



**“We got what we wanted...but we lost what we had”:  
A Counterstory of *Brown v. Board*  
towards narrative and educational justice**

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study seeks to advance narrative justice by countering dominant, deficit-laden retellings of U.S. school desegregation. Our research team of 6th and 7th-generation Black Chapel Hillians and education scholars examines retellings of school desegregation in the 1960s. Oral histories from elders about their experiences in Lincoln High School and the Orange County Training School serve as counterstories that illuminate truths about community care, Black brilliance, and thriving even in the face of injustice and segregation. We compare the popular iconography of desegregation stories with the experiences

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of Black communities who themselves desegregated schools, revealing a chasm between reality and the false dominant narratives of U.S. school desegregation. Findings illuminate how manifestations of brilliance and trauma unfolded across multiple, interconnected levels— where structural racism and economic disinvestment produced harms, and Black educators, families, and communities cultivated collective care, resistance, belonging, and transformation. Implications call for centering Black counterstories, humanizing infrastructure, and anchoring equity in our (re)tellings of history.

**Keywords:** Narrative Justice, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black Counterstories, Racial Trauma in Education, Community Cultural Wealth

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### Introduction

*Narrative justice is the power of the word... to shape or express reaction to law and policy... Let us... consider applying narrative justice as a tool for lawyers, judges, activists, teachers, and artists to engage with each other and to extend arms not only to women, but to all marginalized groups seeking to build their rightful belonging in the legal landscape.* (Tewari, 2020, p. 62)

Schools have long been sites of trauma for Black youth (Dumas, 2014). Race-based exclusion was fundamental to the establishment of US public schools, and racial trauma continues today: “The white supremacist foundations of American society... have always rendered Black children socially vulnerable to physical and psychological violence” (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021, p. 68). While school-based trauma (SBT), which we define in subsequent sections, is *borne* by individual Black children, it plays out in the public eye. Consider the retelling of the school desegregation of the 1950-60s. The stories our nation tells – Ruby Bridges, the Little Rock Nine, and other youth our nation tasked with desegregating hostile schools – are lauded as testaments of American progress. But these stories are often told– and taught – from the dominant white perspective. When retold in ways that center Black children’s voices, these stories can serve as counterstories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and become means to reexamine America’s history, rather than reify white supremacist narratives (Yosso, 2005).

We seek to illuminate the origins of racist retellings of desegregation efforts. By uncovering dominant narratives and counternarratives, we compare the dominant iconography of desegregation stories with the experiences of Black communities who desegregated schools.

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Our work reveals a chasm: a gap between reality and the false dominant narratives of desegregation in US Schools. Further, we inquire into the danger of these falsehoods and the consequences of over six decades of a narrative injustice in the retelling of a national history - that of desegregation. Specifically, we ask, “How does narrative injustice cement deficit-laden White supremacist retellings of desegregation?”

We push back on deficit-framed narratives of Black communities impacted by desegregation by holding up the communities’ assets, and question not their existence but rather, their erasure. Thus, we first seek to acknowledge the richness of knowledge, experiences, and skills in historical Black communities by asking the question: (1) Where are assets present in the experiences of Black children, their families, and communities who desegregated U.S. schools in the 1950-60s? Next, we seek to uncover how white supremacy acts in ways that construct dominant narratives about Black communities by asking the following questions (2) How does white supremacy construct dominant understandings of Black communities and the narration of Black children’s SBT during desegregation? In what ways do these racialized historic narratives continue to influence present-day policies, representations, and educational responses related to Black children and their SBT?

### Literature Review

This literature review situates the study within a broader historical and theoretical context by tracing how structural inequality has always shaped the educational landscape for Black children in the United States. It begins by detailing– and problematizing– the history of school desegregation, then addresses racial trauma and the strengths of Black children, families, and their communities. Finally, we turn to theory to explore a frame for investigating and (re)constructing schools that both mitigate systemic harms and cultivate brilliance.

### *Complicating the History of U.S. School Desegregation*

The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. The Board of Education* was a watershed moment in American history. It overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), declaring that segregated schools were inherently unequal. The central assertion supporting this view was the argument that segregated Black schools “generated feelings of inferiority in the children who attended them” (Fairclough, 2004, p. 43). But the stories we teach about desegregation and about segregated Black schools are, like many stories, incomplete. They evoke an approach to scholarship that Tuck refers to as ““damage-centered” research– research that “reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of...people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless” (Tuck, 2009, p. 409).

It is true that the school buildings and classrooms that Black students learned in were criminally underfunded. And, that the paltry funding of Black schools during Jim Crow meant that schools were reliant on “the voluntary contributions of patrons and the heroic efforts of teachers” (Fairclough, 2000, p. 77) the books were hand-me-downs and many resources – from measuring cups to Bunsen burners – were non-existent. Nonetheless, Vanessa Siddle Walker’s landmark book, *Their Highest Potential* (1996), illuminated that while the *inert resources* of these schools – the buildings, books, musical instruments, and more – were scandalously inadequate, the *human resources* were plentiful even in the face of gross injustice. Indeed, “the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community

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support that helped black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from white school boards” (Siddle Walker, 1996, p. 3).

Recent scholarship has pointed to the ways that segregated Black schools’ culture of excellence was, in fact, “hidden in plain sight” inside of segregated high schools in the Jim Crow era (Davis et al., 2023). Research describes how Black teachers developed pedagogical excellence and enacted culturally responsive teaching through high expectations, maintaining cultural competence, and fostering critical consciousness amidst extreme resource restriction (hooks, 2004; James-Galloway & Harris, 2021). In a review of literature, Siddle Walker (1996), highlights evidence of exemplary teaching, continuous professional preparation, efforts to bring academic and extracurricular resources, familial support, and exceptional school leadership in segregated schools.

Siddle Walker and others (e.g., Baldridge, 2017) have documented, elevated, and centered the professional expertise and power of Black segregated educational spaces (Fairclough, 2000). Givens (2021) opened up Black teachers’ fugitive practices, rejecting damage-centered research, and instead beginning with a desire for “a way to write about education as black people experienced it, in the interstices of this liminal reality – wedged between their collective striving and the anti-black domination they sought to escape – a way of writing that would account for the intentional ways black people navigated these deeply violent contexts and dreamed up new worlds and new ways of being” (p. vii).

Scholarship has entered this liminal space, rejecting white supremacist views of segregated Black schools as necessarily lesser than because of their blackness. Indeed, DuBois and African American educators themselves resisted desegregating Black schools in the quarter century before *Brown*, with:

Concern for their children’s well-being; satisfaction with their existing schools and teachers; the sound reputation of black teachers in that era; and the sense of community created by black families and teachers in black schools, to and prophecies about the dangers of desegregating (Lutz, 2017, p. 14).

Counterstories speaking back to the logic of *Brown* thus predated *Brown* itself. Zora Neale Hurston wrote a letter to the Orlando Sentinel on August 11, 1955, proclaiming:

It is well known that I have no sympathy nor respect for the ‘tragedy of color’ school of thought among us, whose fountain-head is the pressure group concerned with this court ruling. I see no tragedy in being too dark to be invited to a white school social affair. The Supreme Court would have pleased me more if they had concerned themselves about enforcing the compulsory education provisions for Negroes in the South as is done for white children.... Them’s my sentiments and I am sticking by them. Growth from within. Ethical and cultural desegregation. It is a contradiction in terms to scream race pride and equality while at the same time spurning Negro teachers and self-association. (Hurston, & Wal 1995, p. 956).

Black educators and scholars, thus, recognized the dangers that *Brown* posed to Black children. Scholars have enriched these counterstories, documenting the excellent teaching, high expectations, strong leadership, and how these supported Black students’ thriving during moments of racial violence, hatred, and crushing injustice. These counterstories speak back to

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dominant constructions of Black schools (pre- and post-segregation) as low achieving, underachieving, and inadequate.

### ***Racial Trauma and Black Brilliance***

What is written above captures the brilliance of Black schools’ resistance. Also foregrounded in this story is the racial terror and violence inflicted upon Black people. To more fully account for these realities, we turn to the concept of trauma— of racial trauma – which names the lasting wounds inflicted by structural racism, violence, and the relentless dehumanization of Black communities. Racial trauma is, by definition, the (1) direct consequence of institutional racism, resulting in unequal access; (2) the physiological and psychological responses experienced by individuals and communities in the wake of racialized harm; and (3) the internalization of harmful stereotypes that impact well-being (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Racial trauma can lead to shifts in emotions and behaviors (Carter, 2007; Douglas et al., 2024); it is unique from other forms of stress because it involves ongoing individual and collective injuries due to pervasive experiences of racism (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019).

Schools have been, and continue to be, sites of racial trauma for Black youth and educators. A 2019 study by Anderson and colleagues found that an overwhelming majority of Black participants reported at least one discriminatory or racist encounter in a school, such as harsh disciplinary practices and racial profiling. SBT is defined as trauma-inducing experiences, witnessed or experienced in person or virtually at school, that lead to long-term negative impacts, upend an individual’s capacity to cope, and exacerbate educational inequities (Duane, 2023, p. 117). Research has identified how overt and covert forms of racism (e.g., tokenizing, hair bias, microaggressions) can detrimentally impact Black children in and out of schools (Duane, 2025; Saleem et al., 2022).

Further, racial trauma can be passed intergenerationally, where the cumulative psychological wounds can be passed down from generation to generation (Hankerson et al., 2022; Saleem et al., 2019). For example, a grandchild of a Black activist during the Civil Rights movement may inherit the trauma— socially and genetically— that accompanied fighting for freedoms. Thus, the long-term impacts of racial trauma can follow Black communities, as Comas Díaz and colleagues write, “from the cradle to the grave” (2019, p. 2). Just as the trauma responses can be passed, so too can brilliance.

We draw upon Martin’s (2011) key points for conducting scholarship related to Black children and their communities, as elaborated by Gholson and colleagues (2012):

We must accept, and insist on, the brilliance of Black children as axiomatic. We must avoid the trap of having to prove that Black children are brilliant. We must avoid generating arguments, logic models, and counternarratives requiring proof that Black children are not brilliant. (p.3)

Such brilliance, in the face of racial trauma that spans generations, persists: brilliance that underpins Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) (Yosso, 2005) and the forms of cultural capital that enable and empower Black communities to thrive.

### ***Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice***

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We draw upon Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice (SysTIP) (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020; Goldin et al., 2024; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020) as a theoretical and methodological frame. SysTIP centers Critical Race Theory (CRT), which names the “ordinariness” of racism and how intersecting identities interact and compound, particularly for those who have multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001, p. 7). CRT also centers *counternarratives*, defined by Solórzano and Yosso (2001) as:

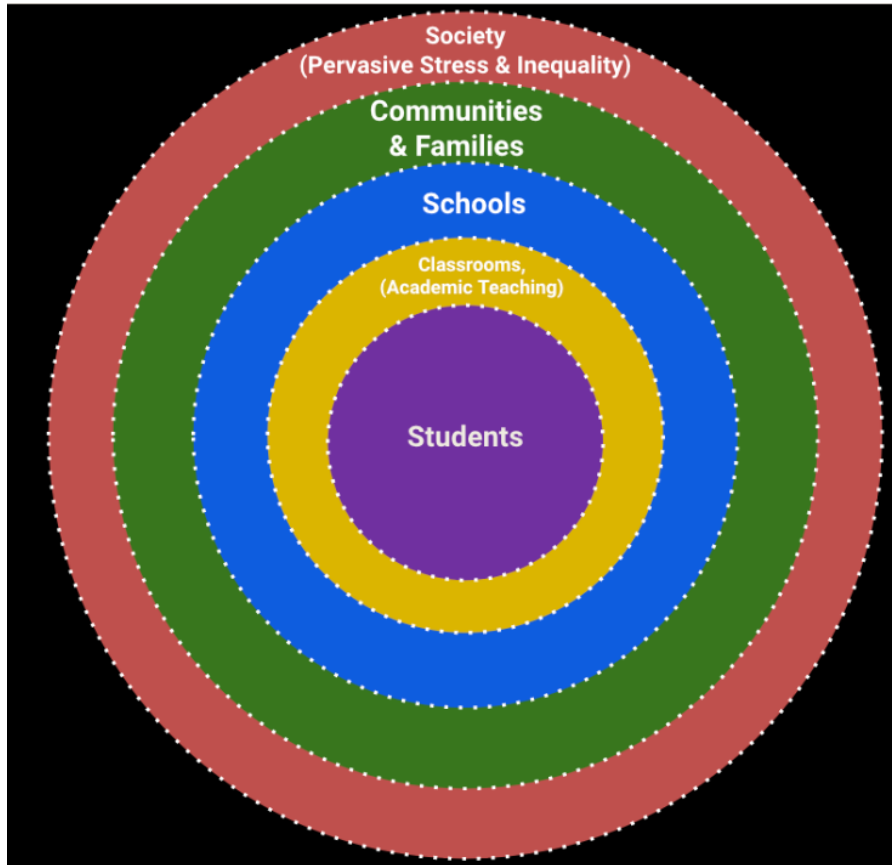
A method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. (p. 32)

SysTIP was developed in response to the weaponization of trauma-informed practices (TIP) in education, which often situate trauma as an individual problem and provide deficit-framed solutions (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020). SysTIP elaborates the nested contexts that produce and reproduce trauma (see Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020). These contexts are interrelated and reciprocally influence one another and shaped by race and racism. Rather than viewing trauma as an “individual problem,” SysTIP situates trauma as a *systemic* problem necessitating systemic solutions.

The original model of systemically trauma informed practice, created by Khasnabis & Goldin (2020) illustrates concentric circles, with students at the center. A newly updated model was published in 2023 and is included, below, in Figure 1 (Khasnabis, Goldin, & Duane, 2023). Taken together, the concentric rings illuminate a defining principle of Systemically Trauma-Informed Practice: trauma is not located within individual children but is produced through interlocking systems. The outermost layer—society—is saturated with structural racism, which is not a distant backdrop but a force that permeates every inner circle. It shapes community conditions, constrains school resources and possibilities, and structures daily life in classrooms. Racism generates trauma both directly and diffusely—through discriminatory policies, economic and environmental dispossession, and the continual devaluation of Black children, families, and communities.

**Figure 1**

*Systemically Trauma Informed Practice.*



*(Khasnabis, Goldin, & Duane, 2023)*

Because racialized harm is woven through each layer, repair must also be systemic. Supporting students requires more than classroom strategies; it demands confronting and transforming the societal, institutional, and relational structures that reproduce inequity. This model asserts that trauma-informed practice must be explicitly anti-racist, systemic, and oriented toward justice—mobilizing every layer of the educational ecosystem in service of children’s healing, dignity, and possibility. Key aspects of enacting SysTIP include the following: (1) naming individuals as existing inside unequal systems; (2) speaking to and about race and racism; (3) navigating whiteness; and (4) using asset frames (Goldin et al., 2024).

Leveraging SysTIP’s fourth principle, asset frames, we draw from CCW, which leverages CRT to complicate popular interpretations of the inherent strengths of communities of color (Yosso, 2005). CCW critiques deficit frames by illuminating *at least* six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, navigational, linguistic, familial, social, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Research has found that CCW can serve as a protective factor for communities of color experiencing racism—by leveraging the brilliance and reserves of cultural capital in the face of hostile environments (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2021).

We focus on another remarkable, and heretofore less-examined construct: how the CCW of Black segregated schools and communities was centered to construct schools and classrooms that were Systemically Trauma-Informed. It was there that they cultivated critical consciousness,

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racial literacy, and achievement. Further, the tearing down of those spaces, by way of desegregation, delivered Black students to white supremacist school systems that not only didn't believe in their brilliance, but also stripped their schooling experiences of SysTIP.

We have documented how TIP is weaponized when it is constructed as if trauma exists in a race-free vacuum (Khasnabis et al., 2023; 2025; Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020). When this is the case, educators run the risk of ignoring the role systems play in constructing and reproducing trauma and can harm the students they aim to support. Black segregated schools not only existed despite racism but in ways that contended substantively with that racism. Arguments for desegregation positioned Black schools as deficient, lesser than. The problem, this line of argument went, was the Blackness of segregated schools. The solution, then, was “integration” into purportedly superior white schools. This argument extended to all aspects of white schools: the supposed primacy of white educators, the purported superiority of white studies curricula. Complicity with ideas of white superiority elevated white children and positioned Black learners as inferior.

### Methods

#### *Study Context*

Our study inquires into the lived experiences of Black communities who attended all-Black schools prior to school desegregation efforts and who desegregated U.S. schools. We focused on one community, that of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, by inquiring into the experiences of David Mason Jr. and Annie Hargett, Black Chapel Hillian elders, who attended Black schools in the Jim Crow South, experiencing daily discrimination in the broader community while also experiencing Black schools that were rich in their collective care for their students. We also inquire into the experiences and insights of Danita Mason-Hogans, Mason's daughter, who speaks to intergenerational impacts of segregation and school desegregation on the descendants of school integrators.

Mrs. Hargett, Mr. Mason, and Ms. Mason-Hogans are informants, co-researchers, and co-authors. They provide first-hand narratives of this period of history as well as an exploration of the continuous nature of history - the notion that no history is ever complete - and that the past is always with us, carried in the bodies and experiences of descendants and embedded in educational practices, curricula, and policies. Because some authors' own childhood and professional experiences surface as sources of insight into the workings of white supremacy, desegregation, and SBT, we incorporate a limited autoethnographic component (Ellis, 2004) into our methodology. These reflexive narratives function not as anecdotes but as analytic data points that deepen our interpretive account, situating our scholarly analysis within the lived realities and embodied memories of those who experienced these systems firsthand.

In his elementary years, David Mason attended Orange County Training School and graduated from Lincoln High School (LH) in 1961, a segregated all-Black school. Mason was one of nine teenagers, *the Chapel Hill Nine*, who engaged in a lunch counter protest at Chapel Hill's Colonial Drug when he was seventeen, in February 1960, launching an era of civil disobedience in Chapel Hill. Anne Hargett attended Orange County Training School and LH, graduating in its class of 1957. She later studied nursing at the Winston Salem Teachers College and pursued a graduate degree at the University of Maryland, graduating in 1969 during the height of the civil rights era.

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Seeking out these narratives is a time-sensitive matter, as Black community members who are holders of this knowledge base age, and the window of opportunity to learn from them narrows. Their insights and experiences are often absent in the dominant iconography of school desegregation efforts, for example, Norman Rockwell’s “The Problem We All Live With,” one of the most common cultural referents of school desegregation efforts. The painting features Ruby Bridges walking to school, taunted by racist onlookers, accompanied by U.S. marshals . While the painting juxtaposes the innocence of a young child with the violence of racism, it also risks reducing the experience of Bridges and other Black children to triumph narratives - stories of children who paved the way to a better America, to our nation’s arrival to a post-racial society.

Equally concerning is the erasure of what those Black children were walking *away from*, what they *lost*: Black schools with educators who believed in them, who lived in their communities, who took on the professional responsibility to teach and inspire as a moral commitment. Silences around the experiences of these children, their suffering and their resolve, the engagement of their families and communities, and the ongoing impacts of these experiences in the modern day serve to flatten the past and to reduce the complexity of this critical stage of U.S. history. Mr. Mason, Mrs. Hargett, and Ms. Mason-Hogans’ narratives provide requisite complexity, allowing for substantive exploration of school desegregation, told from the perspective of those who experienced it.

### *Data Sources*

The data for the study were elaborated oral histories collected on October 24, 2024, and additional member checking conversations that occurred on April 14, 2025. On October 24, Mr. Mason, Mrs. Hargett, and Ms. Mason-Hogans attended a university class session taught by Goldin at the University of North Carolina, where Mr. Mason and Mrs. Hargett provided historical context of their upbringing in Chapel Hill, attendance in all-Black schools, and reflections about the experiences of family members who attended integrated schools. Mason-Hogans moved fluidly between a role of facilitator, engaging Mr. Mason and Mrs. Hargett in reflecting on histories, and the role of informant, sharing her and her daughter’s own personal experiences, as well as her professional expertise as a researcher, memory worker, and civil rights historian.

Mason-Hogans offered a multi-generational lens on the impacts of segregation and school desegregation, asking both “grand tour” questions to evoke oral history storytelling, such as: “how did you experience schooling here at Lincoln, in this district, in this state, in this country?” as well as zoomed in questions focusing on particular teachers and their pedagogical and professional expertise: “I was wondering now if you could tell them a little bit about Miss Cannon and how she was creative in terms of teaching people about music? This class session was recorded on Zoom. The transcription was generated by Zoom and then cleaned by an undergraduate research assistant. Hargett, Mason, and Mason-Hogans member-checked all quotes across multiple points of time: in author sessions, as a whole group, in their work on the manuscript, as they contributed ideas, analysis, and feedback. The transcription served as the primary data source.

Over the subsequent seven months, Mr. Mason, Mrs. Hargett, and Ms. Mason-Hogans were regularly consulted for follow-up clarifications during which they also shared primary artifacts that provided more detail and texture to the histories that had been shared. These included primarily videos and photographs. The authorship team met again to discuss, test, and

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develop findings and implications of the study on April 14, 2025, during which time additional clarifications were developed.

### ***Data Analysis***

We utilized an interpretive approach (Wetherell et al., 2001) that built upon Abrams’ (1982) approach to historical sociology to integrate historical narratives with sociological theories. Specifically, we sought to illuminate the roles of SBT and white supremacy as they interact with the lived historical experiences of Black “once-children” (Ransom, 2021). We also drew from the theoretical frame, SysTIP (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020; Goldin et al., 2021; Goldin et al., 2025).

For the first step of our analysis, Goldin and Khasnabis separately listened to the recording of the class session, tracking the audio on the transcript and coding the oral histories for CCW (Yosso, 2005). We listened for moments in the oral histories shared by Mr. Mason, Mrs. Hargett, and Ms. Mason-Hogans when CCW was revealed in segregated schools and communities. We logged these forms of capital on a spreadsheet, identifying the corresponding transcript segments. We also identified and logged moments in the oral histories when informants shared their understandings about the ways that white supremacy contributed to the construction of specific and distorted narratives. Goldin and Khasnabis then compared their codes and noted only minor discrepancies, typically in the label applied to an instance of capital. In each of these cases, Goldin and Duane shared their codes with one another and readily came to an agreement, deciding typically that these instances could reasonably be coded in multiple ways. This tendency aligns with the CCW model, in which different forms of capital are not intended to be mutually exclusive. This discussion resulted in a shared understanding of the breadth of capital in the experiences of Mr. Mason, Mrs. Hargett, and Ms. Mason-Hogans, as well as their strong racial literacy with regard to the role of white supremacy in constructing dominant understandings relevant to segregation and desegregation histories.

Drawing from that discussion, the Goldin, Khasnabis, and Duane separately applied SysTIP to the oral histories. At each systemic level in the SysTIP model (student, classrooms, schools, community, and society), the authors drew from the oral histories and codes to identify: the trauma suffered by Black people; and the forms of CCW Black people manifested in the face of that trauma and injustice. The authors elaborated these findings in a table and met to share their sensemaking. Working across these understandings, Goldin and Duane synthesized these ideas into a set of memos that fleshed out the ways that trauma and injustice were suffered by Black people at each level of the SysTIP model and the ways that they developed CCW in the face of that trauma and injustice. These memos served as texts for shared deliberation with the authorship team. Through ongoing conversation about the memos, key ideas were further developed and complemented with specific examples to ultimately construct the key findings of the study.

### **Findings**

By analyzing historical occurrences of trauma in US schools, we invite scholars and practitioners to use history as a guide for educator practice. We generated tools so that counterstories can be more readily acknowledged, constructed, and valued in everyday moments of racial harm. In-so-doing, we seek to dissipate the smog of racism (Tatum, 1997), to see our own histories, and to dismantle the racial injustice of SBT in the work towards liberation. As

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such, the findings are organized by “level” – working from the outside, society, to community, schools, classrooms, and, finally, to the student.

### ***Society Level***

*“That’s the blues part of the rhythm, right?” (Ms. Mason-Hogans)*

At the societal level, our informants’ oral histories captured the macro-level impact of large-scale disinvestment in Black communities. Black people suffered indignities of unsanitary living conditions, of under compensation, and poor working conditions - conditions which Mrs. Mason-Hogans referred to as the “blues part of the rhythm.” Black suffering in these conditions meant disease and danger, for example, where people died swimming in unsafe conditions when they were prevented from accessing pools, or where people were disease-stricken due to a lack of trash pickup and sewage systems. Ms. Mason-Hogans reported that janitors at the University of North Carolina made 25 cents an hour and were denied a raise, even though they worked 7 days a week for over 60 years.

Given these conditions, 48% of Black people in Chapel Hill in 1944 remained on public assistance. These harms to Black society were addressed only in the case of interest convergence with white society. For example, since Black women provided care for white children, they transported disease from their community into white spaces, which ultimately led to calls for improved hygiene and living conditions, and for service workers to be hired to provide care and guidance in improving living conditions in the Black community.

Still, in the face of such flagrant disregard for their humanity, Black people resisted. In some cases, this resistance occurred through organized labor, such as janitors who fought for higher pay. This was also the case of lunch counter protests, where high school students, like Mr. Mason and his peers, met for weeks to plan their protest, prepare for the emotional toll of humiliation and demoralization, and strategize to stand for their rights. In addition to organized protest, Mr. Mason repeatedly returned to a theme that “everyone was poor, but we didn’t know that,” suggesting that even in the face of extreme poverty, they persisted and survived, and in some cases thrived. Thus, the very survival of the Black community, and the ability to find joy, despite the flagrant disinvestment in their community, was an act of resistance. It was also the utilization of community networks of university laborers who knew how to build, farmers who shared food, and tailors who knew how to make clothing. The integration of these important networks, as well as community resilience and joy are essential to understanding the context of such a frequently made statement by a child who benefited from these shared resources.

Ms. Mason-Hogans powerfully captured these contrasts of suffering at the societal level and Black people’s resolve to live joyfully: “So that’s the blues part of the rhythm, right? But the other part is, in the midst of all this, the community always created a way for young people to feel loved, accepted, and have fun.”

### ***Community and Family Level***

*“Believe it or not. The first thing we did was we built churches and schools. And so in 1865, people were already thinking about education for poor, local Black people.” -Ms. Mason-Hogans*

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Mrs. Hargett and Mr. Mason spoke to the daily reality of injustice in the Jim Crow South for Black communities. Significantly, Black people either knew explicitly or implicitly that there were certain locations where they were not welcome. They cultivated and shared the knowledge that they needed to navigate around and avoid certain dangerous areas. While much racial violence was documented and witnessed, many instances weren't necessarily “proven,” but were known. Black community members lived with great caution, making self-protective assumptions about shrouded acts of White rage or violence that had been committed with the intention of harming Black people. Ms. Mason-Hogans shared that after emancipation, Black people set about building their own schools and churches. However, Ms. Mason-Hogans then elaborated that the school they had built had burned down (June 12, 1922; Merritt Mill Road, Chapel Hill, NC). She commented that during that era (early 1920s), there were a lot of fires, alluding to arson. Implied in this narrative is an understanding that Black advancement (i.e., building of Black schools after Emancipation) was often met with white violence.

Black people countered harms by manifesting CCW through a range of methods, creating relationships and institutions where social and familial connections could thrive. This occurred, for example, through building churches and schools, places of learning and community building. This also happened in ongoing daily interactions inside of Black communities - whether through stories of children whose mothers knew of any mischief they had been up to before they returned home, or stories of neighbors who advocated for children because of the relationships they had with the child's mother. Ms. Mason-Hogans explained, “There're many times that you talk about your neighbors who also stood in for you when your mom's not available or stood in for you when you were not able to.” Our informants' narratives clearly conveyed a cultural norm to look out for other people's children, that children were a focus of collective care.

Teachers, too, were instrumental to this value of collective care for children. Black teachers were seen as part of a community family, as people who knew their students deeply and thus had high expectations for them. Mrs. Hargett explained, “And our teachers felt very important that we learn to be the best that we could be, and whatever. And so they were in the community. [If] they visited your home, they would go to church with you. They knew everything about you.”

In such an environment of omnipresent community care, Black people triumphed even in the face of White violence. For example, when they were prevented from accessing pools, they sought other places to swim, such as spring holes. While their schools were limited in allocated material resources, Black communities prevailed and developed academic and extracurricular programming to support their children's growth. The Black athleticism of Lincoln High, for example, was celebrated and known to produce award-winning athletes. Ms. Mason-Hogans also referred to the vibrancy and innovation of the Black music scene of Chapel Hill, a dimension of the community that developed despite the ongoing hardship of the community. She credited the B1Band<sup>1</sup>, an all-Black military band from World War II, as a resource in the community that brought people together through regular parades and provided musical inspiration to the community's children: “They were like heroes in the community. They developed relationships in the community. I give a lot of credit to the B1 Band for people emulating them.” And yet, in each of these stories of CCW, an underbelly of racism was always present - the rhythm *and* the

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<sup>1</sup> the first all-Black unit in the modern U.S. Navy during World War II, established in 1942 as part of a broader effort to expand opportunities for Black sailors beyond service roles like messmen

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blues. For example, yes, Black children found joy and relief from the southern summer heat in spring holes. But later it was learned that the water in these oases was polluted with toxins.

We learned also that the capability of the Black community to thrive even in the face of harm is a quality that has transcended generations. Ms. Mason-Hogans elaborated on an experience in working with a young high school student, Naya, who reported Black girls’ modern-day challenges to resist colorism in school and to develop pride in their Blackness. Upon hearing this, Ms. Mason-Hogans consulted with her daughter, a high school teacher, who shared that this was not only her experience as a child but that it was a common, modern-day experience of white oppression. Ms. Mason-Hogans reported her daughter’s recollections of her own childhood:

And she was like, well, you know, I get it. She said, you don't remember when I was in elementary school? And, I had my little black girl crew, and one of my friends said, these white girls get everything, and we don't get anything. And, she said, sometimes I wish Dr. King had just kept his dream to himself.

In the modern day, youth like Naya stand up to this harm by seeking to build community with Black girls experiencing colorism, and Ms. Mason-Hogans has designed and sought funding for learning spaces to support Black girls’ learning and resistance. Patterns of white harm founded in earlier histories continue to persist, and Black people continue to extend their forms of resistance across generations.

### *Schools*

*“We got what we wanted, but we lost what we had.” -Mr. Mason*

Harm at the school level to Black youth was powerfully captured by Mr. Mason when he spoke of his younger brother, Darrell, who attended Chapel Hill High School after desegregation began. Mr. Mason relayed how his brother was told by his white counselor that he wouldn’t go to college. Mr. Mason spoke about this as a moment of truth about the racial harm occurring in the desegregated school that his little brother, who would later become a successful entrepreneur, experienced. This story is meaningful because Darrell was new to desegregated schools, having come from Black schools with Black teachers, and experienced this low expectation for academic success for the first time. In addition, a common refrain that Mr. Mason returned to throughout the session was the notion that “We got what we wanted, but we lost what we had.” This statement captured the reality that desegregated schools purportedly gave Black communities the schools they wanted access to, but at a great cost - they lost the richness of community care that Black youth were immersed in in Black school pre desegregation.

Ms. Mason-Hogans elaborated an ethic of care and belief of the axiomatic truth of Black brilliance that existed in Black schools. The history of Lincoln High School speaks to the community’s aspiration and resolve to build sacred spaces for their children’s thriving. The original school was built by the Quakers for Black students. It was referred to as “The Quaker School” by the Black community. But by the Quakers, it was referred to as “The Freedmen’s School.” The school evolved into the Orange County Training School, which originally housed all grades, where younger children attended school in the morning, and older children attended in the afternoons. The school then evolved into Lincoln in 1949 when the community wanted a

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curriculum characterized by greater ambition and rigor. Ultimately, Lincoln also evolved into two separate schools - an elementary school called Northside and Lincoln High School in 1951. This evolution occurred with the key aim of instituting rigor and pressing against modal conceptions of education for Black children. The Black community ensured that Chapel Hill schools provided that - in the handful of years between its founding and desegregation.

Additionally, Ms. Mason-Hogans, at various moments throughout the session, referred to experiences she had had as a young person, that her daughter Akanke had had, and that Black children today have in schools - schools that are desegregated and are very much influenced by white norms. Having “gotten what we wanted,” the schools of today still oppress Black children in uncountable ways, from the differential expectations of Black and white children to the presence of colorism. Mrs. Hargett, listening to this sharing, poignantly reported that she never experienced the school-based racial harm that women of future generations experienced. She declared, “That did not occur to me because I was always in a segregated state.” Having attended only segregated Black schools until she attended graduate school, it was only in graduate school that she felt the sting of othering and racism from her peers.

### *Classrooms*

*“We did not have the supplies that we needed. Yet we still survived. We were still able to accomplish great things with what we had. We had old textbooks. Torn textbooks. But the teachers found a way to make it meaningful, and to get what we needed. Because they cared. They really cared that we would be successful. And they poured their heart out to help us achieve. And so, yes, many of us were able to go on to college and do other things that were noteworthy.” - Mrs. Hargett*

Injustice was ever-present in segregated Black classrooms: in the absence of Bunsen burners; in music classes without a range of instruments; in aged textbooks; in mismatched sets of measuring cups and instruments. These resources are but some of the items Mr. Mason referred to when speaking about desegregation, when he said “we got what we wanted.” He followed up this statement; however, with “but we lost what we had.” To each of these injustices, there was a response from teachers; flutes were brought in for all, and mathematical exercises were designed in such a way that they could be enacted with incomplete measurement cup sets. In practice, as Mrs. Hargett and Mr. Mason recalled, this looked like their home economics teachers building on her knowledge of relationships of volume to adapt to the problem of only having incomplete measurement sets. To the societal devaluing of Black brilliance evidenced in torn textbooks and desperately underfunded segregated schools, there were skilled teachers armed with unconditional belief in the potential of each Black child to succeed *to their highest potential* (Siddle Walker, 1996). Teachers, Mrs. Hargett proclaimed, built “a community of support and care and expectations around them [students].” Interactions with teachers “impacted you and your ability to think.”

High expectations are fundamental to effective teaching, but they are not sufficient. Excellent teachers must be able to connect students' thinking with the content they are teaching and support them in thinking about and learning that content (Goldin et al., 2019). In mathematics, for example, this means the ability to listen to and hear young people's ideas, recognize how those ideas are mathematical, and connect student thinking to the mathematical point of the lesson (Ball, 2000). Mrs. Hargett, Mr. Mason, and Ms. Mason-Hogans repeatedly

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spoke to the superiority of teaching in Black schools. They also named the anxiety that the Black community felt about the potential loss of exceptional educational experiences that would come with desegregation. Black women teachers, in particular, sounded alarms about these losses that would surely come. Their fears were realized.

Ms. Mason-Hogans referred to oral histories of other Chapel Hillian elders, including Alice Battle, one of the first Black educators to teach in an integrated classroom in Chapel Hill. Ms. Battle, speaking to her first experiences teaching French to Black and white children together, remembered that her Black students were better prepared and were outperforming the white students, and that they were the only ones raising their hands. In addition, she recalled a moment of pointed recognition of her own assets - her awareness that she had a knowledge base and expertise that the white students had not previously had access to: “It’s not unfortunate that they have me here. I have something to offer them,” she recalled thinking.

Thus, Mrs. Hargett, Mr. Mason, and Ms. Mason-Hogans continued to elevate the professional expertise of the teachers at Lincoln High. They noted, too, the resources they no longer see in the contemporary district that once housed Lincoln - resources that would be necessary to contend with continued racial trauma. Reflecting on the riches of Lincoln, Ms. Mason-Hogans shared:

some of the things that might not be specifically taught in some education classes [now are] the very things that make people feel like they fit... You'll hear how the teachers went to their houses, went to church with them, building a community of support and care and expectations around them. And that's why we have to complete this circle, because they [students] need to be affirmed.

While racial harm persists in today’s desegregated schools, the particular strengths that existed in Lincoln during segregation were lost when Black children found themselves in newly desegregated schools.

### *Students*

*“I was ready for it.” -Mr. Mason*

At the student level, Mrs. Hargett and Mr. Mason shared the frustrations faced by Black youth in the Jim Crow South. Both felt the sting of living in a society where the threat of white violence was inescapable, where their safety was always at risk, and where they did not have access to the same resources that white youth had. Frustration with these inequalities led to acts of civil disobedience across the South, and to Mr. Mason coordinating with eight of his peers to protest the injustices suffered by Black people in Chapel Hill.

Years later, after desegregation efforts were underway, injustices such as poor funding, sub-standard materials, and textbooks only magnified. In Black schools, Black educators and administrators had enveloped Black children with their professional expertise, their high standards and belief in Black brilliance, their deep knowledge of pedagogy and content so as to nurture thriving and flourishing. Torn from these spaces and landing in white supremacist schools where they were seen as less than, where their white teachers did not see or leverage their brilliance, and where their access to challenging and rich curricula was delimited, desegregated schools sharpened the harm. The hidden curriculum in these schools, built on the presupposition that white schooling was inherently superior and Black schools were inherently

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inferior, elevated ideas of white supremacy and Black inferiority, and obstructed opportunities to learn. Students confronted and navigated racism in and out of educational institutions.

Black youth pushed back through strategic coordination with one another. The Chapel Hill Nine planned for their lunch counter protest, meeting daily for several weeks at the rock wall outside a community center. Their successful effort was the first sit-in or protest organized and executed completely by high school students in the civil rights era. They were spurred to act when, just weeks prior, four Black North Carolina A&T students engaged in a lunch counter protest at a Woolworth’s in Greensboro. Mason and his peers learned from these students and drew from their knowledge of football, planning for a protective movement where larger students stood alongside the perimeter to protect smaller students. Black students thus manifested resistant capital that tapped into and drew from the knowledge of their community.

In sharing about his first experience with segregation at the age of five in 1948, Mr. Mason illuminated the way that a mindset of resistance developed over the course of a lifetime. He narrated a moment when he’d gone out with his mother and her first cousin and had a dollar to buy hot dogs. He had not understood the rules of the Jim Crow South and was confused by his mother’s explanation that he could not be served because he was “colored.” He told her, “I’ve got a dollar, and I want to get the hot dog.” This lesson of injustice stayed with him from age five, building in him a passion to seek justice - resolve that he tapped into when planning for the lunch counter protest at Colonial Drug at age seventeen. He explained, reflecting on his experience as a five-year-old: “I couldn’t help but think about that when we were talking about planning for the sit-in. I was ready for it.”

### **Discussion**

Our findings illuminate the pervasiveness of racial trauma and SBT for children who lived in the Jim Crow South, juxtaposed with ever-present reservoirs of support, community care, and expert teaching in Black schools. During desegregation, Black children entered previously segregated white schools, experiencing racial trauma as they walked past violent crowds into buildings to study alone and be attacked. These factors created a potent storm of trauma for Black children, who were also walking away from excellent and affirming Black schools, as described by Milner and Howard (2004). These students experienced institutional betrayal (Smith & Freyd, 2014). We also find that as SBT was playing out, these stories were re-told in dominant ways that perverted and erased daily dangers, constructing an incomplete history. Per Mr. Mason’s insight, the nation “got what it wanted,” but so much was lost for Black children and communities that warrants acknowledgement.

In addition to the ways that teachers at Lincoln High and other segregated schools created environments that were rich with collective care, they invented and innovated by contextualizing content (e.g., math in teaching). This meant leveraging their content knowledge to devise sufficient problems and problem sets for students to grapple with as teachers scaffolded students’ developing content mastery. These successful adaptations highlight their content knowledge and how teachers were able to leverage this content knowledge to ensure that students would be able to master key content even though their classrooms were often missing important resources. They built these learning opportunities for students in the face of scarcity of financial resources, and so that they would be successful in the white supremacist Jim Crow South, they would continue to live when they graduated. These reservoirs of teaching knowledge were erased by dominant narratives - and they were not present in the teaching knowledge of the white educators who replaced Black teachers. Even today, Ms. Mason-Hogans speaks to examples of Black

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wisdom, i.e., a case where she learned of a child’s interest in colorism and sought funding to support this child’s interest and other mental health-related learning opportunities. These interests were critiqued by decision makers and seen as experiences that were “not educational.” But as the Black educators during segregation knew, these were exactly the kinds of experiences Black children would need to thrive.

Other key findings illuminate the power of youth organizing and the ways that Black people resisted oppression, in community with one another across time and space. While dominant narratives of resistance often suggest a spontaneity in acts of civil disobedience or “riots.” Engaging with counterstories demonstrates otherwise. Resistance efforts were planful and coordinated. The Chapel Hill Nine planned their lunch counter protest by studying what college students had done in Greensboro, and met together for weeks to prepare, consulting with community mentors. Also significant was an attentiveness to the risks that individuals of different identities faced. In Chapel Hill, UNC was the largest employer; and thus any act of resistance or rebellion risked a loss of income. But high school students, who were not employed by the university, did not face this risk, and thus, there was some benefit to the Black community in acts of resistance being led and enacted by youth. The coordination, forethought, and collectivity inherent to these moments, in particular when enacted by youth, were typically erased in dominant narratives.

Another key theme that we generated around collective action was the everydayness of resistance. Hargett’s own story embodied this in many ways. While she attended an HBCU for her undergraduate degree in nursing and was surrounded by Black peers and faculty, segregated hospitals in North Carolina would only welcome Black nursing students for two of the five placements necessary for clinical study. This meant that Mrs. Hargett and the other Black nursing students needed to travel out of state, going as far as Atlanta and Harlem, simply to complete their studies. These experiences seated in her a moral outrage and a decision to push back and open doors for other Black students throughout the rest of her career.

Hargett, Mason and Mason-Hogans also told stories of everyday heroes in their community: Ms. Battle, a teacher who advocated for Black children in Chapel Hill; Nurse Compton, a nurse who helped the Black community navigate disease perpetuated by unsanitary living conditions; Ms. Pope, a home economics teacher who helped Black women learn to sanitize their kitchens; Coach William Donald "Huck" Peerman, the coach who led Lincoln High School to record-breaking wins; the B1 Band members who inspired a next generation of music innovation. Everyday activism was the narrative of Chapel Hill. This orientation to resistance has a power that is erased by dominant narratives that lift up only the stories of a selected few heroes, like Dr. King and Rosa Parks. Solitary heroes are hard to find. And the likelihood that any one person will suddenly change the trajectory of history is low. But collectives of people, working together, in coordination, through their daily lives, over time, while supporting families and holding a job, are accessible narratives for emulation. These stories of everyday heroes are how change happens. And *these narratives* must be lifted up.

## Conclusion

“...I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.” — James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955)

By analyzing historical occurrences of trauma in US schools, we invite scholars and practitioners to use history as a guide for educator *practice*. This analysis generates tools so that

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counterstories can be acknowledged, constructed, and valued in everyday moments of racial harm. In-so-doing, we seek to dissipate the smog of racism (Tatum, 1997), to not refuse our own history but to assess it honestly so that we may dismantle the racial injustice of SBT in the work towards liberation. Baldwin, in 1955, is speaking directly to us. We must respond by messing with the master narrative (Goldin et al., 2024). We must respond by tracing how that master narrative continues to inform federal, state, and local educational policymaking and teaching.

For the present to be *coherent*, we need to address the layers of consequences at the heart of the great American falsehood in the master narrative of desegregation. That master narrative posited that Black schools were fully inferior. That they had nothing, and therefore that Black students had nothing to lose. That Black students were, in fact, lucky. Lucky as they stepped away from *their Lincoln Highs* through rioting crowds screaming epithets at them as they sought to integrate white schools. Appraisals of substandard inert resources – buildings, textbooks, flutes, and Bunsen burners – were correct but incomplete. The master narrative took these inert resources and blamed *Blackness* for injustice, not systemic racism. In this way, the human resources, professional expertise, and community ethic of care present in Black segregated schools were devalued and erased. And in this way, the trauma of segregation that was named was “being Black.”

This cemented moments like Elizabeth Ann Eckford’s, Ruby Bridges’, and other Black students’ individual experiences of racial trauma in the nation’s collective memory. Seeing only these moments, a nation declared that justice was being done.

### Figure 2

“Scream Image,” *Outside of Central High School, Little Rock, Arkansas, September 4, 1957.*



**Figure 3**

*Norman Rockwell's "The Problem We All Live With," depicts Ruby Bridges, the first Black child to attend an all-white elementary school in the South.*



This narrative injustice has meant that we do not ask our students, today, when teaching about *Brown* and our civil rights history: "Why was it that *children* were tasked with desegregating schools?" We do not see Ms. Eckford's Black school behind her, or Ruby Bridges' parents and community behind her. These images feature Eckford and Bridges' individual pain, the racism surrounding them, and the violence and peril they faced.

Eckford and Bridges' Black school, Black teachers, Black community, and childhood friends are nowhere to be seen in this picture. The iconography traded on the erasure of Black children's systemically trauma-informed schools. Black children continue to be harmed in this erasure, as schools seek to become trauma-informed in color-evasive ways that weaponize TIP.

**Figure 4**

*Lincoln High School, Chapel Hill, Graduating class of 1957*



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This falsehood obscures how we understand our own history. And it also bequeaths to us layers upon layers of policies, laws, and practices that continue to harm Black students in US schools.

Today, this narrative injustice contorts educational policy and practice, extending, for example, into how we measure the “lack of value” of urban schools - making them vulnerable to neoliberal reforms. The swallowing of this lie also affected teaching practice and research. For sixty years, research, practice, and policy that pathologizes Blackness has proliferated.

This includes the way that school counseling has progressed in ways that limited the understanding and visibility of Black pain and joy. That blames individual students for their trauma (Khasnabis & Goldin, 2020) instead of racialized systems. In this way, educators seek to invent TIP, without realizing that segregated Black schools were places of SysTIP, schools where Black educators were attentive to the systemic injustices affecting their students, and the trauma they were experiencing. Schools where Black educators saw each child as worthy, as filled with potential, and thus worked to design learning opportunities that were relevant and ambitious, as well as learning environments that provided a safe haven in an otherwise unjust world. Those Black educators who taught in Black schools, and those who inherited their approaches and continue in their name, have much to teach us.

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