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Fugitive Mentorship and Cultivating Expansive Futures: A Collaborative Autoethnography by Black Student Union Advisors

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Abstract: In response to the growing bans on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) across multiple states (Shwartz, 2021), the need to listen to Black Education Spaces (BES) advocates has never been more crucial to the thriving future of Black Education (Love, 2019, 2023). This article aims to amplify the important, yet often overlooked, voices of High School Black Student Union (BSU) advisors and their experiences with mentorship. Utilizing collaborative autoethnography methodology, we, the authors as research participants, collectively explored the following research question: "How do we steward Black Educational Futures that do not perpetuate school systems' anti-Blackness rhetoric?" Through our four vantage points on advising BSUs within the same district in the American Southwest, we offer three findings that nuance Givens' (2021) historical framework of Fugitive Pedagogy and Warren and Coles' (2020) conceptualization of BES. By showcasing how our layered identities as BSU advisors impacted us and our educational landscape, we wrote this article to contribute to the literature on how educators, broadly defined, can challenge inequities while fostering inclusive educational environments (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005).

Keywords: Black Student Union, Fugitive Mentorship, Collaborative Autoethnography, Black Educational Futures

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Introduction

On July 25, 2025, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) confirmed that the current Trump administration would release around $5 billion in K12 grant funds for "student academic supports, English learners, immigrant students, and teacher training" (Arundel, 2025). The federal funding delays led to unnecessary employee layoffs and the elimination of programs. News articles like the one mentioned previously are part of a broader discourse surrounding policing intellectual freedom. Recent K12 legislation banning CRT and SEL in classroom instruction and content is affecting higher education's Diversity and Equity Inclusion initiatives and the funding/presence of affinity clubs, as CRT is cited as anti-American (Sawchuk, 2021; Schwartz, 2021; *Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History*, 2025; Jones, 2025). As a result, many higher education Black Student Unions (BSU), have been shut down or discontinued, as in the case of West Point, the University of Utah, University of Florida, Ohio State, and Hood College (Berstein, 2025; Dixon, 2025; Gabbatt, 2025; Hess, 2025; Kanno-Youngs, 2025; Maynard, 2025; Tanner, 2024). The current higher-education policy discourse can serve as a warning call to BSUs in K12 contexts, if we choose to listen.

If not addressed, cultural affinity spaces and diversity clubs, which offer safe spaces for youth of color, especially Black youth, will not exist, and school sites will profit off Black suffering without repercussions (Dumas, 2014; Love, 2019). By sharing our collective autoethnography on advising within Black Education Spaces (BES), we as BSU advisors (three Black women and one white woman) contribute to the following three research fields: (1) out-of-school time learning, (2) community-based youth mentorship, and (3) Black Education history. We hope to illustrate in this article how BSU advisors are part of a long history of Black educators and Black Education researchers who know the value of Fugitive Pedagogy. Furthermore, Givens (2021) defines Fugitive Pedagogy as the "physical and intellectual acts of subversion engaged in by black people (*sic)* over the course of their educational striving" (p.10).

Therefore, this article argues that BSU advisors are part of a larger historical legacy of Black educators as political transgressors; our autoethnographic reflections provide guidelines for what current Fugitive Mentorship encapsulates in our Southwest Black Education Spaces (BES) contexts. To explain Fugitive Mentorship, we first utilize Warren and Coles' (2020) definition of Black Education Spaces:

> BES are physical locations, cultural practices, traditions, and opportunities for Black students and educators to: (a) heal from the racialized assaults resulting from anti-Blackness; and (b) strategize resistance to manifestations of anti-Blackness. (p.382)

We then returned to Givens's (2021) definition of fugitivity.

> Fugitivity enunciates subversive practices of black social life *(sic)* in the African diaspora over and against the persistent violence of white supremacy and its technology of surveillance and domination that were bound up in and animated by the chattel principle. It is a constant seeking of an outside to white supremacy that might elusively be understood as black freedom. (p.10)

As we have already stated, if left unchecked, school sites remain spaces of Black suffering. Additionally, Black Student Union clubs, i.e., after-school culturally affinity programs that include all students while promoting awareness of Black culture, exist in a liminal space of being both inside and outside of school spaces. Therefore, BSU, as our BES, is not seeking an outside to white supremacy, but rather it is a space to heal and breathe despite white supremacy's pervasiveness, and Fugitive Mentorship is a constant effort by culturally relevant educators to maintain and protect a space for all students, especially Black youth, to co-conspire, resist, and heal. While we agree with Givens (2022) that Black Education was a "fugitive project from its inception" (p.3), our article explores how to ensure that cultivating Black Educational Futures is not a forced expectation on only Black educators. As the teacher profession remains predominantly white, it is imperative that all educators know how to support every student, regardless of differing identity markers, to achieve their academic goals. To answer *CIE*'s special issue call, we aim to share what we believe has been the most meaningful aspect of our advising experience in cultivating expansive Black Educational futures amidst anti-Black rhetoric on K-12 high school campuses.

Literature Review

Our literature review situates this article at a critical juncture: (1) out-of-school time learning, (2) community-based youth mentorship, and (3) Black Education history. Our literature review is organized into three headings to illustrate how the field relates to BES and BSU scholarship, highlighting the critical gap we aim to address.

Out of School Time Learning

Little's (2002) seminal work on Black college students' extracurriculars established the importance of debate and literary society in Black out-of-school-time learning. Recent scholarship argues that K12 out-of-school programming is historically rooted in moral panics about youth of color (Baldridge et al., 2024). Therefore, unlike higher education, K12 extracurricular spaces initially operated as character-forming and were not intended to liberate or transform educational outcomes. While there is emerging research on the important role of US Black Student Unions in higher education (Cowley & Dowie-Chin, 2024; Lane, 2022; Malone, 2025) and how Black clubs are education spaces abroad (Ribeiro, 2025), the literature around K12 Black Student Unions, as an out-of-school-time extracurricular, is slowly growing and remains in the gray literature (Harrison, et al., 2020). Meanwhile, other scholars who explore extracurricular activities use the phrase "diversity club" to speak towards advisor expectations and mentorship styles (Parry et al., 2020). Additionally, dissertations focusing on out-of-school time that aim to promote equitable membership, such as for marginalized ninth graders, do not label the clubs vaguely as either academic or non-academic (Swaney, 2023).

Community-Based Youth Mentorship

While Black Student Unions are often housed within school classrooms, they are influenced by community-based mentoring practices. In 2005, Ginwright, a leading scholar within the field, first explored the critical social capital needed for Black youth activism. He later researched the role of adult development in effective intergenerational community partnerships (2007). Then, Ginwright claimed that effective Black civic engagement and mentoring youth to be civically engaged required a shift from a fixing to an action-based perspective (2010). More recent scholarship explores how non-Black mentors can effectively work with Black youth in community-based mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (Jones et al., 2022).

Black Education History

To disrupt anti-Blackness rhetoric on high school campuses, BES remains a necessity in school systems (Bridgeforth, 2024). Furthermore, there is no shortage of great scholars of color conducting the research that speaks to the critical formation of BES in affirming Black brilliance, healing, and academic well-being (Bell and Sealey-Ruiz, 2023; McConatha and Brown, 2020; Mims, Rubenstein, & Thomas, 2022; Sulé, Williams, & Cade, 2018; Warren & Coles, 2020). However, this paper hopes to close a critical gap in the literature by exploring a unique geographic location within Black Education research. Additionally, while there is a growing literature on K12 BSUs, there is a dearth of scholarship by and about BSU advisors, who teeter on the fine line between formal education employees and community/after-school youth workers. By examining how American Southwest BES are nurtured and sustained, we offer our collaborative autoethnography to address the following research question: How do we steward Black Educational Futures that do not perpetuate school systems' anti-Blackness rhetoric?

Theoretical Framework

This study on Fugitive Mentorship is theoretically grounded in Fugitive Pedagogy (Givens, 2021). Fugitive Pedagogy provides us a lens through which to historically examine how Black educators, and we argue BSU advisors too, used subversive methods, physically and intellectually, to cultivate expansive futures for and with Black youth. The Fugitive Pedagogy framework relies on the duality of a fugitive's (an enslaved individual's) identity: escaped or convicted. While not all authors identify as Black American, it is important to note the theoretical underpinnings. Therefore, fugitivity for each author is shifted to express how counternarrative and subversion lead to liberating and abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019). While Givens' (2021) focus is on Black Educational heritage through Carter G. Woodson's life and the history of Black teacher associations, we highlight how first-generation U.S. citizenship status is part of fugitivity, particularly in the cases of Latoya and Celina's lived experiences. We believe pursuits of migration inform the essential collaboration needed to strategically resist and transform educational futures. We are aware that fugitivity could be conflated with modern notions of refugee immigrant experiences, but our theoretical lens of fugitivity is entirely historical. Additionally, we theorize alongside Tessie McGee, who was featured in the opening vignette of *Fugitive Pedagogy* (Givens, 2021, p. 3), about the gendered experience of Black educators.

Black Education Spaces

While many Black Education scholars state the importance of BES, Warren and Coles (2020) provide a clear definition of BES and a conceptual framework of three components that a transformative BES reveals to engaged youth: (1) self determination, (2) self-actualization, and (3) self-efficacy (see Table 1).

Table 1
BES Character Forming Traits & Definitions (Warren & Coles, 2020, p. 389)

Self Determination	Self-Actualization	Self-Efficacy
"BES might be recognized by the value or emphasis given to restoring Black students' full autonomy in decision making about who or what they might become in the future."	BES ought to "actively celebrate the individual diversity within Blackness while consciously working not to further marginalize already stigmatized populations of Black people (e.g., Black queer youth)."	BES insist that "Black youth not disassociate themselves from, or compromise aspects of, their home/cultural affinities to achieve success, broadly defined."

We created this table based on the descriptive definitions provided by Warren and Coles (2020). The traits appear in the order they are mentioned in the article, and no trait has more weight or value based on its sequence in the table. We provide this table to illustrate the BES framework and offer readers a guide for our data analysis when comparing our different BSU contexts.

Although the case study, from which these components were theorized, is of a same-sex Black male school space, there is merit in learning how advisors cultivate these components to resist anti-Blackness outside of BES. Additionally, given their BES definition, BES can be both physical and metaphorical, as in the case of cultural practices or traditions. Therefore, in our autoethnographic reflections, we kept in mind how these three components were displayed as both external and internal outcomes in the educational narratives of Black youth. Lastly, due to the deeply personal nature of the research we produce, we include our positionality section earlier in this article than is typically expected.

Positionality

Our collaborative autoethnography research is informed by multigenerational, interracial, linguistic, and gender-fluid identities (Milner IV, 2007). We, as BSU advisors, identify as women, Black and white educators, counselors, parents, caregivers, daughters, and sisters. Celina is a first-generation Romanian American white woman. Sholanda is a Black American woman. Latoya is a first-generation Black American woman. Regina is a Black American woman. Our individual positionality statements are not just a checkbox to fill out, but they are integral to the

integrity of this article and the community work needed thereafter. We come to this work of conducting educational research as educators, academics, and scholars with a collective interest in social justice; our efforts are rooted in the belief that Black youth's educational futures should not be dismissed at the expense of the school's interests (Dumas, 2006). With a combined 23 years of experience as advisors, we have created spaces of resistance and resilience for Black students, and we continue to learn what is needed to cultivate expansive futures.

Given our unique perspectives on diversity clubs, we were inspired to collect data on our lived experiences in Black Education Spaces, meanwhile suspending damage-centered narratives (Tuck, 2009). Our different positionalities, as insiders/outsiders (Holmes, 2020; Villenas, 1996), informed the research process; without a clear understanding of our positionality, the reflexivity needed to thematically analyze the storied data would prove challenging. Each author reflected on their one-pager (presented in the findings section) and read one more of each other's one-pagers to expand their perspective on the data and improve inter-reader reliability. Reading each other's autoethnographic accounts also helped establish credibility and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for our discussion on Fugitive Mentorship.

Rigor and Reliability

As a collaborative research team, we ensured reliability and validity in our collaborative autoethnographic research by Le Roux's (2017) five suggested criteria: (1) subjectivity (self is visible in the research); (2) self-reflexivity (researcher's intense awareness), (3) resonance (an intertwining of research and audience's lives); (4) credibility (plausibility); (5) contribution (generate ongoing research). We especially focused on self-reflexivity and resonance, conducting two 90-minute Zoom meetings dedicated solely to discussing the paper's writing progress, in addition to numerous email correspondence and text messages to maintain an iterative, organic writing-as-research process. One meeting was held before data collection was completed, and another was held after to analyze key takeaways from our critical reflections (presented in the results section). Our meetings provided a space for questioning and clarification, promoting both group awareness and self-awareness about the BSUs' reputation across the district, and they offered us a critical, reflexive space to interrogate our approach to the field of ethnographic inquiry (Green, 2025). As colleagues and friends in this work, we wholeheartedly agree that each reflection authentically represents the author's lived experiences.

Methods

We selected collaborative autoethnography as our methodology to uniquely display our intersectional identities as we tried to create inclusive educational environments while addressing inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Education research requires a powerful tool, like qualitative inquiry, to analyze complex notions like race, language, and identity in highly complex subjects like human beings (Adams et al., 2015; Ellis et al., 2011). Autoethnography, as defined by Adams, Ellis, and Jones (2017), is "a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')" (p. 1). Additionally, it allows us to tell our stories as research participants.

Participants

We are the only participants in the research study. Our methodological choice to view ourselves as both researchers and participants was a participatory approach, aligned with our theoretical framework and data analysis. In autoethnography, the researcher is synonymous with the research, claiming individual identity is worthy of inquiry, even if it is considered taboo (Muncey, 2005). Our memories, recollections, and embodied knowledge become our data, which are presented in our collaborative autoethnographic reflections. We offer the stories of four BSU advisors from three schools to show how our school district is navigating the formation of diversity clubs, particularly BSUs.

Ethics & Considerations

Although our autoethnographic reflections incorporate the lived experiences of others, we prioritized the confidentiality of all events and individuals involved in our research inquiry. Even though it was through our embodied meaning-making, we understand how sharing our lived experiences can affect others as we reflect on them. Throughout the research process, we ensured that we anonymized and kept items confidential to protect both ourselves, as former certified staff, and current or former students. In line with Yano's (2024) argument, while autoethnographic studies do not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval due to their inability to "generalize knowledge" and are thus deemed not research by the IRB, many other ethical considerations remain.

Additionally, our autoethnographic accounts are critical because the personal is political (Hanisch, 2006/1969; Holman Jones, 2005). Therefore, we, as authors, take on accountability as researchers, but it is not without meticulous and careful attention to the school sites, the youth we worked with and care about, and the work colleagues we will engage with after the publication of this article. For that reason, some of our stories are not entirely ours to share, and our retellings offer only one side of the narrative (Ellis et al., 2011). While we are appreciative, we must strive to work in solidarity with other education practitioners and hold school sites accountable. Without receptive and representational school administrators on these campuses, formal Black Education spaces, such as BSUs, might become more difficult to establish and sustain.

Data Collection

Recognizing that our lives constitute a critical, primary source (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022), we collected data on our years as a BSU advisor, detailing how we stewarded Black Educational futures. We consulted photographs, spoke about memories and interactions with students and community members. Between March and May 2025, we wrote multiple drafts of our one-page autoethnographic reflection (our unit of analysis), focusing on one central, meaningful moment in our BSU advising experience. To ensure auditability, we include our writing visual (see Appendix A) as protocol for writing up our autoethnography reflections. While Celina created the visual, all of us had access to it through the data collection process. We followed this order of steps for data collection: 1) we first returned to our research question to intentionally ground our writing; 2) we described the critical, meaningful moment; 3) we connected the experience to social structures/ systemic inequities; 4) we reflected on the process of writing in relation to Fugitive Mentorship.

Data Analysis

Between May and July 2025, we used a combination of deductive and "in vivo" coding for two reasons: 1) a desire to offer nuance BES from a 2) gendered, feminist lens that contributes to Fugitive Pedagogy. The decision to use deductive coding stems from the goal of clarifying connections among three key terms in Black Education spaces (BES), as our BSUs have distinct modalities. With this decision, we aimed to establish a protocol for analyzing the collected data. However, in a second iteration of the data analysis, we realized the need for "in vivo" coding due to the lack of Black feminist theoretical frameworks beyond Givens' *Fugitive Pedagogy*. We agree with scholars of autoethnography that best practices should be considered "in vivo" to capture the multiple voices in the research inquiry (Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Green, 2025).

To explore how we, as school faculty, navigated academic landscapes, we categorized our thematic analysis using our theoretical lens of Fugitive Pedagogy (Givens, 2021) and our conceptual framework of BES (Warren & Coles, 2020). We matched our thematic findings to the three character-forming traits in Table 1. We aimed to explore each BES concept through both physical and intellectual means, examining how BSU advisors were subversive in cultivating Black Educational Futures.

Results

We present our four autoethnographic reflections (one written by each author) in chronological order, given the varying lengths of time each author spent in their BSU context. Our order is Regina, Sholanda, Celina, and Latoya, and we include the years of advising experience in the subheading for context. We share raw, emotional recollections of our time advising BSU as critical, reflexive vignettes (Huber, 2024; Humphreys, 2005).

Regina's Autoethnographic Reflections (2016-2025)

I founded the Black Student Union (BSU) at Garden Heights High School during the 2016–2017 school year. At the time, most classes were allowed to meet during RTI, a class period that offers students reteach and enrichment opportunities, and I often hosted up to 70 students weekly. Our discussions focused on current events and school-related issues that made many of our students feel isolated. We created signs to hang around the school, encouraging kindness and challenging stereotypes. Coming from the East Coast, it was eye-opening for me to encounter so many students who felt unseen or unheard.

Then the pandemic hit. With no students in the building, many felt even less comfortable expressing themselves, particularly in the online AP History class. They feared backlash from non-marginalized peers, and their voices began to fade. I made it a point to speak with them after class, working to build trust and reassure them that I would advocate for their safety. It helped, though only to a small extent.

When students returned to school, most groups were allowed to resume meeting during RTI—except us. I was told, "Clubs can meet after school." Unfortunately, many of our members were bus riders and couldn't stay late. I encouraged them to find ways to participate regardless, and by 2023, we were finally starting to grow again.

Our group became a safe space. Students would alert me immediately if something serious were to occur. I remember one instance when a substitute was accused of calling a student the N-word. I told the class we were going on a field trip. I found an assistant principal, who confirmed the substitute had been sent home and the situation was being handled. I brought the students back to class, showing them that they had support.

Today, BSU is thriving. Our meetings are student-run, students lead our fundraisers, and we now have strong male representation in leadership roles. It's been a meaningful experience to be part of this journey.

Our new sponsor is younger and brings fresh ideas. The students have already begun planning for next year with her. I've come to realize that my role is to plant seeds. Others will water them and witness the growth. Every challenge, every conversation, and every moment has been worth it.

Sholanda's Autoethnographic Reflections (2018-2025)

I title my section "In the Shadows, We Dream: Black Mentorship and Fugitive Advising." In 2018, I was asked to co-advise Western Sky High School's founding BSU chapter. Coming from an HBCU and being in love with Blackness and Black culture, I was honored to do so. My Co-Advisor and I quickly found out that, though we were excited about the leadership support, the students weren't quite sure how to feel. Many students joined, and some joined to, at first, make a mockery of the club. Others joined because they had a sincere interest in learning about Black culture. We received so much support at the start of the club. Then, Covid-19 happened, leadership changed, and the world changed at the same time. During the pandemic, we had more than 80 students join us via Zoom. We had amazing student leaders who took their positions seriously and took the club to a place that we had not been in before. Once we were given the mandate that we had to return in person, we noticed a shift in the students' desire to be part of the club. George Floyd. Black Lives Matter protests. Loss of the Black administrator whom students looked up to—in the name of representation—left and went to the District Office. "Diversity" is one of our pillars, but the lived reality for Black students remains deeply isolating. The community that the Black Student Union (BSU) birthed was a necessity.

This was our protection work. We went through so much. So much. So much mockery. So much intimidation. So much lack of support. So much explanation just to prove that we were a real club and worthy of recognition. So much. Tired and more tired. Distress calls. Fires. Hurt. Pain. Disappointment. Fragility. Supremacy. Marginalization while already being in the margins. Embarrassment. Shame. Delight. Hope. Rebranding. Reframing. Protection. Strength. Pride. Joy. Black joy. Despite the challenges, we had so much to celebrate. From the BSU circle, in which we invited all the District BSUs, to our regular campus meetings, students shared how much they loved and looked forward to BSU.

Being an Advisor wasn't easy, but it was so worth it. Consistency and intentionality became our mission and our vision statements. We, the students and the Advisors, fought so hard to replace laughter of mockery with smiles of appreciation and acceptance. We even added a step team to our club, for students who wanted to be part of other co-curricular activities but had a hard time finding their space. However, as racially and ethnically diverse as the team was, it was never as accepted as Cheer and Pom. Non-Black students were questioned about why they wanted to be part of something so "ghetto." Black students became too ashamed to perform in front of the school, due to being called "ghetto." The support from multiple entities just did not

exist. The fight became more about sustaining than existing. After a while, an exhale had to be taken. The team disbanded, and the light went back to Cheer and to Pom, the comfort food for movement on high school campuses

As their advisor, I didn't just guide students through the layers of being authentically who they were. I became a witness, a mirror, and a protector. Our work became fugitive work naturally. Over the pandemic, looking for community was important. Connecting with another West Coast BSU Advisor who partnered with our local BSU was a blessing. The students, across Western states, found connections and familyship with each other. The yearly BSU conference, locally held, is an event that we look forward to each year.

Celina's Autoethnographic Reflections (2021-2025)

I became Ridge Point High School's BSU advisor in the 2021-2022 academic year, and even though I never met the prior BSU advisor who left the previous school year, I reached out to see how I could continue a club mentorship he would approve of. I heard from community members that BSU had been on and off at the school since 2008. I connected with many BSU members who were part of last year's Google Classroom. In my first year, we built the club back up to what it was. Students shared that online, the club had a weekly membership of 30. In the 2021-22 school year, we held a steady group of 7-10 dedicated members, with 3 returners. Our first year, we had virtual field trips and guest speakers, but in my second year, we geared up for our in-person first Black alumni guest reading and in-person in-state field trip.

In April 2022, I reached out to the alum poet after reading their book in a community book club. After emailing, they shared an interest in returning to their alma mater to speak to BSU, and we decided on a fall 2022 date. In BSU, we prepared and read their poetry, and BSU members were excited. A month out from the event, one administrative principal shared with me concerns with the poet's pronouns on the flyer and the use of the N-word in their selected poetry.

I shared my frustrations with BSU, and we all agreed on inviting the administrative principal to a BSU meeting to discuss the matter. BSU officers wanted to speak about how the use of the N-word was freely used on school grounds, but when a Black alum came to the school, their language was being censored.

At the BSU club meeting where the admin was invited, we were the only two adults in the room. It didn't feel weird to me, but the admin was visibly uncomfortable. Two white adults with a group of students that were predominantly Black (10-12 students and 1-2 white students). He kept sharing it was a school event, and some families wouldn't be ok with that language. The BSU president was very open and shared her personal experience: "This school couldn't care less if students call me that daily." The admin left, saying he was new to the job, and I was open with the students that, as a second-year teacher, I didn't want to push so hard that I couldn't return to advise next year. I shared with the poet over email that the decision was essentially up to them.

When the event came around, the poet first came to our BSU club space to meet all the members, and then we all went to the auditorium for the guest reading. At least two administrators showed up. I got nervous and didn't record or take a lot of photos because I stayed in the back to watch the admin. When the poet got to the part in the poem, they looked up to see more of the audience and took the risk and said it. All the students cheered, and they knew how big of a deal it was to have a Black poet uncensored. I didn't lose my job. Students bought their

book, and I learned what it meant to take mentorship seriously and show up for BSU despite the risks.

I now co-advise BSU and still advocate for in-person events that center Blackened knowledge. I advocate as loudly as I can and leverage any privilege I have to offer BSU members the opportunity to dream with abandon.

Latoya's Autoethnographic Reflections (2014-2025)

Before working at the Western Sky High School in 2024, I had never heard of the Black Student Union (BSU), even though I lived in the state my whole life. When I was introduced to the club, I was immediately intrigued and agreed to serve as a Co-advisor alongside two colleagues employed at the school. I soon discovered that BSU was far more than just a student club—it was a space for deep connection, understanding, and shared experience that extended beyond racial identity or skin color.

There's a saying in the Black community: "All skinfolk ain't kinfolk" (inspired by Hurston, 1942/2006). It's a powerful reminder that sharing the same skin tone doesn't necessarily mean we share the same experiences or perspectives. Yet, in many ways, that diversity within our community became a source of strength. Our BSU students—and we as Advisors—found common ground not only in shared identity but also in our unique journeys. What united us was a collective desire to be seen, heard, respected, and valued. At the same time, we sought space—space to exist authentically, to move freely, and to express ourselves without apology. Individually and collectively.

Unfortunately, I often felt that the school's administration struggled to find a healthy balance in how they supported the BSU. At times, it felt like we were invisible, overlooked, and dismissed. At other times, we were micromanaged, as if our very presence was disruptive. It often felt as though our efforts were perceived as a nuisance rather than a necessity. I believe our students felt this, too. As the year went on, participation declined. Fewer and fewer students showed up, perhaps sensing the lack of genuine support and recognition.

Still, my time with BSU was deeply meaningful. It opened my eyes to the importance of not just creating space for marginalized voices but protecting and uplifting those spaces. BSU is about more than race—it's about dignity, belonging, and the right to thrive.

Discussion

Informed by Fugitive Pedagogy and the BES character-forming trait, we argue that we, as advisors, conceptualize Fugitive Mentorship by 1) protecting to defend choice; 2) modeling unapologetic self-acceptance; 3) boldly dreaming new beginnings. Our three findings on Fugitive Mentorship reflect how BSU advisors created spaces of resistance and advocated for the Black Educational futures during times of political crisis. We believe the fields of Black girl studies, participatory school leadership, critical mentorship, and even ethnic studies could apply this article's findings to cultivate expansive futures for Black youth.

Self Determination: Advisors Defend BES to Provide Options

We all write in our autoethnographic reflections about how, as advisors, we were in the company of wonderful Black leaders who believed in defending BSU and in offering Black

youth options to pursue their academic dreams. They informed us how to pivot and restore Black students' full autonomy in spaces (Warren & Coles, 2020). In their autoethnographic accounts, Regina and Sholanda share how they founded their BSU chapters in 2016 and 2018 at their respective high schools (Garden Heights and Western Sky). Celina and Latoya also pay their respects to former co-advisors and mentors who helped formally establish the BES. In the literature on Black mentorship, scholars claim that effective mentors are socialized and nurtured to be good mentors through communal methods of observation and discussion with like-minded individuals (Griffin, 2012; Brown &Mendenhall, 2023). Therefore, co-advising offers another space for Fugitive Pedagogy and shared values in BES.

All our reflections highlight a consciousness-raising element: the Black Student Union was worth fighting for, but the efforts must be intentional, so that Black suffering is not disregarded (Baldridge, 2020). Sholanda states how BSU was "born out of necessity," but she worked hard with her co-advisors to ensure the club replaced "laughter of mockery with smiles of appreciation." In Regina's account, she even paused her class "to take a field trip" as a measure to show how much she fought for Black students and their efforts to be seen. Celina, despite her frustrations, undoubtedly believed in the BSU members' ability to effectively lead a discussion with the administration, allowing them to explore options for the guest speaker to be uncensored and have their pronouns shared. Latoya states it concisely, saying, "BSU was far more than just a student club." BSU was a BES worth protecting because it offered Black youth the space to lead, heal, and dream (Love, 2023).

Self-Actualization: Advisors Bring Their Full Selves to Their Role

In our reflections, we critically examine what we bring to our BSU advisor roles and how our contexts shape our complex identities, and, in turn, afford us the ability to create spaces that celebrate individual diversity (Warren & Coles, 2020). Each of our accounts shares parts of our lives before we accepted the role at BSU. Regina shared differences in her East Coast upbringing compared to those of her BSU members. Sholanda felt inspired to join BSU because of her HBCU experience. Latoya is open about her newness to BSU as a BES, even though she worked in the state where she grew up. Our reflections align with research indicating that Black mentors continue to support youth mentorship development, particularly in areas where Black teachers are scarce (Deleveaux, 2022). Latoya states that even when BSU's presence was seen as a nuisance by the administration, they continued to show up, and it speaks to bold self-acceptance. She draws meaning from BSU's "shared identity" and "individual journeys." Additionally, Regina's eye-opening experience with Southwest Black youth's confidence made her reflect on what it means to show up unapologetically and accept oneself.

Since Celina is the only non-Black club advisor as part of the research team, traits such as critical humility and honesty were necessary for them to demonstrate authentic, effective mentorship as part of their BES. Furthermore, research on white educators engaging in anti-racist mentorship highlights the importance of recognizing the limitations of their network and knowledge (Lensmire & Lozenski, 2020). Therefore, when non-Black club advisors are in BES, it is imperative to explore partnerships that bring in Black mentors in a fair and safe manner, one that is not performative, and to model working towards self-acceptance beyond white guilt. Few white mentors acknowledge youth's racial/ethnic identity enough to have conversations and engage in identity-based activities (Jones et al., 2022). Furthermore, youth notice the lack of cultural competency in service providers (Tulli-Shah, Welch, & Onah, 2024).

Self-Efficacy: Advisors Dream Big Enough to Include Everyone

Even though our collaborative autoethnography was not designed to record youth perspectives, we all speak to how youth might dream if we are effective advisors. Latoya demonstrates that for Black youth's identities of all types to be welcomed, the message of inclusion must go beyond a shared bond over racial identity. For example, she says, "BSU is about more than race, it's about dignity, belonging, and the right to thrive." Current scholarship on mentoring Black male youths illustrates that racial identity formation is just one factor in effective mentoring (Sanchez et al., 2018). Dreaming big also doesn't guarantee that we will always see our visions come to fruition. Regina states that she sees her role as "planting seeds and watching them grow." Celina refused the admin's closed-minded narratives to curb BSU's dreams of having a Black nonbinary poet speak on their identity in their hometown. To ensure that BSU spaces were inclusive to all, Sholanda offers her role as a "witness, mirror, and protector" to allow for multiple forms of dreaming to occur, including her title: 'in the shadow's we dream.' Dreaming boldly is still a personal act, even when it is communal, and we have, through our actions, illustrated that there is no need to disassociate from what is culturally relevant to achieve success (Warren & Coles, 2020).

Navigating busy school years and family obligations, we all found time to dream alongside the youth and remain inspired. We truly believe that if more Black youth were invited to dream, with what they have, in safe BES settings, Fugitive Mentorship would be folded into community-based mentoring programs and in-school student participatory leadership models (Bertrand et al., 2025).

Conclusion

By offering our collaborative autoethnography of an often-overlooked educational role, high school BSU advisors, this paper contributes to the literature on how educators can challenge inequities while fostering inclusive educational environments (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005). Our three findings illustrate that, despite challenges to solidify BSU's presence on campus, the efforts were worthwhile. These efforts are essential to invite Black youth to envision alternative, relevant, and more educational futures. Without providing a space and place for fugitive pedagogues to craft a culturally relevant mentorship on school campuses, Black Education Spaces will become rare and even more covert (Givens, 2021). Overall, Fugitive Mentorship underscores the importance of historically and culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1992/2022) for the most effective mentorship possible for as many Black youths as possible.

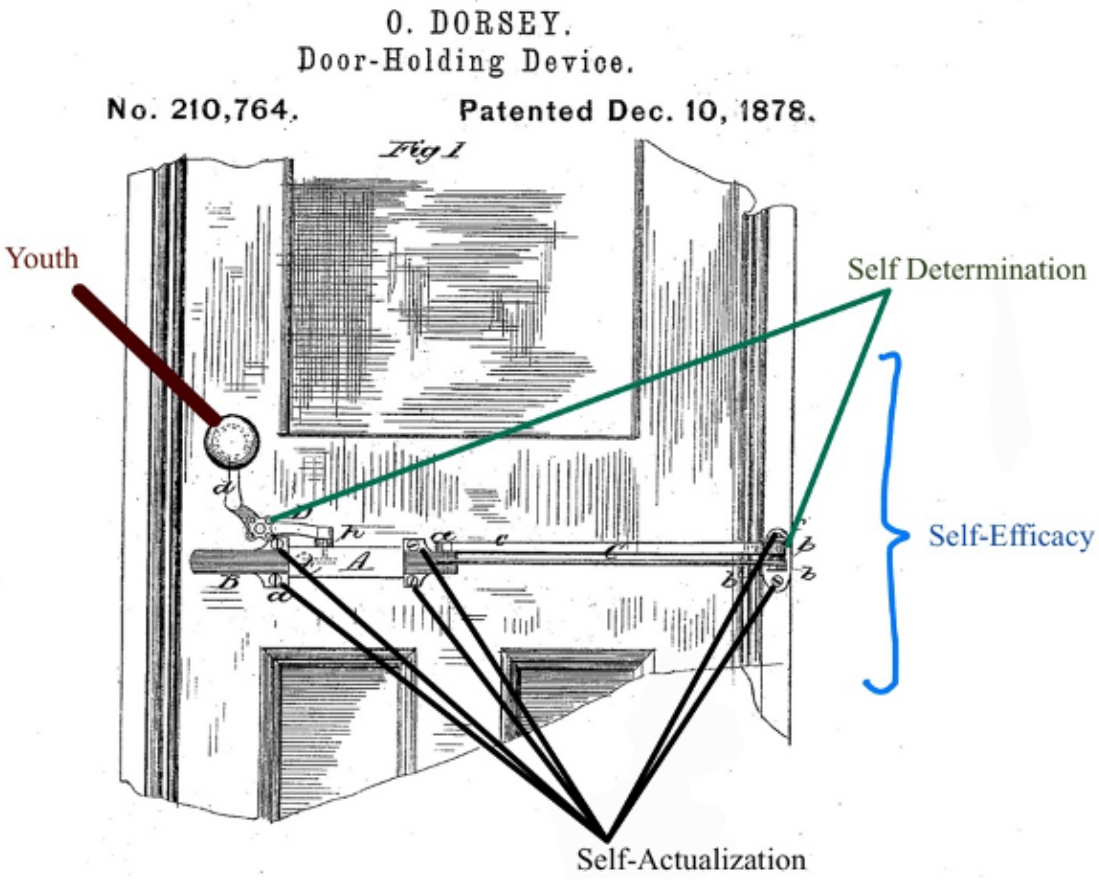
Holding the Door Open: Visualizing Fugitive Mentorship

To ensure Fugitive Mentorship is a constant effort by culturally relevant educators to maintain and protect BES, which co-conspire, resist, and heal, we present our visual representation (see Figure 1) as a guide to disrupting adultism (Bertrand, Brooks, Domínguez, 2023). We believe our figure, inspired by Osbourn Dorsey's 1878 patent, will contribute to existing models of Fugitive Pedagogy (Givens, 2021; Laughter et al., 2025) and Black Education mentorship (Brown & Mendenhall, 2023; Griffin, 2012). In *Fugitive Pedagogy*, Givens (2021)

states that Black Education has always felt underground, i.e., under a desk, under a hat, or under the earth (p. 15). However, the subversive act of Black learning derived from not seeing the underground efforts in plain sight. We see our accounts of advising as unassuming as well; we did the work we felt called to do. Therefore, we wanted to include a visual that does not prescribe a format, checklist, or pledge to mentoring/advising, and that invites the youth to feel empowered to know that we are in service of their dreams. Even though historical research is still emerging, we saw the invention by the Black freedman, a sixteen-year-old self-taught engineer, Osbourn Dorsey, as an example of stewarding Black Educational Futures: honoring the youth's genius in unassuming ways. (Boule, 2023; Boyd, 2025; Nartey, 2023).

Figure I

Osbourn Dorsey's 1878 Door-Holding/Doorknob Patent (Google Patents)



We view our Fugitive Mentorship work as similar to the parts, i.e., screws, rods, and bolts, that hold the door open from the frame (the school system) and the doorknob, which serves as an invitation for youth to dictate the door's movement (their imagined future). We saw how our three findings: 1) protecting to defend choice; 2) modeling unapologetic self-acceptance; 3) boldly dreaming new beginnings (aligned with Warren & Coles' (2020) BES character-forming traits) were all part of the mechanism that held the door open (to invite /celebrate) and closed (to shield/ protect).

In this figure, we illustrate that Fugitive Mentorship involves doing everything necessary to get out of the way and allow a young person's ability to shine, as seen in the case of Dorsey's invention. The foundational screws symbolize the self-actualization (celebrating individual diversity and embracing critical humility). The whole mechanism indicates the modest equipment needed for self-efficacy (not dissociating from what is culturally familiar to achieve success). In fact, Dorsey used his blacksmith training to ingeniously use cast iron instead of metal or wood (Walker, 2023). The doorknob is an invitation (autonomy) and is up to the young person to maneuver alongside the mechanism, choosing when to heal and when to strategically resist (BES' purpose). The special parts that allow for pivot and rotation are ways for self-determination (restoring Black students' full autonomy). Through this visual, we hope to demonstrate that no part holds more significance; however, even if one part is missing, Fugitive Mentorship would not be as effective in stewarding Black educational futures.

Future Research

As we share our collaborative autoethnography of advising BSU clubs in the American Southwest, we call in other participating research practitioners to share their knowledge of their hyperlocal context. We affirm that young people's voices must be centered through youth-driven methodologies such as Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Domínguez & Cammarota, 2022). Furthermore, we agree with Jones and colleagues (2022) that future research ought to examine how Black youth spaces can cultivate socio-political awareness. We ultimately underscore the critical need for research-practice partnerships to evaluate the implementation of professional development and funding given to diversity club advisors (Parry et al., 2020).

Recommendations

Our recommendations for stewarding Black Educational Futures are threefold: 1) Black representation matters to thriving BES; 2) systemic school implementation of racial literacy can improve culturally responsive mentorship; 3) Fugitive Mentorship must be relevant to the youth it aims to serve. We hope that, through our layered autoethnographic inquiry, we illustrate how to cultivate expansive Black Educational futures that disrupt systemic anti-Blackness (Sharpe, 2017).

To begin, Black adult representation remains essential when mentoring youth of color. Research shows that school systems that intentionally implement hiring and retention practices for Black faculty reduce the racial battle fatigue (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020) and do not overburden them with the sole responsibility of leading affinity spaces (Stanley, 2025). Next, school systems can systematically implement racial literacy professional development to offer more culturally responsive mentorship, rather than replicating this type of Fugitive Mentorship in other educational contexts, which would go against the aim of this paper. While some educators might have had some prior experience with culturally relevant historical literacy (Mihammad, 2020) and racial literacy framework (Sealey-Ruiz, 2022), in recent community-based mentorship literature, non-Black mentors, who make a large majority of the volunteer base (similar to educators) report not having had adequate training to discuss topics around race and culture (Jones et al., 2022). To minimize racial liberalism (Oto et al., 2020; Sealey-Ruiz, 2022), we propose that administration and teacher education departments engage with racial literacy before beginning in-service teaching. Lastly, effective BSU advisors know how to listen to young

people. We know youth already act as liaisons and consultants to their respective communities. By sharing our BSU advisors' experiences, we hope to get closer to our goal of having Black youth leaders' voices heard and respected. By listening to the youth who hold the future in their hands, we can disrupt anti-Blackness in educational contexts by Fugitive Mentorship: co-conspire, resist, and heal together.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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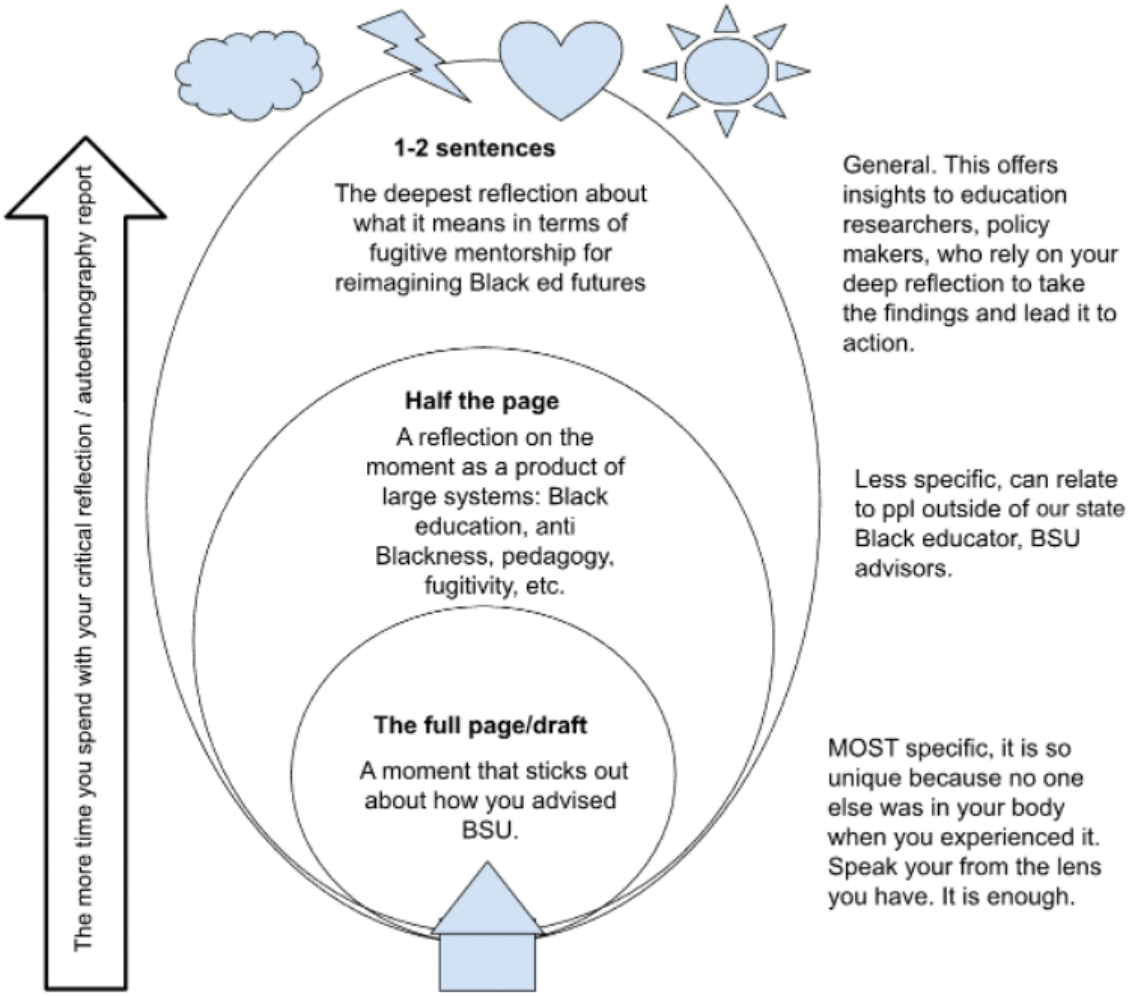
Appendix A: Collective Autoethnography Data Collection / Writing Visual



Celina created this visual representation of the writing process/prompt during a brainstorming activity in a virtual meeting with all the authors. While there are many ways to direct the writing-down experience for autoethnography, we offer this as a tool or guide for future scholars, educators, and autoethnographers to utilize. We found the experience of writing about a critical, meaningful moment within years of advising to be a daunting task, and we gradually shifted the focus to make the full page about the experience, with 1-2 sentences capturing the essence of why it mattered so much to us. Our results section is a textual representation of this writing visual.

Description of the visual: The bottom of the figure depicts a home, symbolizing comfort and familiarity, while the top of the figure represents the outdoors, filled with raw emotions and extreme weather conditions. The arrow on the left indicates a direction for the writing as it moves farther away from a deeply personal experience.

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Author Notes

1. In line with Matias and Boucher's (2021) approach, we chose to capitalize racial markers such as "Black" and "African American." Even though we are aware of American Psychological Association's guidelines to capitalize all racial categories, we do not capitalize "white" in our article to decolonize hegemonic narratives of whiteness and not uphold settler colonial logics (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

2. All high school names are pseudonyms to respect the anonymity and confidentiality of all involved.

3. We use the term collaborative instead of "collective ethnography" or "collective narrative" to ensure that each author's individuality is showcased in their critical reflection.

4. We did not go through an IRB process because it was not deemed as "research," generalizable knowledge, and we were the only participants.

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