic use can be traced to the 1983 publication of Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Robinson, 2000). Through detailed historical analysis, Robinson illustrates that racial logics were deeply woven into the "cultural tapestry" (Camp & Heatherton, 2017, p. 96) of European society long before the advent of capitalism, "among people, all of whose descendants may well have become white" (Gilmore, 2019, p. xii). Racist ideologies played a major role in the birth and expansion of capitalism because a hierarchical class system requires the creation of differentially-valued human groups (Melamed, 2011). As Gilmore has argued, "racial capitalism is all of capitalism. There is not one minute in the history of capitalism—not one minute—that was not

racial" (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2018, 24:33). Jodi Melamed's (2015) explication of this concept is worth quoting at length:

> The term "racial capitalism" requires its users to recognize that capitalism *is* racial capitalism. Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. Most obviously, it does this by displacing the uneven life chances that are inescapably part of capitalist social relations onto fictions of differing human capacities, historically race. (p. 77, emphasis in original)

The reproduction of these social relations therefore means the reproduction of a racial class system and the ideologies that rationalize that system.

Within this framework, racial categories are neither fixed nor naturally given. Racialization is a *process* of *ascribing* value to human groups in order to justify unequal relations of power (Chen, 2013; Melamed, 2011). In other words, the fiction of race rationalizes and naturalizes the exploitation, dispossession, and/or disposal of certain groups of people—what Gilmore (2007) calls the "production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (p. 28)—who historically have become marked as Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021). To quote Melamed (2011) again,

> *Racialization converts the effects of differential value-making processes into categories of difference that make it possible to order, analyze, describe, and evaluate what emerges out of force relations as the permissible content of other domains of U.S. modernity (e.g., law, politics, and economy).* (p. 11, emphasis in original)

Criminalization is thus a key domain of race-making (Browne, 2015; Muhammad, 2010), one important for the reproduction of states since the relations of the state and capital work *through* race (Gilmore, 2022; Hall, 2021; Seigel, 2018). As these relations of the state and capital shift over time, so too do conceptions of race (Hall, 2021; Melamed, 2011). As Robinson states, "racial regimes are not actualities but inventions; they constantly fray and fall apart, so they have to be repaired" (in Camp & Heatherton, 2017, p. 100). Race and racial capitalism are malleable structures (Jenkins & Leroy, 2021), shaped in large part by the state (Gilmore, 2022).

In addition to a racialized class of exploitable workers, capitalism requires access to land and natural resources, and this need has historically led to the violent removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands (Coulthard, 2014). Even before the development of capitalism, "racialization within Europe was very much a *colonial* process—one involving invasion, settlement, expropriation, and racial hierarchy" (Kelley, 2017, p. 272, emphasis in original). With the growth of capitalism and capital's ever-expanding need for land and resources, European colonialism spread across the globe. In the contemporary period, the global capitalist economy continues to operate through dispossession and "imperialist accumulation," which Charisse Burden-Stelly (2020) describes as "the rapacious conscription of resources and labor for the purpose of

superprofits through violent means that are generally reserved for populations deemed racially inferior" (para. 18, emphasis in original), particularly those living in the Global South. Colonialism and imperialism are constitutive elements of racial capitalism, and the reproduction of what Glen Coulthard (2014) has referred to as the *colonial relation*—namely, ongoing dispossession—is essential to the reproduction of racial capitalism.

The State

How precisely to define "the state," or whether the state is even a "thing," is hotly debated within Marxist scholarship, and there is certainly no agreement among abolitionists (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022). My understanding of the state draws primarily on the work of Marxist abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who defines a state as

> a territorially bounded set of relatively specialized institutions that develop and change over time in the gaps and fissures of social conflict, compromise, and cooperation. … Through the exercise of centralized rulemaking and redistribution, a state's purpose (at whatever scale—municipal, county, national, and so on) is to secure a society's ability to do different kinds of things: such as tax, educate, support, connect, exclude, criminalize, segregate, equalize, make war, and make profits. (Gilmore, 2022, pp. 262–263)

States maintain their legitimacy and their ability to fulfill these capacities through a combination of coercion and consent. One key way that states resolve crises and shore up legitimacy is through "the relentless identification, coercive control, and violent elimination of foreign and domestic enemies" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 209; see also Hall et al., 1978). This racializing process is accomplished domestically in large part through criminalization, policing, and incarceration.

Capitalist economies require states (Gilmore, 2022; Seigel, 2018), because "capital cannot by its own efforts provide or secure the conditions of its existence or reproduction" (Dale, 1982, p. 132), and in turn state actors must protect and serve the economy if they are to maintain political power and legitimacy. This relationship between capital and the state is not completely deterministic, however. "If states are the residue of struggle," as Gilmore asserts, "then the institutions comprising states are the same substance: partly realized and partly failed attempts to make general certain modes of social being whose underlying contradictions never fully disappear" (Gilmore, 2022, pp. 265–266). In other words, the state is not a monolith. It is ground for political contestation, both a tool of class struggle and its result. It is "a contradictory set of institutions able to act with some autonomy and some impunity" (Gilmore, 2022, p. 265). "The state, then," Gilmore argues, "is not only site and weapon, it is both adversary and, in a few corners at least, ally" (p. 275).

Significance for Abolitionist Teacher Praxis

A primary assumption and assertion of this dissertation is that abolitionist teacher praxis must be grounded in abolitionist theory. If the goal of abolition is to eradicate the PIC and racial capitalism, then abolitionist educators must understand these systems. In particular, we must understand the state and its relationship to racial capitalism, since public schools are state-run institutions. Abolitionist thinkers provide some of the greatest clarity on these topics. Because of their close focus on the PIC, however, they typically do not focus on the role of schools, despite a recognition that schools play an important role in reproducing and legitimizing the state and racial capitalism. In what brief attention is given to schools, abolitionist scholars typically take an ambiguous and contradictory

stance, framing education as a public good toward which resources should be directed and simultaneously as a policing institution that reproduces racial capitalism. To address this gap in the abolitionist scholarship, I turn now toward Marxist scholarship in education.

Marxist Scholarship on Schools, the State, and Reproduction

A large body of scholarship, much of it Gramscian in orientation, analyzes how schools function as state apparatuses to reproduce capitalist relations. Such scholarship is important for the consideration of the connections between schools and the PIC and what teachers can do to advance the project of abolition. Michael Apple (1995) writes that "schools perform important roles in assisting in the creation of the conditions necessary for capital accumulation (they sort, select, and certify a hierarchically organized student body) and legitimation" (p. 13). State schooling socializes the cost of producing the "technical/administrative knowledge" that industry requires, though the profits remain mostly private (Apple, 1995, p. 49). Because industry prioritizes the *production* and *accumulation* rather than the equitable *distribution* of this technical knowledge, and because the economy requires a hierarchically stratified labor force (including a reserve army of unemployed workers [Carnoy, 1982]), schools naturally produce levels of low achievement and the labels of deviance that go along with them (Apple, 1995, 2019). It is in the self-interest of educators, educational administrators, and education policymakers to prioritize the production of high-status knowledge because doing so gives schooling legitimacy in the eyes of the "new petty bourgeoisie," which in turn can "*use the educational apparatus to reproduce itself*" (Apple, 1995, pp. 49, 50, emphasis in original).

The "legitimation" function refers to the role of schools in circulating ideologies that support the reproduction of capitalist relations. Many education scholars have taken up this concept, often describing this process as "cultural reproduction" (Apple, 1982a) or "ideological reproduction" (Apple, 2019), and frequently drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*. In this context, hegemony refers to the ability of dominant groups to maintain power not only through the use of force, but through their ability to "establish the 'common sense' or 'doxa' of a society" (Apple, 2003, p. 6). Dominant groups are able to generate consent among the people over whom they rule in part through "the control of the knowledge preserving and producing institutions of a particular society" (Apple, 2019, p. 26). Schools, then, are of significant interest in the struggle for power, as they are institutions in which ideologies—including hegemonic ideologies that legitimate the current power structure—are transmitted across generations.

This transmission, however, is not a simple process of top-down imposition. Ideologies "are not coherent sets of beliefs. … They are instead sets of lived meanings, practices, and social relations that are often internally inconsistent" (Apple, 1995, p. 14). Ideologies are ways of making sense of the world that are often filled with contradiction (Apple, 1995, 2013). The "common sense" contains both "good sense" and "bad sense":

> Side by side with beliefs and actions that maintain the dominance of powerful classes and groups, there will be elements of serious (though perhaps incomplete) understanding, elements that see the differential benefits and penetrate close to the core of an unequal reality. (Apple, 1995, p. 85)

The contradictory nature of ideology means it must be constantly struggled over. Hegemony is far from automatic; it must be continuously and actively worked for (Apple,

1981, 1995; Dale, 1982; Giroux, 1981; Hall, 1986).

While recognizing the roles that schools play in facilitating capital accumulation and legitimating the class structure, most Marxists do not see the school as *entirely determined* by the economy; they see schools as having "relative autonomy" from the economic base (Au, 2018). Apple (2019) summarizes this position well:

> There is a somewhat more flexible position which speaks of determination as a complex nexus of relationships which, in their final moment, are economically rooted, that exert pressures and set limits on cultural practice, including schools. Thus, the cultural sphere is not a "mere reflection" of economic practices. Instead, the influence, the "reflection" or determination, is highly mediated by forms of human action. (p. 4)

So while economic forces may "set limits" on what happens in schools and other state apparatuses, they cannot guarantee a one-to-one correspondence between the curriculum or instruction in classrooms and the interests of the bourgeoisie. Dale (1982) writes that "state policy makers do not possess perfect knowledge of the State's needs or of how to meet them, through education or any other means at their disposal" (p. 134), and this is certainly true of educators as well. Furthermore, the state itself contains contradictions and must respond to contradictory political pressures. For example, "the needs of capital accumulation may contradict the needs for legitimation" (Apple, 1995, p. 13). The state is a site of political struggle, and state actors must maintain the state's legitimacy in the eyes of various groups with competing interests. Schools, then, are not only instruments of class rule but are the result of class struggle (Apple, 1995, 2003, 2013; Carnoy, 1982; Dale, 1982). Rather than take a fatalistic view that sees schools as doomed to forever

reproduce the class structure, these scholars see the potential for "large-scale social movements" to transform schooling (Apple, 2019, p. 195)—albeit within certain limits—and for action in the realm of education to impact the economic base (Apple, 1982b, 2003). They also believe that the contradictions inherent in the state and schooling open up possibilities for teachers to build radical critical consciousness within their classrooms (Au, 2018).

Despite these contradictions, decisions about the form and content of the formal curriculum in schools are heavily influenced by economic factors. Take, for example, the types of knowledge deemed "high-status." Apple (2019) writes that "a corporate economy requires the production of high levels of technical knowledge to keep the economic apparatus running effectively and to become more sophisticated in the maximization of opportunities for economic expansion" (p. 36). The bourgeoisie has an economic interest in socializing the costs of the production of this technical knowledge, and therefore attempts to ensure that schools focus primarily on technical knowledge—the kind that is discrete, testable, and "the province of experts" (Apple, 2019, p. 38). Ethical considerations will be afforded lower status, as these are less "*macro-economically* beneficial" (Apple, 2019, p. 37). There is a mutually reinforcing effect here: the types of knowledge deemed high-status by the bourgeoisie will also be the most sought-after by students and parents pursuing economic mobility, as well as by educators seeking legitimacy in the eyes of elites.

While the bourgeoisie may not be able to dictate exactly what happens in schools, their class interests influence curricula in several ways. Education is a massive industry, and there are large sums of money to be made by "testing companies, consultants,

textbook corporations, and the educational technology sector" (Au, 2018, p. 115). Textbooks and other curricular materials are commodities, and the political economy of the production and sale of these commodities shapes what is taught in schools (Apple, 1982b). Textbook publishers will want to make materials that can be distributed widely, and "perceived ideological differences over race, sex, and class in the communities in which publishers want to sell their products will provide substantial limits on what is considered 'legitimate' (or safe) knowledge" (Apple, 1995, p. 145). Materials that challenge White supremacy, for example, are unlikely to be published if they might incur pushback from White parents who perceive a threat to their dominant status. In other words, textbooks tend to legitimate the extant social order because "any content that is politically or culturally critical or can cause a negative reaction by powerful groups is avoided" (Apple, 2019, p. 205).

Wealthy individuals can also wield a more direct influence over what is taught in schools through philanthropy and political lobbying (Au, 2018). William H. Watkins (2001), for example, shows how philanthropists can use their money and influence to create educational policy and practice, thereby circumventing the democratic process to push their own ideologies and material interests. As long as wealthy philanthropists are able to influence what happens in schools, they will do so to ensure that what happens in schools promotes their class interest. The result will likely be the continued rationalization of education in the name of "efficiency," where any knowledge that is not packageable, sellable, and testable is increasingly marginalized (Apple, 2019).

Abolitionist teachers must understand how their work makes them complicit in the reproduction and legitimation of capitalism, how their location within the state limits

their ability to teach radically, and how they can nevertheless contribute to the building of abolition democracy from within those limitations. This Marxist educational research is important, therefore, and gives more attention to the role of schools than the scholarship on the PIC and abolition does. The Marxist education scholars do not, however, give sufficient attention to processes of racialization within schools, despite the fact that these are essential to how schools reproduce racial capitalism. They also tend not to focus on the important connections between schools and the PIC, despite the ways in which these institutions work hand-in-hand. To address these gaps, I turn to scholarship on the school–prison nexus.

Abolitionist Scholarship on The School–Prison Nexus

Most analyses of the connections between schools and prisons have used the framework of the *school-to-prison pipeline* (STPP), while recently some scholars have broadened their analysis, often shifting to a framework of a *school–prison nexus*. As the "pipeline" metaphor suggests, the STPP framework highlights the movement of students, particularly students of color, from schools to juvenile detention centers, jails, or prisons (Meiners, 2011b). The literature on the STPP has focused largely on school discipline—for example, suspensions, expulsions, and arrests at schools—and correlations between these practices and eventual incarceration (Vaught, 2017; Wald & Losen, 2003). Some scholars have focused on disproportionate disciplining of Black boys (e.g., Allen & White-Smith, 2014) or Black girls (e.g., Annamma et al., 2019), or the racialized impacts of zero-tolerance policies (e.g., Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). While the "school-to-prison pipeline" terminology began as a radical critique of schooling within grassroots movements in the 1990s (Warren, 2021), the language has since been largely

coopted by education policy actors, academics, and philanthropists (Acey, 2000; Koon, 2020; Sojoyner, 2016), and the STPP discourse often "simply posits schooling as the antidote to carceral expansion, without linking the two structures" (Meiners, 2011b, p. 553). This rhetoric leaves both the school and the prison unproblematized, and it frames schools as inherently good institutions capable of solving the criminalization of youth with a few education policy reforms (Sojoyner, 2013; Vaught, 2017). Though scholarship on the STPP points toward important reforms to school discipline policies, it often fails to investigate the roots from which such policies grow.

Some scholars have noted that the interconnectedness of schools and prisons is much deeper and more complex than a simple one-directional pipeline, and have begun to analyze the school–prison relationship from an abolitionist perspective. Erica Meiners is often credited as the first to use the "school–prison nexus" framework. She writes,

> Linkages between schools and jails are less a pipeline, more a persistent nexus or web of intertwined, punitive threads. This nexus metaphor… is more accurate as it captures the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration. (Meiners, 2007, pp. 31–32)

There is not a strict distinction between the nexus and pipeline frameworks, and some scholars use both terms. But the nexus framework tends to encompass not only the ways that students are moved from schools to prisons but also the many ways in which schools themselves are punitive, criminalizing institutions (Annamma, 2018). Meiners (2007, 2011b, 2016), for example, shows how schools in the United States have a long history of perpetrating colonialism, producing youth of color as "public enemies," and disseminating ideologies that justify incarceration, state hegemony, and White

supremacy. Rather than seeing schools as fundamentally separate from the PIC, or as an antidote to the problem of incarceration, Meiners sees schools *as part of the PIC*, or fundamentally linked within a larger carceral state.

Damien Sojoyner (2013, 2016, 2018) has taken up the school–prison nexus framework to examine the role of schools within Black liberation movements. Like Meiners, Sojoyner sees schools and prisons as doing similar work, which he names *enclosure*. Specifically, the state uses both institutions to enclose Black freedom—that is, to suppress Black radicalism and stifle expressions of Black culture. Importantly, Sojoyner's approach is dialectical: he sees the state's enclosure of Black education as a response to the importance of education in Black communities. Because of the complementary nature of schools and prisons, and the ways in which practices in each of these institutions inform the other, Sojoyner rejects the STPP framework, which posits the two institutions as having fundamentally different purposes. Instead, he argues that "the basis of any option for addressing issues of education must have a philosophy of abolition at its core. It is only then that we can begin the work to abolish enclosures that dominate both prisons and public education" (Sojoyner, 2016, p. xxi).

While not explicitly using the language of the "school–prison nexus," Sabina Vaught (2017) uses her observations at a school within a juvenile prison to theorize about U.S. schools and the state broadly. She views compulsory schooling as an element of coercive state power, and understands "schools and prisons as a function of U.S. conquest statecraft" (Vaught et al., 2022, p. 2). For Vaught (2017), the primary function of the state is the maintenance of White people's exclusive claims to property, citizenship, intelligence, humanity, security, "freedom, will, and fitness for self-governance," all of

which “exist only through the ideological and structural denial of those very things in Black people” (p. 322). According to Vaught, it is this function that determines what happens in state schools. “School is designed to be a function of the state” (Vaught, 2017, p. 36), and teachers “are state employees whose labor is determined by the state and conducted in line with state mandates” (p. 203). The state fulfills this function—the maintenance of White supremacy—by removing Black and Indigenous children from their homes, where challenges to White supremacy and colonialism might be fostered, and coercing their participation in a system designed to reproduce their subordinate position in society: school. Along similar lines as Sojoyner, Vaught (2017) imagines “that abolition strategies will increasingly work across institutional categories, targeting the types of power that pervade a network of state institutions” (p. 322).

Savannah Shange (2019) similarly sees “schools as one of the many organs of the state’s anatomy” (p. 70) and sees the state as anti-Black. Unlike Gilmore, she defines abolition as an anti-state politic, and she uses an abolitionist framework to critique progressive reforms at a school in San Francisco that are widely seen as antiracist “wins” but nevertheless maintain a structure of anti-Blackness. She aims for readers to consider the limits of reforms within a “settler-slaver society” (Shange, 2019, p. 3).

Building on these conceptions of schools as oppressive institutions and sites of Black suffering, David Stovall (2018b) suggests that educators learn from prison abolitionists and consider the possibility of “school” abolition. Stovall uses the word “school” to denote not just a building, but also a “set of dehumanizing processes that reward young people for order and compliance instead of supporting critical analysis while providing necessary skills to change our conditions” (Stovall, 2018a, p. 427). He

distinguishes "school" from education, which he describes as a "political exercise that seeks to end repression while simultaneously supporting the capacity of historically oppressed and marginalized peoples to think and create" (Stovall, 2018b, p. 52). "School" abolition, then, is not necessarily about eradicating schools, but rather about eradicating *from* schools the conditions of dehumanization and practices of control that reproduce White supremacy. Stovall acknowledges that "school" abolition is at this point an uncertain, incomplete, and aspirational concept, so he suggests educators participate in movements for more radical educational spaces and against neoliberal reforms, such as charter schools, vouchers, merit-based pay, and high-stakes standardized testing. Others have recently taken up this call for school abolition (Q. Alexander et al., forthcoming; Clarke, 2022; Gillen, 2021; Love & Muhammad, 2020; Love & Stovall, 2021).

Whether or not these scholars use the "nexus" language, they use abolition as a framework for thinking about the relationship between schools and the PIC. This scholarship is therefore indispensable for abolitionist teachers. But, despite these scholars' rooting in abolitionist literature, racial capitalism is not a central analytic of their work, and they at times take up a monolithic conception of the state. (Damien Sojoyner's work is a notable exception.) Because they do not give sufficient attention to the roles that schools, police, and prisons play in reproducing capitalism, they fail to explain *why* these institutions are connected and how they are politically determined. The school–prison nexus scholarship must therefore be put into conversation with the Marxist education scholarship and scholarship on the PIC. And, because of its focus on systemic issues, the school–prison nexus scholarship does not give much attention to what teachers ought to do when working within these systems. To address this gap, I turn to scholarship

on abolitionist teaching

Abolitionist Teaching

Bettina Love (2019) has popularized the idea of *abolitionist teaching*, which she defines as "the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools" (p. 2). Love draws less explicitly on PIC abolition, and more on 19th-century slavery abolitionists. She argues that reforms have done little to change the structural nature of the "educational survival complex," a "system built on the suffering of students of color" (Love, 2019, p. 27). She calls for teachers to take up antiracist pedagogy within the classroom and grassroots organizing beyond it to aid students and their communities in fights for social justice.

Writing from the fields of ethnic studies, American studies, and media and cultural studies, Dylan Rodríguez (2010) argues for an *abolitionist pedagogy*. Like many of the aforementioned authors, Rodríguez sees schools and prisons as intimately linked. Drawing on his own (2006) concept of the *prison regime*, he posits that "at its farthest institutional reaches, the prison has developed a capacity to organize and disrupt the most taken-for-granted features of everyday social life, including 'family,' 'community,' 'school,' and individual social identities" (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 7). An abolitionist pedagogy, then, is a call for teachers and students to "understand how they are a dynamic part of the prison regime's production and reproduction—and thus how they might also be part of its abolition through the work of building and teaching a radical and liberatory common sense" (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 13). Rodríguez makes an effort to distinguish this

pedagogy from other radical or critical pedagogies that do not attempt to critique the conditions of freedom and unfreedom upon which classroom pedagogy itself is premised. He names abolition "as a perpetually creative and experimental pedagogy" (Rodríguez, 2010, p. 15) rather than a rigid or prescriptive teaching formula.

Carla Shalaby (2017, 2021) similarly uses abolition as a framework through which to consider classroom practice, with a particular focus on classroom management. She encourages educators to view "trouble" in schools differently. Schools engender trouble, she argues, by limiting students' freedom and forcing them to conform to a narrow notion of a docile, "good student" (Shalaby, 2017). Students who do not conform are excluded through practices of classroom management, which she names as "a key means through which schools do the work of prisons, and educators do the work of police officers" (Shalaby, 2021, p. 104). These practices teach students carceral logics that sustain the PIC. Rather than seeing trouble as located in the individual student, Shalaby wants teachers to see trouble as a sign that there are unmet needs in the classroom. She asks teachers to consider an approach to classroom management in which no one is seen as disposable. Instead of teaching carceral logics, such an approach would aim to teach students the skills and dispositions needed in order to keep one another safe and free in a world without police or prisons.

Meiners and Shalaby are among the editorial collective that recently published *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*, a volume which speaks to the increasing popularity of the abolitionist framework within the field of education (Education for Liberation Network & Critical Resistance Editorial Collective, 2021). In the toolkit, abolitionist educators document their attempts to advance the project of

abolition within their classrooms, schools, and communities.

These works provide abolitionist teachers with examples and provocations that might inspire their own classroom practice. However, with the exception of Rodríguez (who, notably, is not an education scholar), these authors' focus on schools often results in a lack of focus on the PIC, the state, and racial capitalism. The result is, at times, a lack of grounding in abolitionist frameworks or revolutionary politics, an inattention to the structural limitations on radical teaching, and a narrowing of the abolitionist project to teaching for "social justice." I contend that abolitionist education scholarship must be grounded in abolitionist thinking.

Furthermore, while more and more books, chapters, and articles are articulating abolitionist theories of education or documenting abolitionist teaching practices, no study has yet inquired into how teachers develop their abolitionist analyses or how such an analysis informs their practice. This study fills a gap in the research on abolitionist teaching by studying abolitionist teachers and by focusing on this intersection of theory and practice.

Conclusion

Through a synthesis of research on the PIC and abolition; Marxist scholarship on schools, the state, and reproduction; research on the school–prison nexus; and scholarship on abolitionist teaching, this dissertation aims to address the gaps discussed in this chapter. A movement to abolish racial capitalism requires thorough theorizations of racial capitalism, which in turn require an understanding of the state in both its repressive and ideological manifestations (Althusser, 1971). An examination of the PIC, schools, and their interconnections can help us understand the ways in which coercion and consent

work together. Racial capitalism is the glue that binds these institutions, but does not make them identical or monolithic. It is only through understanding intra-state antagonisms (Gilmore, 2022) and contradictions that we can find the cracks within which abolitionist teaching can bloom.

Chapter 2: Research Methods

This research is guided by a primary question: How do abolitionist teachers think about abolition as it relates to their work as teachers? To explore this question, I recruited three self-described abolitionist teachers working in K-12 public schools in the greater Twin Cities area to participate in a study group focused on police and prison abolition. We met as a group for seven 90-minute study sessions between June and August 2022, during which we discussed shared readings on PIC abolition and talked about how abolitionist ideas informed our thinking about schools and our practice as teachers. I also interviewed each participant in May 2022, before the study group began, and again in September or October 2022, after its conclusion. Finally, we met for one follow-up study session in February 2023, for which participants read a draft of Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

This chapter details the methods I used to collect and analyze data for this study and explains the decisions that informed those methods.

Methodology

Methodologically, this study is informed by critical ethnography, participatory research, feminist research, and what Patti Lather (1991) calls "research as praxis." Critical and feminist researchers have questioned many of the assumptions of positivist research, including the possibility of an objective researcher and a strict observer/participant binary (Fine, 1994; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Rather than aiming for objectivity or neutrality, critical or praxis-oriented research "is explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society" (Lather, 1991, p. 51). My project does not purport to be value-free, but rather seeks emancipatory

knowledge toward a particular end: the abolition of the PIC. I do not claim to be an objective observer; my participation, observations, and analysis are always informed by the identities, experiences, and commitments I bring to the research—in short, my positionality. I discuss my positionality further in a subsequent section.

Participatory research approaches are similarly aimed toward consciousness-raising for both researcher and participants, while simultaneously aiming to break down this researcher/participant binary (Bernard, 2000). My decision to pursue this research via a study group was motivated in large part by my desire for maximal reciprocity with my participants. The creation of a study group offered participants tangible benefits; I hoped that they would not only learn during the study but also gain a community of like-minded educators with whom they could continue to struggle side-by-side toward more equitable school systems and a more just world for months and years to come. Participants shared this hope: in our opening interviews, each of them expressed that they wanted to participate in the study group because they were seeking community and dialogue with other critical teachers.

In aiming for reciprocity, I attempted to position myself not as an expert above participants, but rather as a full participant in the study group learning alongside them. A primary goal of the study group was for all participants—myself included—to sharpen our analyses of the PIC and movements for PIC abolition. I acknowledged during our first study session that as the researcher I had an unequal share of power in steering the group, but I nevertheless tried to make clear that I viewed this as *our* study group, not *my* study group, which meant that everything we did was up for discussion. I said,

> Obviously, this is my dissertation, but I view this as *our* study group, really as a collective. So the point of this is to really be beneficial for everybody and not just for me. So if there's anything that you want to be different and you feel isn't working, we should talk about it, you know? In my opinion, everything that we do, read, talk about, etc., is up for discussion and to be decided on collaboratively. So yeah, this is for all of us to decide on. In terms of my role here, [I] convened the group, [I'm] hosting and facilitating, and I'm the researcher, but definitely don't want to position myself at all as, like, an expert or teacher in the group. I don't see that as my role. [I] see us all here to learn together. I know that being, like, the person whose research this is and also, like, given gender dynamics, I, like, in some ways will be positioned with more power … in the group. So I'm not gonna, like, try to naively just deny that or pretend that that's not a thing. But I am gonna try my best to be an equal participant with you all in the group. So not dominating the conversation, and also not just, like, sitting silently. Just, you know, being a normal participant in the group.[1]

I sought participants' feedback on my facilitation and on the overall process at the end of each study session, and always asked if others were interested in facilitating (though no one else volunteered). Recognizing that these moves did not completely mitigate inherent power imbalances, I aimed in our discussions and in these pages to uplift participants' expertise as practicing K-12 teachers, as experts on their own lives and teaching contexts,

[1] Ellipses are used within participant quotations throughout this dissertation to indicate where I have omitted part of a quotation.

and as individuals who brought experiences and knowledge to the study group that were new to me.

Following praxis-oriented and participatory researchers, my approach to study sessions and interviews was dialogical. Another motivation for my decision to form a study group was my belief that knowledge is constructed collaboratively, not simply possessed by individuals. To Fred Moten's rhetorical question, "Is there a way of being intellectual that isn't social?" (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 110), my reply is "no." An abolitionist analysis is not something that some educators or researchers "have" or a final destination at which to arrive, but rather an always-evolving horizon toward which to strive, through study, in community. For this reason, I could not simply interview teachers who already "had" an abolitionist analysis, nor could I position myself as an expert who, through my writing months after the study's conclusion, critiqued participants' ideas. When one of us felt compelled to critique another participant's ideas, we were able to offer that critique in the moment and hear others' thoughts, and as a group we were able to arrive at a higher level of understanding through dialogue and the synthesis of several perspectives. We each acknowledged during our first study session that offering disagreement was not easy, but that we were committed to doing so. There were no major disagreements, drawn-out debates, or interpersonal conflicts during our study sessions, but I sensed that we each got more comfortable with asking probing questions and offering reframings of each other's ideas as the study progressed. During our sixth study session, for example, after Hope made a comment about "sociopaths," Nikki pointed out that this framing was "an ableist way of saying this group of people is not acceptable in society," to which Hope agreed. This exchange is illustrative of the

ways in which we collaboratively constructed ideas and negotiated meanings through dialogue (Lather, 1991).

Study Context

Participants

Following Katy Swalwell's (2013) example, I recruited participants using a snowball sampling technique (Crouse & Lowe, 2018) to generate referrals from the personal and professional networks I have built as an educator and abolitionist community organizer. I emailed all of my contacts in the Twin Cities area and asked them to share a flier (see Appendix A), which asked for "Abolitionist teachers currently working in K–12 public schools in the Twin Cities area to participate in a study group focused on police and prison abolition," with anyone they knew who might be interested. Among those who filled out an initial interest form, three were able to make the substantial time commitment that a study group demanded: Eva, Hope, and Nikki. During our first study session, I asked each participant to fill out a Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix B), which included questions about their teaching experience and asked them how they wanted to be identified. In what follows, I describe each participant in their own words, using pseudonyms of their choosing and the descriptors that they named at the beginning of the study as salient for their work as educators and as participants in the study group. I describe myself below in the "Researcher Positionality" subsection.

Eva described herself as a White woman in her early 20s who was not originally from the Midwest. At the beginning of the study, she had just completed her third year as a teacher and her second year teaching middle school math at a small, racially diverse K-12 urban charter school.

Hope described herself as a White woman in her mid-30s who had grown up in a rural, conservative town but had lived in the Twin Cities for roughly 15 years. Though she grew up deeply evangelical, she had recently left the church. After working for two years as an educational paraprofessional in an urban school district, she had taught English as a Second Language for six years at a public elementary school in a first-ring suburb with a significant Latinx population.

Nikki described herself as a 30-something White, bisexual, genderqueer/nonbinary Jew who was married to a woman. Before moving to the Twin Cities, she had taught journalism and English at a suburban high school for two years and worked as a library aide at an urban magnet high school for one. She had also worked as a substitute teacher and served on the board of a foundation that supported her local school district. At the time of our opening interview, she was teaching high school English Language Arts at a culturally-specific urban charter school, which she described as "big on controlling students." She left that school at the end of the school year and moved on to working as a reading intervention teacher at a middle and high school in a first-ring suburb. Nikki and I were friends before the beginning of the study, and had shared an apartment (along with roommates) for about two-and-a-half years. We had engaged in many conversations about schools and about abolition over those years.

In our opening interviews, each participant said that they considered themself to be an abolitionist, and each had previously participated in study groups of some form related to abolition and/or antiracist praxis. Eva had been part of a Black Lives Matter at School study group and had read a few books related to abolition and abolitionist teaching, including *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the*

Pursuit of Educational Freedom by Bettina Love and some sections of *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*. She had also read *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* by Mariame Kaba, and expressed a desire to read it again, this time with others. Hope had participated in a discussion group run by a local community organization that focused on a ballot question that would have made it possible to shrink the size and scope of the Minneapolis Police Department. She had also participated in two 12-week "antiracism discussion circles" at a local church and completed a facilitator training. Nikki was a graduate student studying education and had learned about abolition in that context. She said she had picked up talking points related to abolition during the 2020 uprisings through following organizations online, such as MPD150 (mpd150.com).

We thus entered the study group with a variety of teaching experiences and exposures to abolitionist ideas. Collectively, we taught at the elementary, middle school, high school, and postsecondary levels; we taught math, ESL, ELA, and education; and we taught in urban, suburban, charter, and public contexts for a range of years. We were, however, all White, and our racial identities—along with our other identities and experiences—undoubtedly shaped our engagement with a body of knowledge rooted in Black liberation struggle. I return to the cultural composition of the group in the Conclusion chapter.

Situating the Study in Space and Time

The geographical setting of the Twin Cities area provides a unique context for the study of abolitionist teacher praxis. Teachers in the Twin Cities area—and their students—are living in the ongoing aftermath of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis,

the ensuing uprising, and subsequent police repression; more police murders, more protests, and more repression; and a long, highly publicized, tense political battle over the future of the Minneapolis Police Department. Calls to abolish police are no longer on the margins in the Twin Cities; there is a heightened awareness of abolition as a framework, and teachers are increasingly discussing policing with students. I know this to be true because in the fall of 2020 I led two professional development sessions about policing and abolition for Minneapolis Public Schools teachers, and a similar workshop for students in spring of 2021. I experienced firsthand their curiosity, their excitement to learn more about these subjects, and their willingness to question their own preconceptions during this period of upheaval. Our study group discussions centered on abolition not only as an abstract concept, but as a concrete political project to be examined, questioned, and practiced within an immediate local context.

The temporal setting of this study—2022—was also unique. At the beginning of the study, teachers were wrapping up their third school year impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching is always a difficult and stressful job, and current teachers are working under the added stresses of students readjusting to classroom life, the constant threat of illness, and frequent changes to state, district, and school policy. All participants spoke about the stress of teaching, and Nikki in particular emphasized that Covid precautions had led to stricter regulation of students' freedom to move around their classrooms and school. The fact that the study sessions took place during the summer, and not when participants were, in Eva's words, "consumed in the day-to-day of 'Are my slides ready for the next day?'" meant that they had time and space to reflect on the past

school year, to study, and to dream about what might be possible in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

Researcher Positionality

As mentioned above, I did not enter this study aiming to be objective or neutral, because I knew that this would be impossible. Instead, I entered with an awareness of how my participation, observations, and analysis are always informed by the identities, experiences, and commitments I bring to the research. My understanding of abolition is informed primarily by two distinct yet simultaneous and mutually-informing experiences: my graduate studies and my community organizing. At the beginning of the study, I had just completed my fourth year as a doctoral student studying education, the PIC, and PIC abolition. A great deal of what I have learned about abolition comes from books, articles, speeches, and interviews by and with academics and activists. During this same period I was (and continue to be) active in abolitionist organizing with currently and formerly incarcerated people in Minnesota. This experience gives me an opportunity to apply in practice what I am learning in theory, and it in turn speaks back to that theory. I entered this study with these experiences, but I also aim to write with humility. While I have developed meaningful relationships with incarcerated people, they are my comrades, not my loved ones. I have not been directly impacted by the PIC, and as a White, straight, cisgender, middle-class person I do not come from a community that is targeted by the PIC. I acknowledge that my knowledge of these systems of oppression is partial.

My ideas about how abolition informs schooling and teaching are shaped by my experience teaching high school mathematics at a small charter school in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston for five years (one as a full-time student teacher). I referenced

this experience frequently during the study sessions. While Boston is similar in many ways to the Twin Cities, the fact that I had never taught at the K-12 level in the Twin Cities was one important difference between me and the other participants. Furthermore, during the study, I was teaching undergraduate and Masters students at a public university in the Twin Cities area, rather than K-12 students. So while I was a participant, I recognize that I was uniquely situated in the group.

I also recognize that being a White male academic and the designer of this research project positioned me with power in the study group. As described above, I aimed for reciprocity and mutuality with participants, and at the same time I realized that this power dynamic could never be completely mitigated (Scotland, 2012). To reinterpret a phrase from Paulo Freire (1996), I aimed to be a *researcher-participant* among *participants-researchers*. During study sessions my role was to facilitate and to let participants' interests steer our conversations, but I acknowledge that my choice of text and research questions set limits on where the conversation went. Aiming for a Freirean dialogical approach required me to engage in an ongoing process of self-reflexivity to ensure that I was not imposing my own ideas on the group or harmfully wielding power over participants, and that I was aware of how my experiences and position—which differed from those of other participants—informed my thinking. This involved constant internal negotiation as I decided when to share my thoughts with the group and when to let others' ideas lead the way. After our second study session, for example, I wrote the following in a reflexive memo:

> I do feel slightly awkward at times, because I'm typically waiting to hear what others have to say before I jump in with my own opinions. This is probably good

> practice because 1) it's good to listen and share air time, and 2) I'll have plenty of opportunities to include my thinking in the dissertation later, but it does feel a bit like I'm taking slightly more of a teacher role than I would if I were another participant. I also felt that way when I asked questions. Sometimes I'm going to want to hear participants' thoughts on questions that I've already thought a lot about, and so I end up asking without sharing my own thoughts upfront. Again, I think that's ok; that's part of facilitating a discussion. … I'll try to keep an eye on how much this dynamic is happening, and how I feel about it.

After the next session, I was feeling better about things. I wrote,

> In terms of facilitating in the future, I think I'll do things very similarly. I shared thoughts when I had them and didn't feel weird doing so. I also mostly let the conversation flow naturally, but did direct things when there was a lull so that we got to the things I wanted to talk about.

Overall, I hoped to strike a balance, neither steering our conversations too strongly nor holding back my ideas as if I were not a participant. Eva, Hope, and Nikki had nothing but positive feedback on my facilitation. At the end of our fourth study session, when I asked if I had been "directing the conversation too much," Nikki put this fear to rest, and Hope even joked that she was "shocked to discover that [I] had been facilitating." Nevertheless, I wrote reflexive memos after each study session to reflect on my facilitation, to process participants' feedback, and to consider what I would do differently moving forward.

While I aimed to avoid imposition, I did not try to avoid influence. I recognize that, as a participant, I influenced our discussions. This is not a flaw of the research

design to be mitigated, but rather a feature of which I must be aware, and which I try to acknowledge in my analyses, findings, and conclusions. As Motha (2009) said of her own study (a "critical feminist ethnography" involving "afternoon tea" sessions with teachers),

> I am certain that my participation in the afternoon teas swayed the flow of the conversation, that my questions were at times leading, and that my study partners' relationships with me and with each other affected the identities they constructed while speaking at the afternoon teas. (p. 110)

Like Motha (2009), I have aimed "to be mindful of my actions and their consequences and straightforward and transparent in my accounts of events" (p. 110).

The Text

I did not choose a text for the group until after recruiting participants, because I wanted to consider their input if they had ideas about what we should read. I wanted to select a text that was focused on police and/or prison abolition, rather than one focused on abolitionist teaching, because a major aim of the study was to begin with a firm grounding in PIC abolition and then elicit teachers' own ideas about how abolition informed their thinking about schooling and their practice as teachers. Of the many books on PIC abolition, which one was most appropriate for our group would depend on what participants had read already. Once I had recruited participants, I learned that while Hope and Nikki had some exposure to abolitionist ideas, they had not read books focused on the topic and did not have suggestions for the group. I therefore decided that an introductory text—one that was aimed at a broad audience, introduced a range of abolitionist ideas, and covered these with sufficient depth and coherence to make our

discussions interesting—would be most appropriate. Eva suggested one such text: *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* by Mariame Kaba, a well-known abolitionist organizer, educator, and curator (Kaba, 2021). After weighing this against a few other options, I determined that *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* was best suited to our needs in terms of length, style, and content.

We Do This 'Til We Free Us is a collection of essays by and interviews with Kaba, all but one of which were previously published between 2014 and 2020. Many of the essays are co-authored with other well-known abolitionist thinkers, thereby embodying Kaba's insistence that "Everything that is worthwhile is done with other people" (Kaba, 2021, p. 178), an ethos that also motivated the creation of the study group. The book reached number nine on the New York Times Paperback Nonfiction list in its first week of publication (https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2021/03/21/paperback-nonfiction/) and received endorsements from dozens of prominent academics and activists, demonstrating its broad appeal. After a Foreword and Editor's Introduction, which we did not read for the study group, the book's 31 essays and interviews are split into seven thematic sections, totaling just shy of 200 pages.

Data Collection and Analysis

The main phase of data collection for this study took place between May 2022 and October 2022. We met for one follow-up study session in February 2023. This section describes my interviews with participants, our study sessions, and the methods I used to collect and analyze data.

Data Sources

Interviews

I conducted hour-long, semi-structured individual interviews with each participant in May 2022, before our first study session, and again in September or October 2022, after our final meeting. Both interviews with Eva took place over Zoom; both interviews with Hope took place in her home; and both interviews with Nikki took place in our apartment. These interviews were audio recorded and automatically transcribed using a combination of Otter.ai and Zoom. I listened to each recording the following day and edited the transcripts as necessary.

These interviews aimed to learn from participants how they conceived of abolition, how their understanding of abolition informed their practice as teachers, and how collaborative study had shaped that understanding (see Appendix C and Appendix D for detailed interview protocols). Following Lather's (1991) suggestions for achieving reciprocity, these were dialogic interviews. While I asked certain predetermined questions, I also approached these interviews as two-way conversations, being sure to answer participants' questions, follow their lead, offer my own thoughts, and ask follow-up questions. In initial interviews I focused on getting to know participants, and sought to elicit their ideas about what abolition and abolitionist teaching mean and how they came to those ideas. In closing interviews I asked similar questions, as well as questions that asked participants to reflect on the process of collaborative study. The purpose of these closing interviews was not to measure how participants' ideas did or did not change, nor to point to the study group as the cause of any shifts in thinking. Rather, the purpose was to note such shifts for potential further analysis with participants.

Audio Recordings of Study Sessions

Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I met for seven 90-minute study sessions over the course of two-and-a-half months between June and August 2022. These study sessions were audio recorded and automatically transcribed using a combination of Otter.ai and Zoom. I listened to each recording the following day and edited the transcripts as necessary.

For our first study session, we met in Nikki's and my dining room. We did not do any reading for this session; rather, we introduced ourselves, talked about why we joined the group and what we wanted to get from it, discussed what sorts of norms we wanted to agree to in order to make the group a positive and meaningful experience for everyone, and scheduled the remaining six study sessions. I also talked about my role as researcher, participant, and facilitator, and acknowledged the power dynamics described above. Finally, Eva, Hope, and Nikki completed the Demographic Questionnaire, and I shared copies of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*.

Table 1 details the location and participants present for each study session, as well as the sections of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* that we read.

Table 1

Study Sessions

Study session	Month	Participants	Location	Reading
1	June 2022	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Nikki & Noah's apartment	None

2	June 2022	Hope, Nikki, Noah	Zoom	Part I: So You're Thinking about Becoming an Abolitionist
3	July 2022	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Nikki & Noah's apartment	Part II: There Are No Perfect Victims
4	July 2022	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Hope's house	Part III: The State Can't Give Us Transformative Justice Part IV: Making Demands: Reforms for and against Abolition
5	August 2022	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Hope's house	Part V: We Must Practice and Experiment: Abolitionist Organizing and Theory
6	August 2022	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Nikki & Noah's apartment	Part VI: Accountability Is Not Punishment: Transforming How We Deal with Harm and Violence
7	August 2022	Eva, Nikki, Noah	Nikki & Noah's apartment	Part VII: Show Up and Don't Travel Alone: We Need Each Other
Follow-up	February 2023	Eva, Hope, Nikki, Noah	Nikki & Noah's apartment	Draft of Chapter 4 of this dissertation

Each study session began with time for everyone to arrive, to chat informally, and to make a plate of the snacks I had provided, followed by time for a more formal check-in. This left approximately one hour during each session for discussion of the readings.

Our discussions flowed easily back and forth between the content of the text and our own stories and ideas about teaching. For sessions two and three, we began by sharing our initial impressions and takeaways from the readings, and then let discussion flow from there. For the remaining sessions, I asked everyone to come prepared to share a passage they thought was interesting, that resonated with them, that brought up questions or challenges, or that they thought raised good issues for us to discuss as a group. We structured these sessions around these passages: one of us would read aloud, followed by 10–20 minutes of discussion on the ideas raised before the next person shared. The last 10 minutes of each session were saved for sharing feedback on facilitation, discussing how the study group was going generally, and for addressing any conflicts that arose, though no such conflicts did come up. At the end of session four, I asked everyone to share what was going well and what they would like to change, and Eva, Hope, and Nikki expressed that they liked sharing passages, both as a way to structure our discussions and as a way to focus their reading. At no point did anyone express any problems with how the group was going or how I was facilitating. At the end of our seventh study session, when we had finished reading *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, I asked participants to share their holistic reflections on our study group process and any takeaways or ideas that we had talked or read about that they would be carrying into the new school year.

Six months after the conclusion of the study group, in February 2023, we met for a follow-up study session, for which Eva, Hope, and Nikki read a draft of Chapter 4 of this dissertation. After sharing how the new school year, which was roughly half over, had been going, they shared which aspects of my initial analysis rang true for them, which felt useful, and which seemed off. This process of collective analysis was intended

to acknowledge participants as not only recipients but also producers of abolitionist analyses. I also hoped that it would help to mitigate what Lather (1991) names as primary concerns of praxis-oriented research: theoretical imposition and the problem of false consciousness. The follow-up session gave us an opportunity to collaborate in constructing theory and for participants to share disagreements with my analysis. Our discussion during the follow-up session is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Fieldnotes

This study differs from a traditional ethnography in the sense that it does not involve "the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 1). The study group was not a preexisting "field;" it was created for the purposes of my dissertation. With that said, this study borrowed methods in large part from ethnography. During our study sessions I was a participant-observer, as well as facilitator. In addition to audio recordings of study sessions, I observed participant interactions and took jottings (Emerson et al., 2011) on what I heard, saw, and felt, with particular attention given to that which could not be captured via audio recording, like when Hope made air quotes to refer to "troublemakers," when Nikki took notes in her book, when Eva pulled up a social studies standard on her phone, or when I experienced a chill in my body in response to a participant's story. Ultimately, these jottings played a small role in my analysis. Because our group's chief activity was sitting in a circle and talking, the contents of our discussions—captured in the recordings and transcripts—provide the primary data I analyzed. Immediately following each interview and each study session I recorded an in-process memo (Emerson et al., 2011) that captured my immediate analyses, feelings, and reflections on my actions as researcher, participant, and

facilitator. Since I was a participant in the group, these memos also captured how my own thinking shifted over time, and this process of analyzing as I collected data informed subsequent discussions and data collection. The day after each study session, as I listened to the audio recording and edited the transcript, I took notes about what was said and drew connections among comments that touched on similar themes. I then used these notes, combined with the recording, transcript, my jottings, and my in-process memo, to write a fieldnote that depicted the scene of the study session and described what happened in detail. Rather than merely rehashing or summarizing the discussion, each fieldnote highlighted the comments that I found most interesting, organized them into thematic narratives, and analyzed the discussion in light of relevant abolitionist literature.

Data Analysis

As described above, I informally analyzed data on an ongoing basis during the data collection phase. After the seventh study session, I turned toward more formal data analysis. I began by rereading the opening interview memos and study group fieldnotes, and while I was reading noted potential codes. These descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2014) were shorthand for themes that arose. This initial process of open coding (Emerson et al., 2011) generated a large list of 90 potential codes. I consolidated a few of these, and grouped them into 12 thematic groups. Looking across these 12 groups, I determined three meta-themes: shifting mindsets, shifting ways of being, and navigating tensions.

After completing closing interviews, I began a process of focused coding (Emerson et al., 2011) of all transcripts, memos, and fieldnotes using Atlas.ti software. My approach to coding was not the traditional approach critiqued by St. Pierre and Jackson (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). I did not intend to draw any sort of quantitative or

"objective" conclusions. Nor did I treat transcripts, memos, and fieldnotes as "brute data" that existed "separate from and independent of the collecting subject … in an external reality waiting to be collected and analyzed" and then "broken apart and decontextualized by coding" (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 716). Nor did I believe that themes would "somehow naturally and miraculously 'emerge' as if anyone could see them" (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 716). Rather, the purpose of coding, for me, was to focus my reading of the transcripts, memos, and fieldnotes, and to "tag" what I viewed as important moments in our discussions so that I could easily find these moments later. There is nothing objective about this process; what struck me as important was guided by my subjectivity and by theory. Another researcher would have undoubtedly coded these data differently.

To serve my "tagging" purpose, and because Atlas.ti would allow me to easily group or consolidate codes later, I chose to use the entire large list of codes I had generated during open coding. This allowed me to maintain a level of detail that would make finding important quotations easier later on. I also created new codes during the coding process, and consolidated others. Ultimately, I used 86 codes between one and 74 times, and these were organized into 10 groups. I also wrote coding memos (Emerson et al., 2011) as I went; these documented my reflections on my coding process, codes that overlapped or that I recognized lacked clear definition, and new analytic ideas. While coding the opening interviews, for instance, I wrote to myself,

> I'm noticing that the "policing in schools" code is kind of a slippery one. Sometimes this refers to police in schools, and other times it refers to polic*ing*. But sometimes I don't use that code when I could (for instance, any time "Control

and docility" or "Freedom of movement" is used in the school context). This bunch of codes could maybe be grouped together.

These sorts of notes focused my attention on connections between ideas, helped me recall code meanings when I returned to the codes later, and served as a reminder that this process was not intended to perfectly break apart and categorize the data.

Once coding was complete, I printed out the list of 87 codes and cut these into individual strips of paper. Drawing inspiration from D. Soyini Madison's (2020) suggestion to create a "muse map"—to learn "through the process of reviewing, delimiting, and sequencing ideas" (p. 181)—I organized my codes into two concept maps, placing related codes next to each other. It was impossible to capture every connection between related codes, but these maps gave a general sense of thematic organization. This same set of 87 codes could have undoubtedly been organized any number of ways. For the first map, I picked up the strips of paper in random order and began spreading them out on my bedroom floor, grouping similar codes together and then linking the groups. I tried to approach this without any preconceived notions of what should be placed together, but the map I ended up creating was of course influenced by the thinking I had already done. Unsurprisingly, what I found from this exercise largely fit within the meta-themes I was already using to think about these data.

The first concept map centered around a dichotomy between community and policing, and around the idea of shifting mindsets and culture toward community and away from policing. Connected to the idea of community was a group of concepts that spoke to classroom culture (and culture beyond the classroom), such as accountability, Restorative and Transformative Justice, and relationships. Connected to the idea of

policing was a very different group of cultural concepts, such as punishment in schools, control and docility, authority, and individualism. While making a smooth distinction between what is "culture" and what is a "mindset" is difficult, the concept map also highlighted a dichotomy between what I categorized as carceral mindsets—those related to hegemony, criminalization, disposability, dangerousness, innocence, and binary thinking—and more liberatory mindsets, including systemic thinking, imagination, hope, and experimentation. Also appearing at the center was the idea that schools might be "fertile ground for change," but at the same time are sites where students are socialized into hegemonic ways of thinking and being, which are difficult to unlearn. The opposition between community and policing, the desire to shift from a culture of policing to a culture of community, and the contradictory nature of schools became central themes of Chapter 3.

I began the concept map process over again, but rather than approach the codes in random order as I had with the first map, I began the second map with concepts connected to the meta-theme of navigating tensions in the center, since I knew this was a key theme I wanted to write about. Rather than reusing every code, I focused only on those that felt important. The core tension highlighted at the center of this map was that between authority and community, which echoed the community versus policing antithesis at the center of the first map. The tension between teacher authority and classroom community became the focus of Chapter 4.

After coding and mapping, the first chapter I drafted was Chapter 4. Because I see teachers as theorists who play an important role in producing abolitionist analysis, not just receiving it, I brought Eva, Hope, and Nikki back into the analysis process at this

point. I shared the draft of Chapter 4 with them, and they shared their feedback during our follow-up study session. This process of "member checking"—"recycling categories, emerging analysis, and conclusions back through … respondents" (Lather, 1986, p. 78)—helped to sharpen the final analysis in ways that I describe in Chapter 4. In addition, because each of our discussions built on previous ones, emerging analyses had already been "recycled" back through the group and collaboratively (re)constructed in an iterative process that strengthened the "face validity" of this study (Lather, 1986). Ultimately, however, it is my analysis—informed by and co-constructed with participants—presented in this dissertation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research study was not to reach definitive conclusions about what abolitionist teacher praxis is or ought to be. Finality and absolute truth are not the aims of critical or emancipatory research (Lather, 1991; Madison, 2020). Moreover, I do not claim that this small sample is in any way representative of all abolitionist teachers. The goal of this study, rather, was for all members of the study group to sharpen our understandings of the PIC and PIC abolition, to increase our capacities to act in ways that might bring about an abolitionist future, and, through our discussions and analysis, to collectively generate knowledge that might be useful to others who hope to do the same. Lather (1991) proposes

> that the goal of emancipatory research is to encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the researched at least as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge. To do this, research designs must have more than minimal reciprocity. (p. 60)

The creation of a study group seemed to me a straightforward way to achieve these goals and to maximize reciprocity.

Furthermore, study groups have always played an important role in grassroots political struggles, from the Alabama Communist Party to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to the Combahee River Collective to the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 1970s (Kelley, 2016; Lather, 1991; Patel, 2021; Taylor, 2017). This study draws inspiration from those who have studied and struggled throughout history. My hope and belief is that, because of our participation in this study group, Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I are more equipped to struggle for a future free from oppression and exploitation.

Through studying together, discussing, checking in, sharing food, and sharing laughter, the four of us built relationships. The reciprocity I have discussed throughout this chapter means that I have a responsibility to portray Eva's, Hope's, and Nikki's ideas honestly, in part because I believe they will read this dissertation. I owe them that much. I also owe them my honest analysis and critique, because I respect them as intellectuals. For this reason, in the next two chapters, which present my analysis of our discussions, I attempt to embody what Michelle Fine (1994) calls an "activist," rather than a "voices," stance. That is, I avoid a "romantic, uncritical, and uneven handling" of participants' "voices" (Fine, 1994, p. 22), and instead aim to live up to the "responsibility to assess critically and continually [my] own, as well as informants', changing positions" (p. 23). My hope and belief is that these chapters will provide abolitionists and educators (and those who are both) with ideas that serve as fruitful springboards for their own study and fuel for their struggle.

Chapter 3: Polic*ing*, Community, and the Fabrication of Social Order

> What is, so to speak, the object of abolition? Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society. The object of abolition then would have a resemblance to communism that would be, to return to Spivak, uncanny. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 42)

During our opening interview, when I asked Eva, "What does abolition mean to you," she replied,

> Abolition is creating and working for a world … without police and without prisons, but, like, going deeper than that. Because that's only, like, the tip of the iceberg. … I think this is really why, like, thinking about this in the context of education is seeing how those systems of policing and the systems of prison are really replicated … within the school. And so not to saying, like, "We don't have police anymore, we don't have prisons anymore," but we're also not replicating those same systems within other systems. And not just say, "Okay, like, these don't exist anymore," but still at school, like, you have to, like, it's one person at a time to go to the bathroom, and, like, you must walk in a straight line in the hallway, and all of these … small routines or expectations that we have that are still replicating or reinforcing the aspects of prison culture or police culture within other parts of the world.

For Eva, Hope, and Nikki, and for many abolitionist thinkers, the project of abolition involves not only abolishing the institution of *the police*[2], but also eliminating all forms of polic*ing* from society. Participants' desire to abolish polic*ing* and to excise policing from their teaching practice raises critical questions. What is polic*ing*? How is it "replicated" in schools? Which aspects of teaching are forms of policing, and which are not?

In the first part of this chapter, I explore participants' understandings of the institution of *the police* and the phenomenon of polic*ing*, especially in schools. I find that participants understood polic*ing* primarily through the language of *control*, especially when that control is enacted through the imposition of rules, which are enforced through surveillance, punishment, or coercion.

In the second part of this chapter, I take up participants' desire to create a *culture of community* in their schools and classrooms, which they saw as part of the work of creating the conditions needed for a world without police and prisons to be possible. They saw policing as antithetical to community, and schools as contradictory spaces where policing and community existed simultaneously.

To make sense of this contradiction, in the third part of this chapter I dive into an extended theoretical exploration of the concept of policing, with help from abolitionist

[2] At times throughout this chapter, I use italics to highlight a conceptual distinction between the institution of *the police* and the act of polic*ing*, which can be performed by individuals and institutions that are or are not *the police*. Furthermore, I use *the police* as a shorthand for state institutions ostensibly tasked with law enforcement (e.g., municipal and state police, county sheriffs, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Federal Bureau of Investigation). For convenience, I at times collapse state institutions of incarceration (e.g., state and federal prisons, city and county jails, juvenile correctional facilities, immigration detention facilities, Indian Country jails, military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories [Sawyer & Wagner, 2023]) into this shorthand category as well.

scholarship. An understanding of policing as a form of power aimed at *the fabrication of capitalist social order* helps us to comprehend why policing and community are antithetical, to understand why schools are contradictory spaces, and to refine our understanding of policing in schools as "control."

In the next chapter, I examine how participants experienced these contradictions in their classrooms and use their insights, in combination with the insights of abolitionist scholars, to suggest how they can move forward.

What are *the Police*? What is Polic*ing*?

At no point during our interviews or study sessions did I ask Eva, Hope, or Nikki directly to share their thoughts on what the police are, what they do, or why. But their comments throughout the study evince an understanding of the police as a violent and racist institution that seeks to control people for the purpose of maintaining status quo relations of power and property. In my opening interview with Hope, for example, she repeatedly responded to my questions about police, prisons, and abolition with comments about racism and her commitments to combating racism. When I asked how she saw these ideas as connected, she replied,

> The whole question of abolishing the police is grounded in White supremacy and racism. … We know that the violence that police are enacting is, like, by and large against people of color. … The whole prison system … stems from people of color not being seen as humans, and it's another tactic to get them out of society, to criminalize them. And these stories that we have been told about Black and Brown bodies are centuries old, and they started out as ways to incite fear, as ways to make Black and Brown people less human and to justify treating them as

> property and, like, these stories have not disappeared. [They're] still part of our cultural mindset, and now they're enacted through the police system, through the prison system.

The themes of racism, violence, social control, and property stand out in Hope's response. She seemed to understand police and prisons as contemporary iterations of past forms of racial social control, a view popularized by Michelle Alexander's (2012) *The New Jim Crow*, which Hope said she had read "about half of."

During our fifth study session, Hope challenged commonsense discourses about police officers as "peacekeepers" who have "strong connections with the community." She said,

> The means by which they are doing this—like, they are keeping peace through violence. They are being connected with the community through constant surveillance. Like, the ways in which they're doing all of this, like, "Oh, friendly connection" stuff is by dehumanizing people and bullying and entitlement and power trips.

When I suggested that these seeming contradictions demonstrated that fostering peace and community were not the true goals of police, Hope said, "In reality, the goal is protecting property," to which Nikki and I vocalized agreement, and Eva replied, "Yeah, if you look at, like, the historical foundations of policing."

Participants' conceptions of *the police* as a violent and racist institution are unsurprising given the context in which our study group was formed. Abolitionist ideas gained mainstream traction during the uprisings of 2020, protests that were sparked by police murders of Black people and that built on a decade of protests against racist police

violence (often referred to as "the Black Lives Matter movement"). Participants also brought to the study group their personal experiences with police, as well as everything they had learned from previous conversations, readings, and study groups. As our group progressed, participants read similar descriptions of police in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, which also emphasized the historical role of the police in protecting unequal property relations. In Part I of the text, for example, Kaba (2021) writes that "There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against Black people. … Everywhere, police have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo" (p. 14). Throughout the book, Kaba reiterates that police and prisons are "rooted in anti-Blackness, social control, and containment" (p. 55); that *the police* is "an inherently violent and deathmaking institution" (p. 128); and that police and prisons are focused on punishment, which is to say "inflicting cruelty and suffering on people" (p. 146).

Eva, Hope, Nikki, and Kaba's view of the police as an institution that enacts social control via surveillance, violence, and punishment for the purpose of maintaining race and class inequality is one shared by many abolitionist thinkers. And, like many abolitionist scholars, Eva, Hope, and Nikki understood polic*ing* as a phenomenon or activity that functioned beyond the institution of *the police*. They discussed policing in schools early and often, and at times explicitly. While introducing herself during our first study session, for example, Nikki said, "One of the things that brings me to this group is having had many years of experience in schools that are different amounts of policed, but policed in overt and obvious ways, as well as subtle and covert ways." Hope introduced herself next, and, in a similar vein, responded to the question "What brings you to this

group and what are you hoping to gain from it?" by saying, "I think that the structure of policing, even if there aren't police within my school, that approach to discipline and behavior is very much inherent in what we do … and we need to figure out something different."

Clearly, participants believed that policing took place in schools. But what, exactly, did they understand policing to be? Which aspects of teaching practice are forms of policing, and which are not? The answer to this latter question was not clear to participants, as I will discuss in the next chapter. But their comments throughout the study evince an understanding of policing as *control*, especially when that control is enacted through the imposition of rules, which are enforced through surveillance, punishment (typically in the form of exclusion), or coercion (i.e., threatened punishment).

"Schools are Full of Policing"

During our second study session, Nikki said, "a lot of what's wrong in schools is part of that same, like, policing-oriented, control-based society." For participants, this orientation toward policing and control in schools sometimes manifested in teachers dictating which student behaviors were acceptable or unacceptable. After telling a story about instructing her students to ask for something politely, for example, Hope said, "As I was relaying that story, I was like, 'Oh, am I, like, just policing them and telling them "You behave this way and not that way"?'" In posing this as a question to herself, Hope conveyed her uncertainty about whether such instruction was policing as well as an underlying belief that policing had something to do with controlling behavior.

Participants placed particular emphasis on the ways in which teachers and schools control students' bodies and movements. In the quotation that opens this chapter, as her

examples of "how those systems of policing and the systems of prison are really replicated … within the school," Eva named "it's one person at a time to go to the bathroom, and, like, you must walk in a straight line in the hallway." Nikki told me during her opening interview that Covid precautions at her school had allowed her students very little movement during the school day. She said,

> I'm thinking a lot about freedom of movement right now because that was something that the school I was at was really specifically, like, against quite a lot of times. … I had students talking about the school as a prison. So, like, they were not happy about having to stay in their classrooms all day. Obviously.

In Nikki's view, this was a form of control that was intended to inculcate docility and create—by force—an environment of calm: "Creating a situation where the only way to have calm is to make people stay in their one spot is very gross, and like, very much seems like what I've heard and read about happens in prisons." She picked up on this theme two months later, during our seventh study session:

> But I also think that, like, we really do spend so much energy tracking students' movements. And … I always struggle with how much of it is a safety thing and how much of it is a control thing. Because there's the very real situation that if something happens at the school, we have to be able to account for every single student and find them. … But on the other hand, … I often see it used as a way of controlling students and … trying to make them placid and docile.

Again, we can detect uncertainty in these comments. Is "tracking students' movements" a form of policing that harms students? Or is it a responsible action that keeps students safe? Can it be both?

In considering policing in schools, Eva also drew on a distinction between teacher actions made in the name of safety versus those motivated by a desire for control. In our opening interview, she mentioned that she had been reading *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators*, and that in the toolkit

> there's a piece of art that says, "Are my decisions grounded in a desire for safety or control," and I loved it so much that I … copied it, and I put it up … above the coffee machine in our work room, because I was like, "Everyone needs to see this, and especially some teachers more than others." Because … my classroom needs to be a safe learning environment, but when I'm making those decisions, … it should not be coming from a place of "I need to be controlling these children right now."

This piece of artwork by Molly Costello (which reads "Ask yourself; Are my actions grounded in cultivating SAFETY or CONTROL") is placed within a chapter in which Carla Shalaby (2021) writes,

> As educators, we are most often trained to leverage strategies of reward and punishment to control unruly bodies, to set the parameters for and definitions of goodness and badness, and to police young people into compliance. Like all forms of policing, classroom management follows a historical trajectory that serves certain social and economic goals by deciding who deserves freedom and who requires containment. Traditional classroom management strategies, which rely heavily on punishment and exclusion, are a key means through which schools do the work of prisons, and educators do the work of police officers. (p. 104)

Shalaby captures the ways in which Eva, Hope, and Nikki understood policing in schools: controlling students' bodies, dictating norms of good and bad behavior, and enforcing rules through punishment and exclusion.

Nikki drew out this emphasis on rules and punishment during our seventh study session. She said, "Schools are full of policing, even outside of the discussion of school resource officers. … A lot of places call them 'structures' and 'routines' but mean 'rules you have to follow or you will be in trouble.'" Nikki's implication was not that all structures and routines are necessarily forms of policing. Rather, it is the threat of punishment that makes them policing.

In schools, one of the most common forms of punishment is exclusion—removal from the classroom. For Hope, the propensity to exclude students grew out of an "understanding of justice [that] is rooted in police and imprisonment," what she referred to as the "mindset of the criminal justice system." In our closing interview, she said,

> Really, policing is—it comes out of a whole mindset and a whole way of thinking about right and wrong, and people as being good or bad, and a pretty simplistic and dualistic way of thinking about harm or wrongdoing. And that definitely comes into our school system when we think about good students and bad students and behaviors being right or wrong, and how we handle behaviors. If the go-to is to remove the student from the class … do we echo the prison mindset that … the solution to all of our problems is just remove the bad people and throw them away, and then we'll forget about them?

Hope's comments about "the prison mindset" may have drawn on an essay in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* coauthored with education scholar Erica Meiners. In the essay—the only

chapter of the collection specifically focused on schools—Kaba and Meiners write that, beginning in the 1970s, when "states implemented 'tough-on-crime' policies" that led to an explosion in the US incarcerated population, "a carceral logic, or a punishment mind-set, crept into nearly every government function, including those seemingly removed from prisons" (Kaba, 2021, p. 77).

Shalaby (2021) similarly argues that "the traditional logic of classroom management mirrors and parallels the logic of prison" (p. 107), and that educators therefore reproduce the ideas that justify the existence of prisons. Among these ideas, she lists

- Some people are bad and dangerous, and keeping good people safe requires disappearing the bad ones.
- Rules are clear, objective, and fair, so if people choose not to follow them, then they themselves are responsible for the consequences that follow.
- Punishment is a logical consequence for transgression, and the use of punishment prevents people from repeating their transgressions.
- Some people make rules and other people have to follow them.
- It is OK to throw people away. Some people deserve it. (Shalaby, 2021, p. 106)

These ideas about "good," "bad," and the need to "throw [bad] people away" echo Hope's comments about the "dualistic way of thinking" at the core of the "prison mindset."

As scholars of the school–prison nexus have noted, schools are a primary location for the perpetuation of these carceral logics and thereby justify, rationalize, and normalize

the existence of police and prisons. For example, schools implicitly transmit the message to students that some people are deserving and others are disposable and/or criminal (Anderson-Zavala et al., 2017; Annamma, 2018). Students receive this message when they are subject to or witness exclusionary discipline, but it is also baked into traditional grading systems: "failure and success—good and bad, smart and dumb—are preexisting pathways in every U.S. classroom, ready and waiting to frame students" (J. L. Jackson & Meiners, 2010, p. 28). This notion that some people are good and others are bad is foundational to both schools and prisons (Meiners, 2011a). When young people internalize this logic of disposability in school, whether through discipline, grades, or curriculum, it is no surprise that they grow up to believe that certain members of society deserve to be locked in cages.

Participants understood that "classroom management is a curriculum" (Shalaby, 2021, p. 105) and that their acts of policing—in particular the use of exclusionary discipline—taught their students to accept these carceral logics. During our sixth study session, Hope brought up a recent conversation she had had about abolition, during which her interlocutor had suggested that prisons had to exist to contain the small number of "people who are just very dangerous and … should not be out in society." Eva connected this idea to her classroom practice, saying she was thinking about

> teachers who are always sending kids out of the classroom, and … the message that sends to kids about, like, who is a part of our learning community? … Who is that .1% of people who are … too dangerous to be, you know, in society?

These comments evince an understanding that policing in all of its institutional manifestations is not only repressive, but also pedagogical. Through this "hidden

curriculum" in schools (Apple, 1995, 2019; Kumashiro, 2009), teachers shape the "common sense" that sustains police and prisons. Schools are not the only places where young people receive this carceral "common sense," but educators do play a significant role in producing people who unquestioningly believe that there are some individuals who are "too dangerous to be … in society."

In sum, Eva, Hope, and Nikki understood polic*ing* in schools as controlling students' bodies and behaviors and dictating acceptable ways of being through exclusionary punishment or the threat thereof. This understanding was undoubtedly connected to colloquial uses of "police" as a verb, but also to their understanding of *the police* as an institution that enacts social control via surveillance, violence, and punishment for the purpose of maintaining race and class inequality. Though participants' comments throughout the study demonstrated an understanding that policing in schools had an especially negative impact on students of color, and that norms regarding acceptable behavior were rooted in White, patriarchal, ableist expectations, these notions of social hierarchy and the emphasis on the *purpose* of policing often faded into the background, while an emphasis on *control in general* came to the fore. As I will discuss below and in the next chapter, this equation of policing with control created dilemmas for all four members of the study group, but a refocusing on the purpose of policing as *the fabrication of capitalist social order* can help us think through these dilemmas.

Eva, Hope, and Nikki did not view these acts of policing in schools as aberrations. Rather, they understood that policing was part of the normal, day-to-day functioning of schools. At the same time, however, they saw schools as fertile ground for sowing seeds

of community and cultivating the ethic of mutual care needed to make a world without police and prisons possible.

Creating a Culture of Community

At the end of our seventh study session, when we had finished reading *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, each of us named our biggest takeaways from the study group. I went last and said,

> Probably the biggest idea that I've taken away from this is the focus on community. I feel like that was a theme that came up in so many of our conversations. And when I've thought about abolitionist teaching in the past, I think I've thought a lot about, like, doing discipline differently. And I've thought a lot about, like, teaching, like, critical consciousness, but I haven't thought as much of, like, trying to inculcate … a certain type of culture in a classroom, or certain ways of being that are, like, really community-focused.

Indeed, *community* was a theme that appeared time and again throughout our interviews and study sessions. Echoing this recurrent theme in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, Eva, Hope, and Nikki saw the building of strong communities—groups of people with durable relationships who could care for each other and create space for genuine accountability—as essential to creating a future without policing and imprisonment. They believed their schools and classrooms were spaces where they could foster such strong relationships and such an ethic of mutuality, and that this was a core part of their work as abolitionist teachers.

Hope's comments during our closing interview encapsulated this idea:

> There are a lot of practices [in schools] that the wider society could learn from, [like] restorative circles and Responsive Classroom, like having morning meeting, starting it all out with "We are a community, we all belong. Anything that happens, we're going to sit together, and we're going to talk about [it], and we're going to deal with it, and we're going to do it in a communal way." … We have a vested interest in forming communities in our classroom. We are doing the work that … makes policing not necessary. That is our work, in a very small level.

Hope suggested that communities that could address conflict "in a communal way" without excluding anyone would make policing "not necessary," a sentiment echoed in the title of Geo Maher's (2021) book, *A World Without Police: How Strong Communities Make Cops Obsolete.* Hope believed that building such strong communities in schools was one way—perhaps the primary way—in which teachers could make a small contribution to creating an abolitionist future.

This idea of making police and prisons obsolete (Davis, 2003) takes up the common refrain among abolitionist thinkers that abolition is not only about tearing down death-making institutions, but also about creating institutions and practices that support collective life. As Kaba (2021) writes on the very first page of the first essay in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, "PIC abolition is a positive project that focuses, in part, on building a society where it is possible to address harm without relying on structural forms of oppression or the violent systems that increase it" (p. 2). Building this kind of society requires that people see ourselves as interconnected and that we have practiced addressing harm and conflict without punishment. Participants saw schools as fertile ground for such practice, and for cultivating such dispositions.

Similarly, participants recognized that the kinds of restorative justice practices they wanted to implement in order to move away from punishment in their schools and classrooms required strong relationships among students and school adults. Nikki, for example, said, "Both restorative justice and transformative justice require people to … have those strong ties and want to continue to have them," and that this was why many teachers and school leaders were "working really actively to build and reinforce school as community." Eva said that she felt "really lucky" that her school "really valued community" and kept students grouped together for years. She said that her students genuinely apologized to each other and tried to repair harm when it occurred, because "they all cared about creating this community." Participants felt that a primary obstacle to implementing restorative justice in schools was the scarcity of time, and in particular a lack of time dedicated to building relationships. As Nikki said, "Community building is a slow process, and schools keep getting faster and faster."

Despite this challenge, Eva, Hope, and Nikki felt that schools were excellent places to begin sowing seeds of community. In our opening interview, Nikki said that in her ideal vision of school, "It's an environment where we can provide a lot of the things that prevent people from committing crimes, that enable us to create this world where we don't need police." She felt that the 13 years children spend in K-12 made schools good settings for imparting skills that support collectivity, like "learn[ing] how to ask for and receive and give help." Hope expressed this sentiment even more strongly, stating that "schools are the perfect place" for practicing restorative and transformative justice. In a later session, she added, "If it comes to, like, peacekeeping and shaping people to live together, to develop community, to understand one another, like, [school] is where it's

happening." In her school, she said, "There are lessons that are being explicitly taught about emotions and community and relationships. It's a place to start." She felt that the "wider society" could learn a lot from the work being done in classrooms to repair harm without punishment, a perspective shared by Kaba and Ritchie (2022), who argue that schools "can serve as critical laboratories to practice and multiply abolitionist futures" (p. 153).

Participants did not only view community as the "antidote to the police" (Maher, 2021, p. 137); they also saw policing as antithetical to community. As noted above, Eva understood that sending one student out of the classroom sent a message to all students that some do not belong in the learning community. As Shalaby (2017) writes, "exclusion does not build community—it destroys it. … When a child is excluded, it teaches the other children that belonging to the classroom community is conditional, not absolute" (p. 162). The same held true for participants with respect to *the police* and the broader community. As Hope stated in an aforementioned quote, the police's use of "violence," "surveillance," and "power trips" run counter to the ideas of peace, mutuality, and community. The police are not part of a community and not accountable to it (Maher, 2021). Instead, the institution maintains a top-down relationship to a community through surveillance, and it divides communities by dehumanizing and criminalizing certain groups and individuals. Police officers are aware of this dividing role: they see themselves as a "thin blue line" between the "lawful citizens" and the "dangerous classes"—an inherently racist outlook that they proclaim loudly and proudly (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022; Wall, 2021).

If policing is antithetical to community, how can schools be "full of policing" and, at the same time, fertile ground for sowing seeds of community? To make sense of this contradiction, the next section dives into an extended theoretical exploration of the concept of policing, with help from abolitionist scholarship. An understanding of policing as a form of power aimed at *the fabrication of capitalist social order* helps us to deepen our recognition of the antagonism between policing and community, to consider why schools are contradictory spaces, and to refine our conception of policing in schools as "control."

The Fabrication of Social Order

Like Eva, Hope, and Nikki, many abolitionist scholars understand polic*ing* as a phenomenon or activity that functions beyond the institution of *the police*. While these scholars offer a range of understandings of what precisely constitutes polic*ing*, many have approvingly cited Mark Neocleous's (2021) argument that what this form of power aims to do is to *fabricate capitalist social order*. In *A Critical Theory of Police Power: The Fabrication of Social Order* (originally published in 2000 as *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power*), Neocleous traces early uses of the concept of "police" in Europe, where the term was used interchangeably with "policy" to denote "the management and direction of the population by the state" in order to "promote general welfare and the condition of good order" (Neocleous, 2021, p. 53). As the bourgeoisie rose to power and increasingly defined "general welfare" and "good order" as synonymous with profit and the bourgeois mode of production, "so the police mandate was to fabricate an order of wage labour and administer the class of poverty" (Neocleous, 2021, p. 48). Police thus sought to criminalize and drive out means of

subsistence that did not depend on wage labor—in other words, "to *make the working class work*" (Neocleous, 2021, p. 132, emphasis in original).

At the same time, to create good capitalist subjects—non-rebellious wage workers—requires more than force; it requires the administration of everyday life. What was understood in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries as the "police" mandate "meant everything that we would now call 'policy', including welfare, education, urban planning and, of course, law enforcement" (McQuade & Neocleous, 2020, p. 3). It was only during the late-19th and early 20th centuries that "functions and activities previously subsumed under the police idea - refuse, road cleansing, welfare, health and the administration of poverty - were gradually separated off from the notion of police and increasingly managed by other state bodies" (Neocleous, 2021, p. 182). While the names of these bodies changed, "the function remains the same" (p. 183). Welfare and uniformed police are thus "integrated parts of one police system, operating alongside each other towards the constitution of labour power as a commodity" (p. 164). Neocleous sees

> these other emergent 'services' and 'departments' as part of … the functional differentiation of the police project, within which the *expansive* nature of the police function remained, but was carried out by services and institutions which increasingly went under different names. … It is not that policing was narrowed down to the prevention and detection of crime, but that police work was passed over to other administrative agencies dedicated to ordering the lives of citizens, notably those of the working class who might not work willingly, be 'decent' ('proper') in public and 'orderly' at all other times." (p. 183, emphasis in original)

Polic*ing*, then, is performed by all state agencies—including schools—that produce workers who are docile, proper, and orderly by dominant bourgeois standards.

The police project was necessary to the early formation of the capitalist order, when workers had to be forcefully torn from communal relations of subsistence and made into wage workers. Neocleous argues that police power continues to play this role: not only *repressing* working-class struggle and *reproducing* social relations, but actively *fabricating* a social order based on wage labor and private property. This was and is a project of "world making" (Correia & Wall, 2021, p. 9), of fashioning a social order in the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Because private property is fundamentally insecure, capitalist order continues to require police power to "secur[e] the system of social domination" (Neocleous, 2021, p. 141). Neocleous, along with others, calls this a project of *pacification*. This concept is useful in that it

> brings together a variety of social regulatory mechanisms—the coercive power of police and military agencies, the light touch of surveillance, and social policy more broadly—into a holistic and integrative account of the productive power of capitalist states to shape the societies they govern. (McQuade, 2019, pp. 28–29)

In other words, capitalist states use a combination of strategies to fabricate and maintain capitalist social order: "The security apparatus and social policy are the iron hand and velvet glove that pacify class struggle" (McQuade, 2019, p. 53).

Pacification also connects contemporary police power to histories of colonization (Neocleous, 2011). Colonizers have always used more than force in their attempts to conquer and subdue Indigenous peoples, because brute force breeds forceful resistance.

To pacify insurgent resistance, therefore, colonizers have used counterinsurgent methods, including ideology and culture (Cabral, 1974), to produce "ideal citizen-subjects of capitalism" (Neocleous, 2011, p. 198). Özcan and Rigakos (2014) write that "the projects of pacification concern the practices of everyday life, human subjectivity, and social order, and therefore involve information-gathering, teaching trade and its values, education, the construction of a free market, and integration into the global world economy" (pp. 3–4). Seen in this light, these seemingly benevolent tactics can be understood as part of an integrated war strategy (Özcan & Rigakos, 2014).

At the same time that the European powers were beginning to colonize the Americas, similar processes of dispossession and pacification were taking place within Europe. "Pre-capitalist economies centred on the commons, which went beyond shared property (*the* commons) and entailed the shared knowledge and communal organisation of social life (practices of commoning)" (McQuade & Neocleous, 2020, p. 3, emphasis in original). As noted above, the state intervened "to transform commons into private property, dispossess and uproot the people from the land, and rebuild social order through the wage relation" (McQuade & Neocleous, 2020, p. 3). Marxists refer to this process as "so-called primitive accumulation" (Marx, 1887, p. 508) or "original accumulation," and understand that capitalism requires continuous renewals of this kind of dispossession (Coulthard, 2014). Tearing people from communal means of subsistence and relation to land and making them into wage workers "depend[ed] in part on brute force and in part on a range of powers of discipline and regulation" (Neocleous, 2011, p. 194)—in short, this was and is a project of pacification.

This concept of pacification, which theoretically links colonialism and capitalism—both always racialized—helps us to understand the police power as *class warfare*, which is also always racialized. The bourgeoisie uses the "iron hand" of the Repressive State Apparatus—police, prisons, the military—to wage this war by force, and the "velvet glove" of social policy—welfare, schools—to pacify (potential) enemy combatants (Althusser, 1971; McQuade, 2019). The aim of this war is the fabrication and reproduction of capitalist social order. An important question, addressed below, is which of these implements of class warfare can also be wielded by the working classes to fabricate a social order in the interests of the masses.

This understanding of the police power as a class war of pacification is compatible with radical Black, Indigenous, and abolitionist analyses of police and prisons as modalities of warfare. As Orisanmi Burton (2021) has summarized,

> For decades, Black radical activists and critical prison studies scholars have analyzed the US carceral regime as, variously, "class warfare" against racialized surplus populations, counterinsurgency warfare against political radicals, and racial genocide. … While these analytical approaches have various points of divergence, all of them posit that a major function of this undeclared war is to secure the conditions necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. … [T]he war schema is pervasive among people incarcerated in US prisons. (pp. 622–623)

In a similar vein, Robert Nichols (2014) states that "Indigenous critique … challenges the ideological distinction between the logic of war and the logic of social pacification" (p. 437). The structure of settler colonial warfare in North America has not disappeared; rather, the tactics by which this war is carried out have shifted from overt conquest to so-

called “crime control” (Nichols, 2014) and “the asymmetrical exchange of mediated forms of state recognition and accommodation” (Coulthard, 2014, p. 15).

Policing vs. Community

Understanding the police power as a pacifying project aimed at the fabrication of capitalist social order can help us to understand why, as Eva, Hope, and Nikki suggested, policing is antithetical to community. Building on Marx’s writing on so-called primitive accumulation and scholarship on racial capitalism, Jodi Melamed (2015) describes “capital as a system of expropriating violence on collective life itself,” requiring “the production of social separateness—the disjoining or deactiving of relations between human beings (and humans and nature)—needed for capitalist expropriation to work” (p. 78). Racial capitalism is a “technology of *antirelationality*” (p. 78, emphasis in original) that needs “to invalidate terms of relationality—to separate forms of humanity so that they may be connected in terms that feed capital” (p. 79). If people are to rely on the market, they must not rely on each other. If they are to work for a wage, they must not be able to collectively sustain themselves. The police power thus seeks to break communal relations and relations to land, fabricating capitalist social order through a

> relentless war of destruction against the commons and practices of commoning that still sustain the marginalised masses of humanity, and through the systematic colonisation of everyday practices of solidarity, life, love and care by the ‘soft power’ of social police. (McQuade & Neocleous, 2020, p. 4)

In short, “police are the antithesis of the commons” (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 215).

This antithesis helps to explain why many of the most significant challenges to capitalist terms of order have taken the form of maintaining or reestablishing communal

bonds and resources. Within the context of the prison, the "technology of *antirelationality*" *par excellence*, "intimacy, kinship, and care work become forms of rebellion: countertactics of war" (Burton, 2021, p. 625). More broadly, Melamed (2015) writes that "the Black radical tradition emerges out of the imperative for people of African origins and descent to 're-create their lives' and reassemble social bonds" (p. 79). Or, in Cedric Robinson's (2000) words, the Black radical tradition is "motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality" (p. 171). Melamed (2015) also points to "the integrative potential of Indigenous worldings to point the way to new relations for nurturing total social being (which is more than human) through the material activities of living" (p. 84).

While policing is a "world making" (Correia & Wall, 2021, p. 9) project aimed at fabricating a capitalist social order, abolition is a world-making project (Gilmore, 2022) aimed at fabricating a *communal* social order. For Kaba and Ritchie (2022), "the abolition of policing is about building a new world centered around 'the commons'" (p. 215). Maher (2021) writes that "the only antidote to the police is community, community, and more community" (p. 155). And McQuade and Neocleous (2020) write that "the antithesis of police is the commons" (p. 9).

Each of these scholars suggests that abolition is about creating institutions and practices that support collective life and make police and prisons obsolete (Davis, 2003). This is the building of what W. E. B. Du Bois (1998) and Angela Y. Davis (2005) have called "abolition democracy." Davis (2005) describes the concept thusly:

> When I refer to prison abolitionism, I like to draw from the DuBoisian notion of abolition democracy. That is to say, it is not only, or not even primarily, about

> abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions. … DuBois pointed out that in order to fully abolish the oppressive conditions produced by slavery, new democratic institutions would have to be created. Because this did not occur; black people encountered new forms of slavery—from debt peonage and the convict lease system to segregated and second-class education. The prison system continues to carry out this terrible legacy. (pp. 69–70)

A key question for contemporary abolitionists, then, is what kinds of "new democratic institutions" might be part of this project of abolition democracy? What deeds might help to rebuild the commons and collective life, and which practices fabricate capitalist social order?

The Contradictory Nature of Schools

Given this understanding of policing as a collaboration among state agencies to fabricate a capitalist social order, public (i.e., state-run) schools ought to be considered as part of the police project; educators are what Kaba and Ritchie (2022) call "soft police." Like uniformed police departments, public schools arose in the United States in the 19th century as a means of social control in response to the crisis posed by urbanization, industrialization, and immigration (Apple, 2019). The writings of the men who crafted the American Curriculum (Givens, 2021) reveal a concern with "the preservation of cultural consensus while at the same time allocating individuals to their 'proper' place in an interdependent industrialized society" (Apple, 2019, p. 76). Schools continue to mold young people into docile workers (Gabbard, 2018), "primarily reward[ing] students for order and compliance" (Stovall, 2018b, p. 51) and preparing them for unequal places in

the capitalist economy (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1995; Duncan, 2000). Practices of "classroom management" are particularly aimed toward "determining how to effectively compete in the marketplace, ensure order, eliminate waste, and define labor roles," and are "historically, materially, and ideologically connected" to practices used to manage enslaved labor on plantations and workers in factories (Casey et al., 2013, p. 46).

Like police and prisons, schools have functioned to pacify Black freedom struggles that threaten racial capitalism. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, White educators and philanthropists, in collusion with state actors, created a system of Black education in the South that they hoped would stifle revolutionary spirit and prepare Black youth for jobs as low-wage laborers in the emerging industrial economy (Watkins, 2001). For another example, Damien Sojoyner (2013, 2016) describes schools as a central site for Black radical organizing during the 1960s in Los Angeles, and illustrates how the city attempted to repress this organizing by placing police officers in schools, by teaching a curriculum meant to dampen radicalism, and by implementing discipline policies intended to criminalize Black youth. "Rather than a school to prison pipeline," Sojoyner (2013) suggests, "the structure of public education is just as and maybe even more so culpable in the enclosure of Black freedom, which in turn has informed the development of prisons" (p. 242).

At the same time, oppressed peoples have long viewed schooling as a tool that can be used as a means toward liberation and toward building abolition democracy. As Du Bois (1998) writes in *Black Reconstruction*, "The first great mass movement for public education at the expense of the state, in the South, came from Negroes. … Public education for all at public expense, was, in the South, a Negro idea" (p. 638). This "grass-

roots movement to build, fund, and staff schools" (Anderson, 1988, p. 19) was "class self-activity informed by an ethic of mutuality" (p. 5). In other words, schools were part of a conscious organized effort to establish collective self-determination, to build political power, to enact freedom as a fleshy, lived condition. A vision of liberatory schooling remained a centerpiece of Black liberation struggle through the Civil Rights Movement and to the present day (Sojoyner, 2016).

Public schooling, then, is a site of political contestation (Apple, 2013; Kaba & Ritchie, 2022), a ground over which various classes battle as part of their larger struggle for power. These classes offer competing visions of schooling. To concede that White bourgeois visions of schooling are all that schooling can be is to take a top-down, non-dialectical approach. Sojoyner (2016) writes,

> The formal education of Black people *as articulated by the U.S. nation-state* has been about the suppression of Black freedom. Rather than looking at the official doctrine of the nation-state (that is, education policy) as a totalizing top-down force, it is key to understand it as a *reactionary* agent against the mobilization of Black people, with education being the linchpin. (p. xi, emphasis added)

This dialectical view allows us to see that schooling is not a singular thing, but is in fact contradictory, a tool utilized by oppressed and oppressor to build a social order according to their interests. Schools are not only the master's tool (Lorde, 2007), though the master certainly has a firm grip on them. The object of abolitionist analysis, then, is not only the tool itself, but rather who controls that tool and how and to what ends they use it (Gilmore, 2022).

Teachers play a part in the police project of fabricating capitalist social order yet simultaneously hold the potential to contribute to the liberatory world-making project of abolition democracy. Whether or not they think in these terms, many teachers know this contradiction intimately: they are institutionally mandated to "manage" students, yet at the same time create deep and meaningful bonds with many of them. Parents know it too: they may have sharp critiques of their children's schools, but will nonetheless fight to defend them against organized abandonment (Ewing, 2018; Gilmore, 2022).

Eva, Hope, and Nikki's descriptions of schools as "full of policing" and as fertile ground for sowing seeds of community evince an underlying understanding of the contradictory nature of schools. On the one hand, they saw schools as traditionally oriented toward control and, in Hope's words, "as being grounded in a White racial framework, as having been established as a method of forcing people to assimilate to Whiteness." As Nikki stated during our opening interview, "The way it's always been done tries to control students' bodies and minds and make them more compliant in a way that is consistent with and probably preferred by a police state." On the other hand, they believed that schools could be something different. Nikki said that, despite the controlling nature of schools, she was "holding [onto] this idea of schools as community spaces to serve the actual needs of the community in partnership." While she acknowledged that "schools can be really individualistic," she knew that "some teachers are … creating little pockets of community inside of a system that might not be set up for it." These comments resonate with the idea of *fugitive pedagogy* (Givens, 2021), suggesting that teachers can contribute to liberation even while working within a state-run institution.

Conclusion: Policing is More Than Control

As noted above, Eva, Hope, and Nikki's desire to create community, alongside their understanding of policing as *control* and as antithetical to community, led to a dilemma. They recognized that exercising authority to enforce rules and norms, which feels and sounds a lot like control, is an inherent part of the teaching profession, and even part of their attempts to create a culture of community. As Hope asked during our closing interview, "If I'm the one who gets to decide what is okay to do or not do, or say or not say, does that make me the police?"

But policing is not the same thing as control—it is a particular kind of control aimed at particular ends. Neocleous (2021) argues that "the police power involves a set of apparatuses and technologies not only fabricating social order in general but the law of labour in particular" (p. 22). In their introduction to *Violent Order: Essays on the Nature of Police*, David Correia and Tyler Wall (2021) write, "Police fabricate order. The task is thus to identify whose interests that order serves and how it is brought into the world" (p. 3). Taken together, these statements imply that not all forms of order-making are policing. Policing is the fabrication of *capitalist* order (i.e., order serving the interests of the bourgeoisie) *or* the fabrication of any order brought into the world by means of punishment or the threat of punishment.

Understanding policing in this way, and seeing schools as contradictory, can help us to tease out which uses of teacher authority are forms of policing, and which are not. While the foregoing discussion of policing suggests that all state institutions play a part in the policing project, the contradictory nature of schooling suggests that teachers can nonetheless contribute to building a new social order, as George Counts dared them to do over 90 years ago (Counts, 1932). Abolition is not about the absence of any kind of social

order; if we are to get to a world without police, without prisons, without capitalism, we must build a new, communal social order. As Harney and Moten (2013) argue, abolition is about "the founding of a new society," one that would have an "uncanny" "resemblance to communism" (p. 42). Like the current capitalist social order, this "post-capitalist social order … will need to be fabricated from existing components" (Rigakos, 2020, p. 158); it will need to be *made*, beginning with people as they are now. Part of that work is the creation of "new norms" (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 201)—collective shifts in ways of being. Abolition is about "wholly eradicating police power from our social relations and institutions *and* naming the social order we want to create" (Kaba & Ritchie, 2022, p. 223, emphasis added).

Teaching is part of this naming. As Nikki stated during our second study session, "Schools are where we as a society say, 'Here's who we want to be,' and replicate [that]." This is, in a sense, a form of control, but one that can be aimed at very different ends than policing. During our closing interview, when I asked Nikki, "How do you see schools as being related to the institutions of police and prisons, if at all," she replied,

> They are agents of the state that are trying to—all three—define … what our society is. … [T]hey do it in different ways sometimes, and in similar ways sometimes. But … I do think that schools are how society creates where we want to go with society. And that's, like, still a controlling position to be in. … But I also think one of the big differences is I do think educating youth is a cultural need. I do not think imprisoning people is a cultural need.

Nikki seemed to suggest that the fabrication of some sort of social order is a necessity. The question is what kind of social order that will be, and how it will be made. While

schools “sometimes” collude with police and prisons to (re)produce a capitalist social order, teachers can also work to “shift the culture of society.”

This is the work that Eva, Hope, and Nikki understood themselves to be doing: contributing in a small way to the building of a new social order, one rooted in a culture of community. As I will explore further in the next chapter, this work involves, at times, using their authority. But this is not synonymous with policing. When teachers use their authority to assert boundaries and practice accountability rather than to punish or coerce, and when they use that authority to inculcate democratic, communal dispositions rather than to produce atomized, pacified workers, they are not doing the work of policing.

Chapter 4: "It's Very Closely Tied in With the Police State": Navigating Teacher Authority

As discussed in the previous chapter, Eva, Hope, and Nikki sought to shift their classrooms and schools away from a culture of policing and toward a culture of community. As Nikki stated in our second study session,

> Schools are so, like, strict and rigid and staid, and if we can't imagine what they would look like in a way that's humanizing and empowering and community-oriented, we're not going to move. The same point [Kaba's] making about envisioning a society that doesn't have prisons. And I think the two are really closely connected, because a lot of what's wrong in schools is part of that same, like, policing-oriented, control-based society.

Nikki's comment implied an understanding of the opposition between a "community-oriented" school or society and a "policing-oriented" school or society—an opposition discussed at length in Chapter 3. With respect to schools, this distinction between policing, control, and authority on one hand, and community, democracy, and empowerment on the other, came up frequently in our conversations. But the boundary between these two orientations was not an easy one for participants to draw.

We understood that authority was an inherent part of our roles as teachers, and that we could even use our authority to shape our classrooms in ways that sought to foster a culture of community. At the same time, we felt that one person—the teacher—having more of a say in shaping a classroom than other members of that classroom was opposed to the notion of a democratic community.

In this chapter, I zero in on the tension participants felt between teacher authority and classroom community. As we were developing critiques of policing, we struggled to distinguish the authority inherent in our roles as teachers from oppressive practices of policing. I describe this as a "tension" because it pulled each of us in multiple directions. Teacher authority felt both indispensable and difficult to accept, making our decisions as teachers complicated and confusing. Our questions about teacher authority did not have easy answers, and while teacher authority and classroom community may appear to be a binary, in reality there is no definite boundary between these poles. This tension speaks to everyday decisions that teachers must navigate without a clear roadmap for what is right, wrong, antiracist, or abolitionist.

While the difficulty of navigating their use of authority sometimes led participants to feel "stuck," our discussions revealed ideas about how to move forward within the messy and ambiguous terrain of teaching. They also brought to the surface potential challenges for the implementation of an abolitionist approach to restorative justice (RJ) within schools. These findings suggest that abolitionist teaching is far from straightforward, and that abolitionist education scholars ought to address these tensions by studying teachers struggling to embody abolitionist practice.

Teacher Authority Versus Classroom Community

During our second study session, while discussing RJ approaches in the classroom, Nikki said,

> An important part for that for me is having … a venue for students to bring up issues as well. … Because I've been in school settings where a student is doing something that the teacher, including myself, has identified as, like, that is not

> what we need in this classroom right now. But that is, like, reinforcing the power structure where there's an authority figure that decides what is going on. And it's, I mean that's most of schooling; there's an authority figure that decides what's going on, and [pause] I think that's, um, [pause] I don't know, I mean, it's very closely tied in with the police state, and [pause] yeah, there's no "and;" I don't have a solution or an idea right now.

Nikki drew out an important tension here that points to the difficulty of implementing an RJ approach. She identified that the ideal of a truly democratic classroom community in which each member has an equal voice in deciding what goes on in the classroom is at odds with the authority baked into the project of schooling and the profession of teaching. I read in her pauses and in her statement that she did not "have a solution or an idea right now" that she was grappling with this tension, struggling to figure out how her authority as a teacher replicated policing and what she should do about it. She confessed that she was not sure.

Hope expressed similar uncertainty about how to navigate this tension. A few minutes later, as we were discussing moves that teachers could make to foster an ethic of collectivity in their classrooms, she said,

> I think that a part of it is creating the expectation early in the year that this is what I define—or, again, it's like this top-down model, but I don't know, but, like, this is what is defined as 'successful.' Like we listen to each other, we help each other. And reframing that definition of success.

It was clear that Hope wanted to create a classroom community where listening and helping were valued. But in the middle of talking about creating community, she

interrupted herself and recognized that the community ethic she hoped to cultivate appeared to be at odds with her authority as a teacher, which gave her the power to impose these values from the top down and to unilaterally define what "success" looked like in her classroom. As I interpret them, Hope's hesitation and her statement, "I don't know," demonstrate that she, like Nikki, was struggling to figure out how to navigate the tension between teacher authority and classroom community. She wanted to create a strong community, but was unsure of how to square this democratic desire with the fact that it was *her* desire that dictated the norms for everyone in her classroom. Here she temporarily avoided dealing with this complexity by removing herself—the teacher—from the narrative. She shifted from the active voice of "I define" to the passive voice of "this is what is defined," and in her last sentence the "reframing" has no subject.

Hope would, however, continue to directly address this tension as the study group progressed. In our closing interview, when I asked her about how her understanding of abolition informed the way she thought about schools and her work as a teacher, she replied,

> It makes me think about how I deal with students in my classroom. Okay, so if I'm the one who gets to decide what is okay to do or not do, or say or not say, does that make me the police? How do we create an environment in which we are all responsible and everyone is respected? It's not a top-down system.

Three months after making the comments quoted above, Hope was still grappling with this question, still struggling to figure out which aspects of her job as a teacher were replicating policing. Studying abolition had not provided clear answers, but engaging with abolitionist ideas had pushed Hope to think critically about this question and about

how she could create a classroom environment that respected her students' voices and agency. In the remainder of this chapter, I dive more deeply into the concept of authority and attempt to tease out how teacher authority is and is not like policing.

When is Authority Oppressive? What Makes a Teacher's Authority Legitimate?

Is any use of authority in the classroom oppressive? Should we avoid using our authority and try to create a completely horizontal classroom structure? Is that possible? Or are there ways to use one's authority as a teacher that are not oppressive?

Paulo Freire argued that there was an important distinction between *authority* and *authoritarianism*. He was clear in his later work that respecting students' freedom and engendering democratic dispositions did not mean relinquishing authority or evading the responsibility of making decisions. He wrote, "we tend to confuse a certain use of authority with authoritarianism; and likewise, because we deny this, we fall into a lack of discipline or permissiveness, thinking, however, that we are respecting freedom and thus creating democracy" (Freire, 2005, p. 113). For Freire, permissiveness was not the route to democracy; in fact, democracy required that teachers use their authority to set limits on students' freedom. He argued that teachers were not mere facilitators:

> While educators divest of an authoritarian educational practice, they should avoid falling prey to a laissez-faire practice under the pretext of facilitating. On the contrary, a better way to proceed is to assume the authority as a teacher whose direction of education includes helping learners get involved in planning education, helping them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education, rather than merely following blindly. …

> The radical educator has to be an active presence in educational practice. (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379)

In Freire's philosophy, taking part in directing students' education is not only teachers' pedagogical task, but also their political task. The teacher who instead falls back on a "laissez-faire pedagogy," who "refuses to convince his or her learners of what he or she thinks is just," "ends up helping the power structure" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 378). Furthermore,

> in de-emphasizing the teacher's power by claiming to be a facilitator, one is being less than truthful to the extent that the teacher turned facilitator maintains the power institutionally created in the position. That is, while facilitators may veil their power, at any moment they can exercise power as they wish. The facilitator still grades, still has certain control over the curriculum, and to deny these facts is to be disingenuous. (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 378)

Teachers cannot truly eschew their authority even if they want or claim to; this authority is an inherent aspect of their position.

Following this line of reasoning, I would argue that when Hope defines "success" in her classroom as "we listen to each other, we help each other," she is imposing her values from the "top-down" in a manner that is *authoritative* but may not be *authoritarian*, depending on how she communicates and enforces these norms. She is helping her students to develop the democratic dispositions that will allow them to participate collectively in directing their education. Or, to use the framework presented in Chapter 3, she is attempting to inculcate the norms of a communal social order.

K. Wayne Yang (2009) makes a similar distinction between authority and authoritarianism, rejecting both the "Repressive" classroom and what he calls the "Liberal" classroom, where engagement is high but a lack of structure creates a permissive environment. Yang (2009) advocates instead for teachers to implement structure to create a "Disciplined" classroom, using the term "discipline" not in the sense of punishment but to denote the pursuit of "a rigorous craft that demands intensive work and painstaking creativity towards a common goal" (p. 53). For Freire (2005), part of the work of teachers is to help learners "generate discipline in themselves" (p. 105), and this cannot occur within a "climate of lawlessness, of free-for-all" (p. 112). At the same time, Freire argued that "no one can bestow or impose such discipline on someone else" (p. 52).

Nikki made several comments throughout our study group that suggested that she also viewed cultivating discipline as an important part of her work, but struggled to do this in a way that was not authoritarian. Using her own work as an example, she said, "I know that there are times when you are not having fun, because you are trying to do something that you believe in." In other words, self-discipline might involve negating one's short-term desires, persisting through difficulty, and at times doing things one does not feel like doing in order to work toward long-term goals. But the attempt to instill this discipline in students is complicated by the fact that it is *their* desires *we* must negate. Furthermore, students do not determine the long-term goals toward which they are working. Nikki recognized this complexity:

> I feel like I have an obligation to students and their families to help them learn how to have that persistence. But … where does it … cross the line too much into "Oh, I say we need to do this and so we're doing it?"

She elaborated this idea further during our second study session:

> A lot of the time … students aren't, like, self-motivating to learn the thing that they're in school for. And so, like, they might be interested, or engaged, or all of these other great things; they might be curious people, but there's, like, this set curriculum—or standards, rather—and I don't know how to, like, functionally say, on the one hand, "Here is what we need to learn, because x, y, and z person says so," and "Here's why it's important to you." … The bottom line is that my students won't be showing up to me in the fall because they said, … "Oh, I've identified that I don't have reading skills to where I want them to be; let me practice and seek out help." And so then there's an element of, like, the school is telling them what to do as, like, the baseline. And so how do—can we disentangle that from other times when school adults are telling students what to do?

Nikki recognized that helping her students develop self-discipline required that she demonstrate the intrinsic importance of the content knowledge she was mandated to teach. As she noted during our closing interview, she felt fine saying to students, "I think you need to learn how to read because x and y, z, and I have this power and I'm going to use it to try and convince you to agree." But she also recognized that when her ability to convince failed, students would still have to follow her directions simply because she, or her school, or the curriculum standards said so. In other words, she would have to fall back on a more authoritarian use of power.

The distinction between authority and authoritarianism serves as a helpful reminder for teachers that using their authority is necessary and not always oppressive. But, as Nikki's comments illustrate, this distinction does not resolve the tension between teacher authority and classroom community. Teachers still have to figure out when and how to use their authority and when it crosses a line into policing or authoritarianism. This line is not clearly defined.

Moreover, if we accept that teachers can use their authority in non-authoritarian ways, the question remains, what makes their authority legitimate? Why should teachers like Eva, Hope, Nikki, and me have the power to make decisions about what happens in classrooms composed of 20 or 30 individuals? Freire argued that a teacher's authority was derived from their subject matter knowledge (Freire & Macedo, 1995). This knowledge, according to Freire, gives the teacher not only the right but also the responsibility to make decisions that structure classroom dialogue and direct students' engagement with that body of knowledge. I would add that a teacher's pedagogical skill is also part of what makes their authority legitimate. Nikki echoed these ideas during our final study session:

> As the teacher your role is you have the best skill set of anyone in that classroom to help people learn to know math or science or whatever. Students might know a lot of things about a topic but they don't have that skill set.

In theory, a community consents to entrust teachers with the care and education of its children because of this combination of pedagogical and content knowledge. In reality, parents and community members do not have much of a choice; they are compelled by

law to send their children to school whether or not they believe the teachers' authority to be legitimate. I return to this complexity later in this chapter.

The Follow-Up Study Session

Six months after the study group's conclusion, the four of us met for a follow-up study session, for which Eva, Hope, and Nikki read a draft of this chapter. Our discussion during that session generated some ideas that help to clarify the distinction between authority and authoritarianism. These ideas cannot entirely resolve the tension between teacher authority and classroom community, but they might help teachers sort out when their uses of authority do and do not replicate policing.

Competent vs. Coercive Authority

During our follow-up study session, participants shared that they found the distinction between authority and authoritarianism to be helpful. They also gravitated toward the idea that a teacher's authority rests in their content and pedagogical knowledge. This idea led Nikki to challenge one of the assertions I made above: that Hope's desires dictated the norms for everyone in her classroom. Nikki pointed out that "that's not actually just her desire, because as a teaching professional there is a whole body of research and practice." Nikki added that it can be "so easy to feel like you're just saying, 'Oh, I have the power here. I get to decide what to do,'" when in reality these are not arbitrary decisions made by individuals; they are backed up by research and by best practices that educators have worked through collectively across decades. Her implication was that such individually-made decisions based on teachers' whims might be authoritarian, but decisions based in "research and practice" are not, and that remembering this might help teachers feel better about using their authority.

Eva replied that, in her efforts to empower students and create community, she did sometimes forget that she had expertise:

> Sometimes, like, I, or maybe we, like, want to put yourself kind of on the same level as your students. Like, "We're all a part of this community. And, like, our ideas and our hopes and our dreams are valued, and this is how we should create this community." But that, yeah, I forget, like, yes, I am trained in—like, this is something I went to school [for].

She added that, in trying to give students "choice and voice," teachers sometimes "undermin[e] our own authority and knowledge," and that teachers "do, in some ways, know more than" their students. These comments reiterated the idea that the legitimacy of a teacher's authority rests in their pedagogical and content knowledge.

Hope also agreed with Nikki's point, and highlighted the fact that teachers work constantly to collectively hone their practice:

> You're right, it's not just me deciding, "I have the best ideas; … I'm going to make everybody do this." It is … my educator training; it is all the PD that I do; it is all of the walkthroughs and all of the supervising and all of the observations and, like, the countless discussions that we have every day about what is best practice, how do we do this, what do we need to … see in our classroom[s]? … We're all constantly working on and constantly talking about and constantly changing our classrooms so that it can be an effective place where we meet the goals that need to be met.

This line of thinking seemed to help participants feel more comfortable in their roles by shifting the weight of authority off of their individual shoulders and onto the teaching profession as a collective.

The problem of authority remains, however, since students do not have much say in determining "the goals that need to be met" in school. Teachers also do not determine these goals; they are determined by district, state, and federal policymakers, who are influenced by corporate textbook publishers, curriculum writers, and philanthropists, as well as the political climate and the dictates of the economy (Apple, 1982b, 1995, 2019; Au, 2018). But because teachers are in the position of putting these goals into practice, they are vested with the authority of the state to enforce them (Vaught, 2017). This is a different kind of authority, one not rooted in content or pedagogical knowledge.

Later during the follow-up study session, I told a story about a former coworker that attempted to draw out a distinction between these types of authority. This coworker, who had no experience or training as an educator, was hired just weeks before a new school year began only because there was no one else available to fill the position. Based on our discussion up to that point, I suggested that this coworker's authority was not legitimate because "he didn't have the training or the pedagogical knowledge." I said that "the kids really didn't listen to him because he … had no idea what he was doing as a teacher," but then added that students could "get in trouble and get punished" for not listening to him, even though his authority was illegitimate. For me, this story illustrated that

> There are really good reasons for us to, like, have authority in our classrooms, because we do know what we're doing in a lot of ways, … and some of our

> authority comes from that. Like, kids will listen to you more if they believe you are a good teacher. But then also some of our authority comes from the sort of more, like, coercive elements of our positions.

My comments suggested a distinction between what sociologist Dennis Wrong calls "competent authority" and "coercive authority." Wrong (1995) defines *competent authority* as "a power relation in which the subject obeys the directives of the authority out of a belief in the authority's superior competence or expertise to decide which actions will best serve the subject's interests and goals" (p. 53). In other words, competent authority is operative when students follow a teacher's rules and instructions because they believe the teacher has their best interests in mind and knows how to achieve those interests (Macleod et al., 2012). Teachers use their competent authority when they draw on their content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of students. If that authority fails—if students do not listen to teacher instructions—then teachers can fall back on another form of power: persuasion. They can explain to students why they are giving a specific instruction, and how that instruction is rooted in their expertise.

But teachers can also fall back on other forms of authority, including *coercive authority*, or the threat of force (Wrong, 1995). Coercive authority is operative when students follow a teacher's rules and instructions because they believe that they will be punished if they do not obey. This punishment might be in the form of psychological force (e.g., public humiliation) or physical force (e.g., removal from the classroom or school) (Macleod et al., 2012). Coercive authority requires constant surveillance, since students cannot be punished for acts that teachers do not see (Wrong, 1995).

This differentiation between competent and coercive authority helps give shape to the authority/authoritarianism distinction. While it may be difficult to disentangle these forms of authority in any given situation, this framework may help teachers think about how to act as an authority without acting as an authoritarian.

Relationships Over Rules

At another point during the follow-up study session, Eva told a story about a recent incident in her classroom, when she had to set "boundaries" after students took food that belonged to her. I replied that this use of the word "boundaries" was helpful for me, because

> Boundaries are good and healthy and part of all relationships and communities. Like it's totally legit to be like, "This is a boundary. Like, please don't do this thing." … People need to know that they shouldn't just take other people's things without asking. Like it is, you know, not authoritarian to say that. So I think sometimes I get a little stuck on, like, well, these are rules, and they're very top-down, and that's why it's authoritative, and—but, like, in reality, that's just a boundary. … You might say that to other adults in the building too, like, "Please don't just take my stuff," you know? So I think that, like, naming those boundaries and enforcing them is—seems legit to me.

Here I added another dichotomy to the competent authority vs. coercive authority/authoritarianism framework: that between boundaries and rules. Rules are enforced from the top down—in an authoritarian manner—and are to be followed simply because they are the rules. Boundaries, on the other hand, are "part of all relationships

and communities," and are followed out of respect for fellow community members. Violating a boundary harms a relationship.

Hope emphasized this distinction in her response. She said that she tried to use "'I' language" when talking to students, expressing how their behavior made her feel and how it impacted their relationship. She told a story about using "'I' language" with a particular student, and then concluded,

> I have tried to really be like, "... This isn't about you breaking a rule. This is about you hurting a relationship, right here." … And then instead of some sort of, like, arbitrary rule, or policing, or surveillance, it's the relationship that is on the line, which I think is more of what kids need to care about anyways. They're not gonna care about the rules. But if it's about the community and the relationship … that's what matters.

Hope suggested that when teachers assert boundaries and name harms to community and relationships, they are doing something other than policing. This focus on relationships is less "arbitrary" and top-down than a focus on rules, as long as students are also able to name when boundaries are crossed and relationships are hurt.

Nikki had also told a story earlier in our conversation that emphasized relationships and boundaries over rules and punishment. She said that she wanted to teach students "how to take responsibility for [their] choices," and mentioned a student who had, that same day, made a mess on her desk and then tried to leave the room without cleaning it up. Nikki said,

> And I was like, "Okay, well, I'm gonna tell the person whose desk it is," which was … my other teacher in my classroom. She's like, "Fine, I don't care." Then

> she came back and cleaned it up. Like, because, like, I'm not gonna try to be really punitive with you about this, but you made a mess in someone else's space. And you, like, you either clean it up or they know you made the mess are two very reasonable outcomes.

Nikki's response was not about punishing this student, but rather about imparting the lesson that failing to take accountability for one's actions can harm relationships. This student may have ultimately decided to clean up her mess because she did not want to hurt her relationship with Nikki's co-teacher.

This discussion about tending to relationships and boundaries rather than enforcing rules parallels much abolitionist discourse regarding practicing accountability, which can include consequences, instead of punishment. Kaba and Ritchie (2022) state that "abolition focuses on accountability rather than punishment" (p. 179), and they helpfully clarify the difference:

> Punishment is inflicting suffering for the sake of hurting someone, it does not require the person punished to do anything in particular but suffer the punishment; accountability is the voluntary process of stepping into responsibility for causing harm and committing to repair the harm. Whether or not a person steps into accountability, abolition contemplates consequences for acts of violence or harm. Consequences are nonpunitive responses that are necessary to increase safety for both the person harmed and the community. Importantly, these consequences do not deny the dignity and humanity of the person who caused harm, or their potential for transformation. (p. 179)

When we discussed these concepts during our sixth study session, which took up Part VI of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, "Accountability Is Not Punishment: Transforming How We Deal with Harm and Violence," participants emphasized that consequences ought to follow logically from the harm committed and seek to repair the harm or to prevent it from happening again. Consequences should "match up with their action," Eva said, whereas punishments simply inflict harm as a response to harm.

When teachers use their authority to facilitate practices of accountability, and even to enforce consequences, this is not the same as policing. These are practices that strengthen relationships and community, whereas policing is antithetical to relationships and community. Young people need to be guided into these practices of accountability, but they also need to be able to name when boundaries have been crossed, and to have a say in determining fair consequences. If these relationships are not reciprocal, they become authoritarian.

One of Hope's comments during our follow-up session also drew a distinction between community and the top-down imposition of rules. After I had told my story about my untrained colleague, she told a story about her first teaching job, which was a "long-term sub position." She said she had "zero idea what [she] was doing," that students would regularly tell her as much, and that the class felt like "a big waste of time for everybody." She said that what she needed in that situation was a set of

> community agreements that say that I'm gonna do my best; you're gonna do your best. I gotta have some understanding from my class. Alright, yep, I don't know what I'm doing, but we're gonna try to figure this out together. Which, again, makes it less of a top-down thing. And I think that, especially with a middle

> school crew, if you don't know what you're doing, coming in and being honest and upfront with them is a much better idea because they know anyways. … You're gonna have better luck if you don't go with a top-down authority and try to wield a whole bunch of authority and drum up a bunch of respect that you don't deserve and you don't have anyways. I don't know. I think it comes into community somehow.

Hope saw firsthand that wielding top-down authority did not create a productive learning environment in her classroom, and felt that she would have been better off attempting to create community agreements and mutual understanding with her students. This move away from rules and toward community agreements is one way of shifting from a "top-down model," as Hope had hinted at months prior. Teachers do not have to impose their values from the top down. They can determine classroom values in collaboration with students, and thereby "decenter it just being the teacher's opinion," as Nikki suggested during our second study session.

The contradiction within the term "community agreements" should not be ignored, however. Students do not actually "agree" to be part of a classroom community; they have no say in the matter. They may view a class as "a big waste of time," as Hope's students did, but they have to agree to tolerate the teacher—even one who has no competent authority—nonetheless. I return to this contradiction, and the compulsory nature of schooling, below.

Does Authority Contradict Community?

In Chapter 3, I argued that policing is antithetical to community. In a draft of this chapter, I suggested that a teacher holding authority over students contradicted the idea of

a democratic classroom community. But during our follow-up study session, Nikki suggested that, while policing and community are in contradiction, teacher authority and classroom community are not. Rather, teacher authority can be a healthy part of creating a classroom community. For Nikki, teacher authority is in tension with *student autonomy*, but does not contradict it:

> The police aren't necessarily part of the community, is very different than … the teacher as part of a community. … I think "student autonomy" is a little bit clearer about, like, what is the kind of other goal point here. … I'm trying to have both, right? Teacher authority and student autonomy. They're not contradictions, but that's the tension part.

Nikki's comment suggests that teaching is a balancing act, an attempt to hold teacher authority and student autonomy in tension. Both of these "goal point[s]" are necessary elements of a classroom community. A classroom without student autonomy is the "Repressive" or authoritarian classroom discussed above (Yang, 2009). But a classroom with complete student autonomy is unlikely to be an environment in which students are able to cultivate in themselves either the knowledge or the dispositions that we hope to foster in a democratic society. Without some sort of direction, a classroom is a "community" in only the loosest sense of the word.

Later, after Eva told a story about a student taking a classmate's shoe and throwing it around her classroom, she said, "How much bodily autonomy should a 12-year-old have in this space, you know? I don't know." I replied,

> Yeah, it's like, you can't let them just do whatever they want if that includes taking their classmate's shoes and throwing them around, right? So there have to

> be some limits set. And yeah, it's hard to figure out sometimes where to draw those limits.

Teachers have a responsibility to set some limits on students' behaviors. The tension for teachers is "where to draw those limits," how much autonomy to allow. We also have to think critically about how we communicate and enforce those limits—is it through punishment, or by some other means of accountability? Is the teacher the only one who can decide on where to draw the limits or name when a boundary has been crossed? Or do students have some voice in this process?

Returning to Nikki's point above, I said,

> We are saying that teacher authority is not contradictory to classroom community. Whereas policing *is* contradictory to community. So the question is really … what's the difference between authority and policing? Right? Because we can have that good authority without contradicting the community nature of things. But when it starts to slide into policing, then it is contradicting that, like, community ethos. And so the question is, like, where's that line?

What emerges from this discussion is the idea that not all forms of teacher authority are in tension with classroom community. In fact, some forms of teacher authority may be *necessary* for classroom community and for creating a safe environment. It is *policing*, or *coercive authority* that is antithetical to community. The task for a teacher, then, is to figure out "the difference between authority and policing," and to work to rid their practice of policing/coercive authority.

Remaining Tensions: Navigating Restorative Justice in State Schools

The foregoing discussion of the tension between teacher authority and classroom community raises important questions about coercion and consent that challenge any attempt to implement an abolitionist approach to RJ in schools. As Nikki noted above, most students do not show up to school each day because they have chosen to pursue the particular content knowledge on offer. Nor do they choose their teachers, classmates, the rhythms of their school day, or the kinds of work they must do. In my response to Nikki, I shared my belief that the non-consensual nature of schooling contradicted our efforts at RJ. I said,

> Many of us as teachers want to do these sort of restorative justice or transformative justice things. And I think that we can, like, move towards those. I'm not saying that … we can't do that at all. I think that we can make, like, huge improvements in the way that we do classroom management by moving towards those ideals, but there is, I think, this contradiction with, like, well, the students have to be there, right? They're compelled by law. Like the state potentially threatens them and their families with violence if they don't go to school, right? And dictates what they have to learn when they're in school so, yeah, exactly what you're saying, Nikki. It's hard to be like, "We're going to, like, give over authority to students to decide collectively when, like, a harm has occurred and what they need to do about it," but also, "We're going to tell them, 'you must be in this room, with these people, and you must be doing these things at this time.'" If they're like, "We just don't want to do that; … as a community, we want to be doing this other thing," like, they don't have that option. At least to, like, a full extent. You know, maybe there are some ways you can create structures in your

> classroom that do allow for some degree of choice and autonomy, right? But at the end of the day, I do think that contradiction within, like, a system of, like, compulsory state schooling is maybe not, like, resolvable? Maybe can't be reconciled? I'm not sure.

In this section, I elaborate on this contradiction, its connections to authority and community, and what it means for abolitionist teachers.

In a 2019 interview featured in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, Mariame Kaba defines RJ as follows:

> Restorative justice is focused on the importance of relationships. It is focused on the importance of repair when those relationships are broken, when violations occur in our relationships. It is very much interested in community, because it asks whose responsibility is it to actually meet the obligations and needs that are created through violation? It asks the community to step in fully, to be less of a bystander and more of an actor in trying to repair harm. (Kaba, 2021, p. 148)

Over the past 15 years, due in large part to grassroots organizing by students and families, schools across the United States have increasingly adopted RJ practices in the hopes of reducing suspensions and expulsions (Warren, 2021). One practice that has become common in schools is the RJ "circle process." According to Maisha Winn (2018), "Restorative justice circles, in the context of schools, are spaces for creating a participatory democracy or a movement toward 'non-domination,' requiring an 'equal voice' for all shareholders or community members" (p. 5). Circles are often used as an alternative to exclusionary discipline in order to understand the roots of conflict, harm, or "misbehavior" and to collectively generate solutions to repair relationships after such an

incident has occurred. Many experts, however, suggest that RJ is more effective when it is used proactively to build community and transform the entire culture of a school (Collins, 2021; Warren, 2021; Winn, 2018).

The word "community" appears both in Kaba's definition of RJ and in Winn's description of RJ circles in schools. But the move from RJ in the broader community—the context Kaba is discussing—into schools brings with it complications that we ought not ignore. The suggestion that, in RJ-oriented school spaces, all community members—students, teachers, staff, administrators—would have an "equal voice" (Winn, 2018, p. 5) in defining relationships, naming when harm has occurred, and advocating for solutions papers over the ever-present hierarchical power relations within schools. As discussed throughout this chapter, the very idea of "community" is in tension with the authority that teachers wield within their classrooms. In reality, students' voices cannot be regarded as equal to those of their teachers, and teachers' voices will not be given the same weight as administrators'. Power of course shapes relationships in every context, but these dynamics are heightened in schools, where hierarchy is baked into the institutional structure.

Abolitionists stress the importance of thinking about such structures, rather than blaming acts of harm solely on individuals. This is why many abolitionists prefer the framework of transformative justice (TJ) over that of RJ. According to Kaba (2021), "Transformative justice takes as a starting point the idea that what happens in our interpersonal relationships is mirrored and reinforced by the larger systems" (p. 149). TJ focuses not only on repairing relationships but on transforming the social conditions that lead to harm and the power inequities that allow harm to occur (Dixon & Piepzna-

Samarasinha, 2020; Kershnar et al., 2007). When the study group discussed Kaba's definition of TJ during our sixth session, I said,

> So then transformative justice is, like, about not only transforming the sort of interpersonal interaction, but also the system. And thinking about that within the context of schools, so, like, when something happens between students, or between a student and a teacher, yeah, trying to do that analysis of, like, okay, how is, like, the school structure creating this conflict or creating this harm? … What changes can be made so that this thing doesn't happen again in the future, or as often in the future? Which can be challenging in schools because, like, changing school structure can be hard, and, like, the teacher–student relationship is sort of inherently hierarchical in some ways. Like it's a power dynamic, right? So, like, you can't necessarily change that, but there are things you can do to alter it in some sense, right?

My comment points to the difficulty of enacting an abolitionist approach to harm in schools. Such an approach would call on community members to name how instances of harm or conflict derive from structures and power relations. But within schools, these structures and power relations are typically inflexible. If a teacher–student conflict arises from a student's lack of interest in the subject material, for instance, the teacher can attempt to make the material more appealing, but cannot change the state-imposed curriculum standards. If a dispute between a teacher and a student arises from a struggle over power or conflicting values (Shalaby, 2017), the teacher may be able to shift the balance of power to a degree, but ultimately they retain the institutional authority to impose their values. Any relationship to students that might be "repaired" remains

hierarchical. While it is true that changing "larger systems" (Kaba, 2021, p. 149) is difficult in any context, I again contend that the institutional structure of schools, and the relative inflexibility of that structure, makes TJ particularly difficult to bring into schools and classrooms.

The result of this difficulty is that RJ processes in schools often replicate the "discourse of personal responsibility" (Winn, 2018, p. 105) at play in the criminal legal system and broader society. It becomes the responsibility of students, and sometimes teachers, to change, since little can be changed about the larger school system. As Meiners (2016) writes,

> Definitions of harm and violence within RJ frequently conform to prevailing logics within the criminal justice system. For example, RJ generally assumes an individuated response to harms that should at the very least be partially understood as structural. Restorative justice practices can produce students, again, as the problem instead of implicating schools and other state actors such as school police. RJ places the responsibility to create peace in schools on students (and teachers). This definition of the problem not only places the burden on young people but also strategically creates a focus on particular forms of violence. Interpersonal violence or harm enacted by young people is made visible, and systemic or structural violence—hyper-racialized school policing—is rendered invisible. (p. 113)

This focus on individual responsibility and interpersonal harm may be inevitable within schools, where there are few options for addressing harm and conflict beyond changing the behavior of individuals.

At the root of these issues is the compulsory, non-consensual nature of state schooling, which complicates any effort to create a space of "non-domination" (Winn, 2018, p. 5) in schools. As Sabina Vaught (2017) states plainly, "School is compulsory and represents coercion—if students and their families do not consent to schooling, they are coerced through a variety of immediate and long-term threats that can be materially devastating" (p. 47). Carla Shalaby (2017) teaches that when children "make trouble at school" (p. xix), it is a sign that they do not consent to the conditions of schooling being forced upon them. An RJ circle is certainly more likely to address those conditions than a suspension or expulsion would be, but the available options for actually changing those conditions tend to be limited. Students have, in general, very little say in determining the contours of their own lives at school. Teachers similarly do not determine curriculum standards, and may have only marginally more influence over school rules and schedules, but they do have much more power than students to shape day-to-day life in classrooms. And, importantly, they are not compelled by law to participate in school life or to be in daily contact with individuals who have harmed them. Market forces compelling them to find some form of employment notwithstanding, adults can opt out of schooling. Children cannot.

Coercive authority (Wrong, 1995) is therefore always operative in schools. Even if children do not want to attend school, they must do so under threat of force. Within the school, when other forms of authority and persuasion fail, school adults can fall back on coercion. In my five years of high school teaching, I never saw a school adult apply physical force to remove a student from a classroom. But I believe that students knew that if they refused to comply with such exclusionary discipline, the enforcers—the

police—could be called in, or other "materially devastating" (Vaught, 2017, p. 47) punishments (e.g., school failure) could be applied. Coercion is thus the background context that shapes every student experience—including RJ circles—whether or not a teacher chooses to utilize or threaten punishment on a given day.

Abolitionist teachers concerned with ridding their classrooms of coercion must consider how they can value children's agency and consent, particularly within a system of compulsory schooling. Writing about the ethical frameworks, practices, and knowledge of the Nishnaabeg people, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) asserts that

> Relationships within Nishnaabewin are based upon the consent—the informed (honest) consent—of all beings involved. The word *consensual* here is key because if children learn to normalize dominance and nonconsent within the context of education, then nonconsent becomes part of the normalized tool kit of those with authoritarian power. (p. 161, emphasis in original)

How can we value students' consent if they are forced—by law, under threat of punishment and/or parental incarceration—to go to school? How can we value their freedom if they are literally not free to leave? How can we value their self-determination if we tell them what, where, and from whom to learn?

These are the unresolvable tensions that arise when we try to do the work of building a community that values consent within a context grounded in coercive authority. My purpose here is not to reject RJ. As I stated in the quotation that opens this section, "I think that we can make, like, huge improvements in the way that we do classroom management by moving towards those ideals," and "maybe there are some ways you can create structures in your classroom that do allow for some degree of choice

and autonomy." I believe that every school and every teacher should strive toward a model of restorative rather than retributive justice. Many schools have made great strides in this work, and have drastically reduced their use of exclusionary discipline (Warren, 2021).

My purpose, rather, is merely to bring these tensions to the surface so that abolitionist teachers can consider and navigate them critically. If we pretend that these tensions do not exist, or that RJ creates perfectly democratic schools free from domination, we become oblivious to the ways in which we continue to enact coercion in schools.

Navigating Authority in Practice

Living within a tension is not easy; it is an uncomfortable, unsettling, and at times overwhelming feeling. On several occasions when this tension between teacher authority and classroom community came up, Hope expressed feeling "stuck," unsure of how to proceed. Her comments reveal, however, that while our conversations prompted her to think critically about her authority, they also gave her ideas about how to get "unstuck" and move forward. One comment she made during our third study session vividly illustrates these themes and those discussed above, and is thus worth quoting at length. She began by saying,

> And then in our conversation last time … I was like, "Okay, I feel good about what I do as a teacher. Like, this is how I want my classroom to run. This is how I'm going to make sure that it's run, and this is, like, how I'm going to make sure that people listen to each other and people follow these expectations." But it is a good point that that's also policing on some level. So then I get into this, this

> cycle where I'm like, "… okay, but I am also stuck in the White supremacist, heteronormative, like, exploitive, capitalistic, patriarchal society. And can I do anything without, like, furthering that?" Which I think is a really stupid place to be. Then you're like, "Well, well, I can't do anything, guess I'm just gonna sit here and read about it." Or you just get to this place where you're like, "Oh, I'm so sorry. Yes, you're right. You're in first grade, but what do you think? You are, you're nonwhite. You just, uhh, what do you—what do you all think?" You know, where—which isn't, isn't the truth.

Engaging with critiques of policing had troubled how Hope thought about her practice. Viewing her own authority with a critical eye had led her to feel that she could not act at all without replicating policing and furthering oppression; she recognized that complicity is inevitable for teachers teaching within an oppressive society. At the same time, she believed that simply ceding authority to her elementary school students or retreating into a politics of deference (Táíwò, 2022) were not the correct ways forward.

Despite expressing these feelings of "stuckness," Hope did not view complicity as an excuse for inaction. She continued,

> And I think that in the past couple of years, I've come around to being like, okay, maybe I don't have it right. But I do have values, and I do know what I know. And so I'm gonna do what I think is the right thing and just trust myself that I have the students' best interest in mind. And it feels a lot more empowering and a lot better to be like, … "We don't have time to mess around. These kids deserve better. We need to know what we know, do what we do, and, like, live out our values in this strong way." Yeah, maybe I'm talking in circles, but that was just kind of my sense

approaching the book. I really appreciate it. It makes me very sad. I feel like we're in way over our heads, which we are. And then I'm like, "And what can I do? I'm part of the problem. Oh well, I'm just going to do what I do anyways."

Clearly, Hope was still grappling with this tension, still feeling overwhelmed, and she knew that this feeling could lead her to inaction. But she also knew that she could not simply wallow in this feeling. If escaping complicity is impossible, then the best one can do is to act in accordance with one's values, reflect on practice, learn from mistakes, and continually develop one's analyses and values in collaboration with others. This process of action and reflection is precisely the essence of *praxis* (Freire, 1996).

The idea of experimentation, which Kaba discusses frequently in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, also seemed to help Hope feel less stuck. Later in the same study session, she said, "We don't have a right or a wrong answer, but we have a lot of things to try. Yeah. Which feels like a much more doable place to be than like, 'You got to get it right.'" The tension discussed in this chapter does not have right or wrong answers. Any teacher who feels they can proceed only when they know the "right" thing to do will either end up feeling stuck or teaching uncritically. For Hope, the idea of experimentation seemed to open up new possibilities for moving forward. Importantly, this is not an experimentation driven solely by the whims of the individual teacher; it is experimentation with accountability, as the ensuing exchange reveals:

Hope: And actually, this idea of "we need a million experiments," that idea is directly opposed to the mindset of the criminal justice system. Because the criminal justice system says, "You have one chance. You either do it or you don't do it. And if you do it wrong, we throw you away." But us saying, "We get to

keep trying. We're just gonna try our best and we're gonna try again and again and again." Like, that is the new mindset. And if we do it wrong, we're gonna say, "Oops, I did it wrong. I'm sorry. I'm gonna try again."

Noah: Be accountable for the mistakes we make.

These two important abolitionist ideas—experimentation and accountability—show a way beyond the carceral logic that we must get things right on the first try or not try at all.

Hope echoed some of these ideas a few months later, during our closing interview. We were discussing the benefits and potential pitfalls of community groups taking over some of the duties currently assigned to police, including protecting property. When I noted that there was a danger that these groups could replicate racial profiling and other harmful policing practices, Hope said,

> Yeah, yeah. And that question about, like, okay, what do you do about it? And how does the community—what is, like, a policing and surveillance role, and how do you also, like, take care of … a shop, or take care of a business, take care of a home in a way that is healthy and helpful? … I don't know, I guess I don't—I don't know. I think that it's part of the experiments and part of the reality that one thing is never just one thing. Like, you're dealing with security, policing, surveillance, community, racism, bias, profiling, corporations, I mean, you know, it's like, let's throw all of that in there. Yeah. I don't know. And I think that it's important that there continue to be conversations and thinking about all of those things. And sometimes I get stuck. … We can talk ourselves into a corner, where, like, if you try to think through it too much, you get to a point where you can't do

> anything. Where you're like, "Oh, well, if I stop that kid, am I stopping him because he's Black? Am I stopping him because—maybe I should just—." Like, you just get to a point where you're like, "Okay, well, we just have to try something. Let's try something and then we'll try it again." Yeah, we can't get every single thing right, but we have to try, and try to get the right people at the table, try to get a lot of different people at the table, so that somebody can say, "Oh, excuse me, but this idea seems like it's entirely built on racial profiling. Maybe let's do this thing instead," so that you have voices at the table, and people can notice when things are going in a way that you don't want them to go and people can have other ideas.

Taking the conversation beyond our classrooms and schools, Hope still recognized that there was no clear path toward an abolitionist future amid the complexity and contradictions of the present. The lines around what is and what is not policing—whether we are talking about teaching or community security—are blurry. We must reflect critically on our actions, Hope implied, but cannot allow criticality to lead to inaction. Rather, we must engage in dialogue with a wide array of stakeholders to develop experiments, try things, get feedback, and be accountable to those impacted by our actions.

Returning these ideas of experimentation, collaboration, and accountability to the context of her classroom, Hope said,

> I think it allows me to have a little bit more grace with myself and with others, too, when I remember, like, we're gonna try our best. Nobody has, like, a right answer; that's kind of the point. And every individual, every child, is different,

and we need different things, but a big part of it is coming together and hearing what people need.

Participants shared some concrete ideas for how to make "coming together and hearing what people need" a reality in their classrooms, from collaboratively determining "community values" with students to utilizing the practice of "cogenerative dialogues" described by Christopher Emdin (Emdin, 2016). These practices do not resolve the tension between teacher authority and classroom community, but they demonstrate that it is possible to create space for student voice without negating teacher authority.

Conclusion: Studying Toward Abolitionist Teacher Praxis

The findings documented in this chapter demonstrate that the study group's discussions about abolition pushed us to think critically about important tensions and questions at the heart of teaching and schooling. How do teachers navigate their authority while creating classroom communities that value student voice? When does authority slip into policing, authoritarianism, oppression? What makes a teacher's authority legitimate? Who should decide what happens in schools? While a conversation about police and prison abolition is not the only way to get at these tensions and questions, engaging with abolitionist perspectives necessarily leads to generative and critical thinking about coercion, consent, bodily autonomy, and democracy—the kind of thinking teachers must engage in if they are to be prepared to take an activist and/or social-justice orientation to their work.

Participants expressed that finding a community of like-minded educators with whom to think through these questions was a major motivation for their joining the study group. In our opening interview, Hope said,

> When I found out about the study, I was like, sweet, a chance to be with other educators who share my same values; a chance to, like, talk with people, come up with some ideas, and have … some community to move forward on issues that I care about.

Nikki expressed similar desires going into the study group. When I asked her during our late-May opening interview why she wanted to be a part of the group, she replied,

> I think a big part is coming straight out of the schools this year, I was reminded how hard it is to keep a focus on so many of the things about abolition that are important to me while you're in an environment that is very rigid and controlling, and [you're] just, like, stressed out of your mind, and everyone else is also stressed out of their mind, and so it's a nightmare situation. And so, like, being in a group of other teachers who have also gone through really difficult situations and are trying to focus on … practices or goals that fight the carceral state, or … empower students to be leaders, or just fight all of the specific policing in a school and the role of a teacher as, like, a[n] overseer, or manager, policer, because it feels very hopeless, sometimes. And so a study group seems like a good way to try and get a little bit of, like, the hope that comes from talking to other people who want to make change.

Nikki suggested that the overwhelming demands placed on teachers, combined with the "rigid and controlling" school environment, made it difficult to keep her abolitionist politics and values in command during the school year. She hoped that being in dialogue with like-minded teachers would reinvigorate her efforts to teach in a way that did not

replicate policing. She reiterated these feelings during our first study session, when we were each sharing what brought us to the group:

> One of the things that brings me to this group is having had many years of experience in schools that are different amounts of policed, but policed in overt and obvious ways, as well as subtle and covert ways. And also having a really hard time, like, as a teacher or a person in the classroom, integrating my values and how I want to teach with … the school culture and … having a lot of conflict around that. … And so, having space to talk about how abolitionist perspectives help or inform that, like, process of teaching in a liberatory or authentic manner, but also just, like, try to work through some of my own thoughts and experiences on the topic.

Nikki again expressed that the culture of policing in schools—even in its "subtle and covert" manifestations—was in tension with her values. She believed that talking about abolition with the group would help her "work through" her thoughts on these tensions.

By the time of our closing interview, Hope made clear that the study group had fulfilled this desire:

> I think that [the study group] was really helpful in validating and solidifying some of my values and my goals. … It validated a lot of things that I had been thinking about and solidified my understanding. Yeah, I think it certainly, like, helped me to more concretely develop some thoughts. [Before] I was like, "Yeah, defund the police, that sounds good." And now I understand it a lot better and understand a lot better, like, the reasons why it needs to happen. And it was really helpful to be part of a group of educators who were talking about it, also trying to figure things

> out. … We had similar questions, yeah, that we could talk about … the struggle of trying to figure out how to do this and the relationship of an educator, of a teacher, when you are in a position of authority, how do you balance that? Yeah.

Hope shared that being in community and dialogue with fellow critical educators helped to "solidify" her values, and helped her figure out how to navigate her authority in alignment with those values.

Struggling to figure out how to act in alignment with one's values—this is the heart of *praxis*. Our discussions did not lead us to a clean resolution to the tension between teacher authority and classroom community; as Eva said during our third study session, "There are no easy answers." The purpose of critical educational thought is not to develop a roadmap that can direct teachers' actions in every situation; teaching is far too complex and messy an endeavor for such definitive solutions to be possible. Praxis is not about arriving at a final answer to the question "what is to be done?" It is about grappling with complexity; doing the hard work of figuring out what we believe; letting our values, principles, and analyses guide our action; experimenting; figuring things out; reflecting; and trying again.

Conclusion

> Abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything. … Abolition is not absence, it is presence. And indeed, what the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, in experiments and possibilities. … It's building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can. (Ruth Wilson Gilmore, in Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2018, 23:30)

What would a school free from policing, coercion, and punishment look like? What would it take to achieve such a vision, and what would the enactment of that vision make possible? Would such a school also be free from authority?

In order to work through these questions, we must consider the purpose of public education, not only as it exists now, but also as we hope it will exist in the abolitionist future we envision. On several occasions throughout this study, Nikki grounded our discussion in precisely such considerations. During our seventh study session, for example, she said,

> We are in the profession of teaching young people how to be in the world we want to inhabit. And so you can't not involve them in that, but you also can't just say, "Okay, well, what do you want to do today? Let's play Fortnite or whatever, like, fun thing we're doing today."

In Nikki's ideal vision of public education, schools exist to "teach [students] the culture of society, and also shift the culture of society by what we teach them." She saw "educating youth [as] a cultural need," one that required simultaneously honoring students' voices and setting limits on their autonomy. For Nikki, the use of authority to

direct young people's education in a way that built a better world was not policing. During our second study session, she said,

> Schools are where we as a society say, "Here's who we want to be," and replicate [that]. And so I don't think that has to be inherently, like, oppressive or policed in order for it to be adults saying to young people in our society, "Here's how we do this thing. Here's how it is done."

Speaking to the relationship between teacher authority and policing, Nikki suggested that adults collectively determining the knowledge and norms they want to pass on to youth does not have to be oppressive. Such a determination is a use of authority, and any classroom at any given time is likely to include at least some young people who reject that authority and disagree with what the adults have determined. As Nikki noted later, "It's unrealistic to think everyone is going to love everything every day." Such is the nature of rearing children. But, Nikki said, such conflicts arising from the use of authority do not necessarily equate to oppression.

Following Nikki's lead, this dissertation argues that not all forms of authority are oppressive or equivalent to policing. In Chapter 3, I began by looking at participants' desire to rid their practice of policing, which they understood as *control*. This sort of commonsense understanding can easily lead one to feel that any use of authority is a form of policing, which makes it difficult to imagine a teaching practice free from policing, even under the most ideal conditions. I embarked on a critical analysis of policing, drawing on the abolitionist insight that policing is a form of power aimed at the fabrication of capitalist social order. I argued that state schools are part of this class war of pacification, and therefore part of the policing project, but are also tools that have been

used by oppressed peoples in their attempts to build abolition democracy. Schools are contradictory, simultaneously sites of policing and spaces where a culture of community can be seeded. I argued that when teachers work to build a communal social order, they are not doing the work of policing.

In Chapter 4, I argued that when teachers draw on competent rather than coercive authority, and when they emphasize relationships over rules, they are not being authoritarian. Qualified teachers have content and pedagogical knowledge, and they have a responsibility to use that knowledge to guide young people's engagement with content, to support young people's development of discipline, and to foster young people's capacity to participate collectively in their own education. When teachers use their authority to assert boundaries and practice accountability, rather than to punish or coerce, they help build, rather than contradict, classroom community.

Implications for Educators

To eschew authority entirely—to allow students total autonomy to do whatever they please—would not serve the purpose of public education. It would not help young people cultivate in themselves either the knowledge or the dispositions that we hope to cultivate in a democratic society. Teachers have a responsibility to set some limits on students' behaviors. The difficulty for teachers is figuring out where to draw those limits, how much autonomy to allow. We also have to think critically about how we communicate and enforce those limits—is it through punishment, or by some other means of accountability? Is the teacher the only one who can decide on where to draw the limits or name when a boundary has been crossed? Or do students and their communities have some voice in this process?

I do not claim to have definitive guidelines for where teachers ought to set limits, nor do I offer a roadmap for ridding teaching of policing. But I do hope that my discussions with Eva, Hope, and Nikki, and the analysis provided in this dissertation, can help educators reflect critically on their practice, sharpen their analyses, and thereby develop the internal compasses that guide their practice. Such work is best done through collective study. I hope that educators will read this work together (alongside other abolitionist work), think together about what policing is and how it shows up in their workplaces, and plan together what abolitionist teacher praxis looks like in their contexts.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, I offer the following questions as provocations that I hope will aid educators in developing their abolitionist praxes:

- Are the norms in your school/classroom oriented toward building community, or toward producing docile workers? Are these norms developed in collaboration with students and their families?
- How are these norms upheld? Is it through punishment, or through accountability? Are they enforced as rules from the top down, or are all members of the community empowered to assert boundaries and ask for accountability when norms are violated?

While these questions are posed as either/or, I recognize that the reality of teaching is almost always both/and. The answers will likely never be a simple "yes" or "no," but that is not the point. The point is to think critically and collaboratively about these questions, and to work together toward a practice guided by abolitionist values.

Abolitionist praxis requires holding fast to a vision of a better future while working to enact it in the here and now. This is the "double practice" that "abolition

feminism has always embraced" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 155). As the authors of *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* write, "This both/and practice requires a willingness to inhabit contradictions, to eschew purity, and embrace the tensions and contradictions inherent in political and social movements that seek radical, systemic change" (Davis et al., 2022, p. 155). Abolitionist teaching means inhabiting the contradictions that shape schools as they are now, while working to change schools, along with everything else. No pure abolitionist teaching practice is possible within the context of racial capitalism. We are left, then, to grapple with the tensions, to struggle to value consent, freedom, agency, and community within a compulsory, coercive system structured largely by the needs of racial capitalism and the desires of the bourgeoisie.

Implications for Teacher Educators

This study demonstrates that discussions about abolition can push teachers to think critically about important tensions and questions. In grappling with tensions related to policing, teacher authority, and classroom community, Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I were thinking critically about the purpose of schooling and who should decide what happens in schools—questions at the heart of the project of schooling. These questions have important implications for education policy and teacher practice in general, and in particular for any attempts at *abolitionist* teacher practice, because they get at core issues of coercion, consent, bodily autonomy, and democracy.

While conversations about police and prison abolition are not the only way to get at these tensions and questions, this study makes clear that engaging with abolitionist perspectives leads teachers to the kind of critical and generative thinking that teacher educators hope for.

More specifically, thinking critically about policing can help teachers navigate positive uses of their authority. In my experience working with teachers-in-training, the dilemmas that Eva, Hope, and Nikki encountered are common. Teachers want to figure out how to do their jobs without being cops. By helping their students develop abolitionist analyses of police power, teacher educators can help teacher candidates sort out which aspects of their roles do and do not replicate policing. Developing this analysis might help them get "unstuck" and feel empowered to move forward without drifting toward either authoritarian or laissez-faire classrooms.

Finally, this study demonstrates that a study group is an effective method for professional development and teacher education, if the goal is to get teachers to engage in critical thinking and hone their socio-political analyses—which I think should be the goal of teacher education. In my experience, study groups based around texts are not a method used often in professional development, but creating this kind of intellectual community is something that teachers crave. Eva, Hope, and Nikki each said at the beginning of the study that they were looking to connect with other abolitionist educators, and at the end of the study they said that they had gotten more out of reading the text with others than they would have alone.

Implications for Researchers

For researchers, this study demonstrates that abolitionist teaching is no easy task. Teachers cannot simply take abolitionist ideas and smoothly implement them in their practice; it is messy work that comes up against difficult tensions. Scholars of abolitionist teaching ought to engage these tensions and questions about authority. Like Eva, Hope, Nikki, and me, many teachers are looking for guidance in sorting through these

complexities. Researchers cannot provide answers or a how-to guide, but if we can "think out loud" about these tensions in our writing, we can provide stories and theories than might help educators think about them as well.

Furthermore, scholars of abolitionist teaching ought to study teachers struggling to enact abolitionist practice. I use the word "struggling" intentionally. Something is lost when we document only successes, or when we present ideas as if they can be straightforwardly put into practice. Instead, when we see the difficulty of putting our ideas into practice, we learn that our ideas may need to be refined. Only by learning from and with teachers can we understand abolitionist teacher praxis. While I was able to hear participants speak about these difficulties, I was not able to see them in action. Future studies of abolitionist teacher praxis might include observations in classrooms led by self-described abolitionists. Such studies should always include reflection and dialogue with teachers, with the goal of all parties developing their critical consciousness and their capacities to work toward an abolitionist future.

What is Missing

As noted in Chapter 2, my purpose has not been to make definitive statements about what abolitionist teacher praxis is or ought to be for all teachers, everywhere. There is much ground that I have not been able to cover here. Two ideas stand out as particularly important and worthy of further exploration.

The first is the idea of culture. The study group was fairly homogenous, composed of four White professionals in their early 20s to mid-30s teaching in the Twin Cities area. Because normative expectations regarding appropriate uses of authority vary across racial, class, and cultural lines (Delpit, 1988), it is possible that the worries that

Eva, Hope, Nikki, and I expressed about our own uses of authority may not be major concerns for teachers from different cultural groups. I maintain that the philosophical questions we explored are relevant for all teachers, but I recognize that the lived experience of these questions may differ from one community to another. Furthermore, while I discussed our desire to *create* a culture of community, I recognize that this communal ethos is already normative within many non-Western cultures. US schools certainly reinforce the dominant culture, but our task as abolitionist educators may be more about creating space for already-existing ways of being to thrive than it is about creating something new.

Second, many of my assertions about authority in this dissertation hinge on a largely uninterrogated distinction between adults and young people, and the seemingly natural, normative, or inevitable authority of adults over children. I am aware, however, that while "common sense" teaches that childhood is a distinct phase of life and that children do not yet have the emotional or cognitive capacities of adults, history demonstrates that "childhood" is a relatively recent concept and social category (Meiners, 2016). As Meiners (2016) argues, childhood is a sociopolitical construct that does not have clear-cut boundaries and is not equally available to all young people across race, sexuality, and other markers of identity. Furthermore, the construction of children as innocent can be used to deprive them of rights, to negate their experiences, to mark adults as culpable, and to fuel criminalization, surveillance, the expansion of policing, and the construction of new prisons and jails. Abolitionist scholarship, therefore, cannot take commonsense notions of childhood for granted. Future research ought to interrogate assumptions about childhood and adult authority, asking questions like the following:

what kinds of decisions can and should young people make for themselves? When should adults make decisions for children? How can adults respect children's agency and consent even while making decisions that shape their lives?

Future Directions for Research

In addition to the sorts of engaged studies with abolitionist teachers mentioned above, we need to ground abolitionist educational thought more firmly in study of the PIC, the state, racial capitalism, and abolitionist movements. This study demonstrates that a deep theoretical examination of policing helps to clarify how schools are a tool of both the oppressor and the oppressed. In future work, I intend to draw on abolitionist and Black radical scholarship to contribute further to theorizations of the role of schools within the state and racial capitalism, and of the ideological and material linkages between schools and the carceral state. In particular, I will continue to analyze the ways in which the structural role of teachers does and does not overlap with that of police; examine the interconnections among ideologies of race, crime, and meritocracy; and consider the limitations on and possibilities for radical teaching within state schools.

We also need to look to the past, because understanding how oppressed peoples have utilized education in the pursuit of liberation is essential if we are to understand the function of schools today, their relationship to the state, and their role in a broader movement for abolition democracy. I plan to historicize abolitionist schooling, teaching, and pedagogy, looking particularly at the Black-led struggle for public schooling in the US South during the period of Reconstruction, and at political education efforts within global revolutionary and decolonial struggles in the 20th century. Studying the successes

and defeats of these historical precedents can help us think through an abolitionist vision of education in the present.

The "Fierce Urgency of Now"

In their 2017 article, "Fierce Urgency of Now: Building Movements to End the Prison Industrial Complex in Our Schools," Anderson-Zavala, Krueger-Henney, Meiners, and Pour-Khorshid (2017) offer "(At Least) Ten Things Educators Can Do to End the Prison Industrial Complex" (p. 153). Their first suggestion is to "Always Learn … Start a political education reading into action group with other teachers, or with your students, around a key text" (p. 153). This study took up the authors' suggestion with a keen awareness that abolition remains as fiercely urgent now as it was in 2017 or in 2020. The ruling-class war against Black people, Indigenous people, other people of color, and poor people of all races rages on, domestically and the world over, waged through tactics that range from the spectacular and sudden to the mundane and slow, yet still deadly.

We find ourselves, in 2023, in a moment of particularly urgent and heightened contestation over policing and incarceration. The backlash to the 2020 uprisings and movement to defund the police has been harsh and swift, with bourgeois politicians and the bourgeois press alike working hard to generate a moral panic over "crime" and shore up police legitimacy and funding. Meanwhile, police in the United States killed more people in 2022 than in any other year since researchers began recording such grisly statistics a decade ago (Zhang, 2023). Most of my comrades who were incarcerated in June 2020 are still locked up. Despite our protests, Governor Tim Walz never did significantly expand releases, and 13 incarcerated Minnesotans have died of Covid-19 under his watch to date (according to Department of Corrections statistics:

https://mn.gov/doc/about/covid-19-updates/). Walz's 2024-2025 budget proposal, which is being debated in the Minnesota legislature as I write, proposes adding $414 million to the Department of Corrections budget during the next two years (Winter, 2023). This 27% increase pushes the budget to nearly $1 billion per year and is meant to account for a projected 12.5% increase in the number of people incarcerated in Minnesota's state prisons by 2025. In other words, this is a plan to cage 1,000 more poor people and people of color. I'll say it again: the war rages on, and the need to fight on the freedom side remains as urgent as ever.

This ruling-class retrenchment should be understood as a counterrevolutionary response to a surging revolutionary movement. The 2020 uprisings revealed to many people the inherent violence of policing. Abolition has moved into the mainstream; our movement is growing. Now is an urgent time for us to bring more people into our organizations, to take care of each other, and to study, with an insistence that abolitionist practice be rooted in abolitionist theory and revolutionary politics.

The reactionary forces have made clear that public education is a significant battleground in this counterrevolutionary offensive. The latest manifestations of censorship in schools are intimately connected with expanding censorship in prisons, where fascistic bans on radical reading materials have long been the norm (Meiners et al., 2022; Tager, 2019). Moreover, the current rightwing attacks on teaching and teachers' unions are not only attempts to stifle a growing antiracist consciousness; they are also attempts to destroy public education entirely. Now is the time for those of us on the left to articulate and make real a vision of a truly public education—one aimed not only at "equity" for "our" students but at the destruction of conditions that choke learning and

life everywhere. We need public education that plays a part in the building of abolition democracy.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore teaches that “Abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything” (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2018, 23:30). Teachers cannot do this work on their own. They face many limitations and challenges, but, since “the war goes on no matter where one may find himself on bourgeois-dominated soil” (G. L. Jackson, 1990, p. 108), teachers can and must figure out how to work where they are to build the future from the present. They cannot change everything, but they can contribute in small but meaningful ways to the creation of a new social order and the obsolescence of policing. As Hope suggested, “That is our work, in a very small level.”

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flier

Are You a Teacher Interested in Studying Police and Prison Abolition?

What I'm Looking For

Abolitionist teachers currently working in K–12 public schools in the Twin Cities area to participate in a study group focused on police and prison abolition. We will decide on a book to read together, then meet roughly eight times for 90 minutes to discuss the text and how it relates to our work as educators. Study sessions will be scheduled around participants' availability, and will likely occur every other week from May to August 2022.

Why

To explore how theories of prison-industrial complex abolition inform the thinking and practice of K-12 public school teachers. I will analyze our discussions and present findings in a written dissertation.

Commitment Asked

- Participate in two 60-minute one-on-one interviews
- Participate in eight 90-minute in-person study sessions with other participants
- Read agreed-upon texts (roughly one chapter per session)
- Consent to interviews and study sessions being recorded and analyzed, and to anonymized findings being published

The Researcher

My name is Noah Jefferson (he/him), and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. I grew up outside of Boston, and taught high school math in Boston from 2012–2017. Since moving to Minneapolis, I've been active in abolitionist organizing with currently and formerly incarcerated people in Minnesota, their loved ones, and supporters.

Interested in Participating or Have Questions?

Email me at jeffe281@umn.edu
or fill out this form: tinyurl.com/abolitionstudygroup

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Feel free to share as much or as little information as you feel comfortable sharing. This information will be made available only to the researcher (Noah Jefferson) and used only for the purposes of writing about the research. In any write-up of this research, any information that would make it possible to identify a participant will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used.

First name: _____ Pronouns: _____

Preferred pseudonym: _____

How would you like to be identified in the write-up? Use any descriptors (e.g., race, gender, age, etc.) that feel salient for you in your work as an educator and as a participant in this group.

How would you describe the school you taught at most recently?

How long have you been working as a teacher and/or educator? If you've been in multiple schools and/or roles, describe your journey as an educator.

Appendix C: Opening Interview Protocol

Opening Script

I am interviewing you today to learn about your thinking on abolition and teaching. The purpose of my study is to explore how teachers think about abolition as it relates to their work as teachers, and to see what happens when teachers gather to study abolition.

During our interview, please let me know if you want me to repeat or restate a question. If you do not wish to answer a question, you can just say, "I want to pass on the question." The recorder may be turned off at any point, or the interview may be ended, upon your request.

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

1. For starters, tell me about why you're interested in studying police and prison abolition.
    a. What do you hope to learn or gain from participating in the study group?
2. What does "abolition" mean to you? How did you come to that understanding?
    a. Have there been any particular materials or experiences that have exposed you to ideas about abolition or that have shaped your understanding of abolition?
    b. Do you consider yourself an abolitionist?
3. How does your understanding of abolition inform how you think about schools and your work as a teacher, if at all?
    a. *Possible follow-ups*: Is this something you've experienced? Can you tell me about a time you experienced ___? How does that shape the way you teach, if at all?
4. How do you see schools as being related to the institutions of police and prisons, if at all?
    a. *Possible follow-ups*: Is this something you've experienced? Can you tell me about a time you experienced ___? How does that shape the way you teach, if at all?
5. With respect to abolition, what are you hoping to study further or learn more about? Are there topics or questions you'd like to explore, or any particular texts you'd like to read?

6. Is there anything else you would like me to know about you? Are there any accommodations I can make to remove barriers to your participation in the group?
7. Do you have any questions about me or about what this study group will look like?

Discuss scheduling and what I'm thinking about reading.

Appendix D: Closing Interview Protocol

Opening Script

I am interviewing you today to learn about your thinking on abolition and teaching. The purpose of my study is to explore how teachers think about abolition as it relates to their work as teachers, and to see what happens when teachers gather to study abolition. Some of the questions will be similar to our opening interview, because it will be interesting to see if your thinking has changed. Some of the questions will be new and will ask you to reflect on the study group experience.

During our interview, please let me know if you want me to repeat or restate a question. If you do not wish to answer a question, you can just say, "I want to pass on the question." The recorder may be turned off at any point, or the interview may be ended, upon your request.

Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

1. What does "abolition" mean to you?
2. How does your understanding of abolition inform how you think about schools and your work as a teacher?
3. How do you see schools as being related to the institutions of police and prisons, if at all?
    a. *Possible follow-ups*: Is this something you've experienced? Can you tell me about a time you experienced ___? How does that shape the way you teach, if at all?
4. How has your experience in the study group shaped your thinking on abolition and on schooling and teaching, if at all?
    a. *Possible follow-ups*: Is there anything you are doing differently or thinking about doing differently this school year as a result? Now that you're in a new school year, is there anything that you're thinking about differently?
5. With respect to abolition, is there anything you are hoping to study further or learn more about? Are there topics or questions you'd like to explore?
    a. *Possible follow-ups*: How do you think you will pursue that study moving forward? Do you have any plans to continue to develop your abolitionist analysis?
6. What, if anything, did you gain from this experience? Were there any benefits or

drawbacks to studying this text with a group, as opposed to reading it on your own? What, if anything, do you wish had been different about our group process?