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SAYS

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San Juan Unified School District

2021 – 2022

PHASE 1

EQUITY-IN-MOTION

An Evaluation of the SAYS Partnership with San Juan Unified School District

WATSON, ONONUJU, DE VERA, KIER

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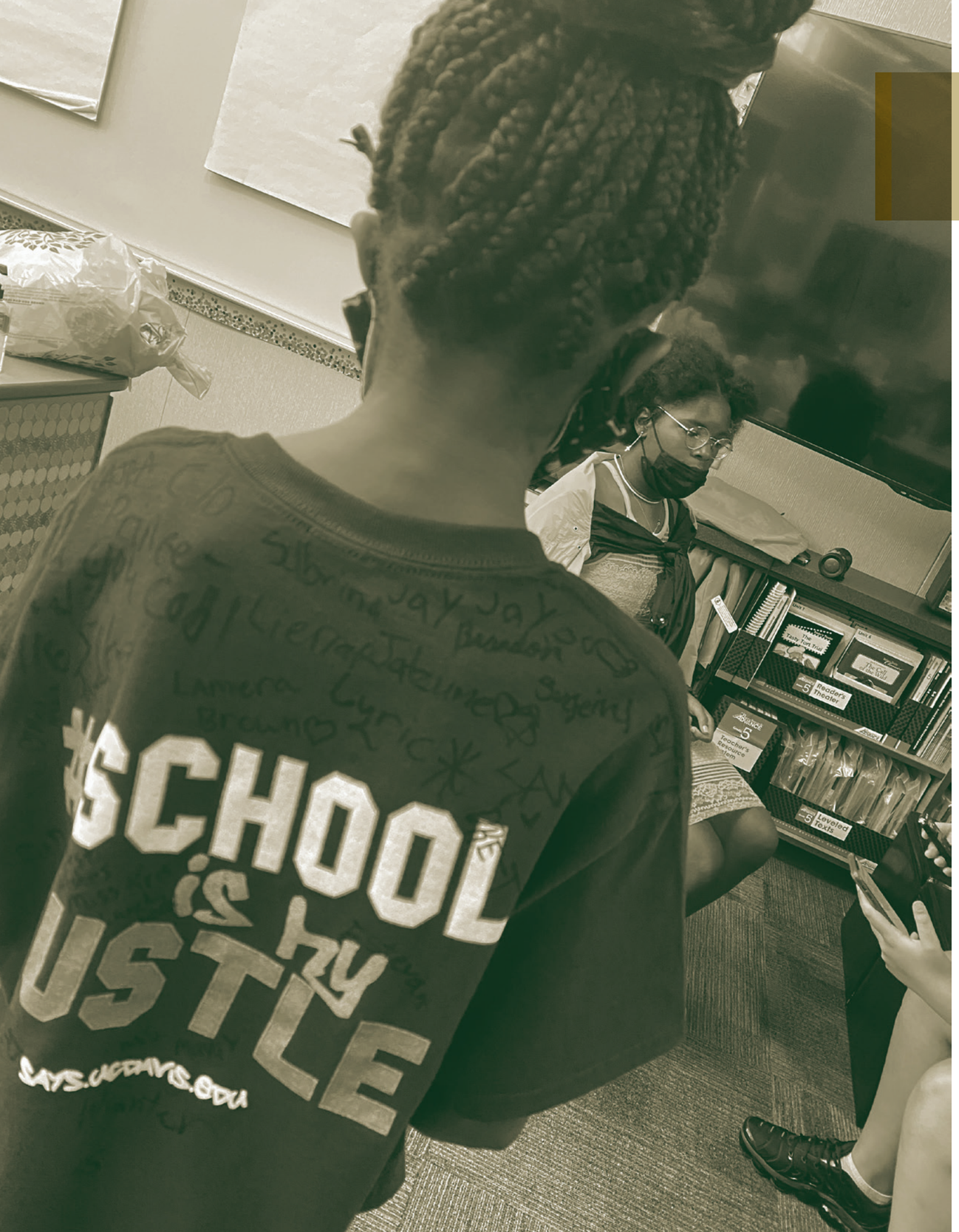

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DR. VAJRA WATSON
DR. IJEOMA ONONUJU
SHAUN DE VERA
AND ANGELINA KIER

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REPORT DESIGN BY PARKER SCOTT

EQUITY-IN-MOTION

RESEARCH**TEAM**

SHAUN DE VERA //

Educational Consultant,
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership

Shaun de Vera is an educational consultant who focuses on K-12 STEAM education. He has worked for Sacramento community-based organizations Square Root Academy and Asian Resources, Inc., and taught new math teachers at the Fortune School of Education's graduate credentialing program. Previous to that, he worked in California high schools for fifteen years as a math and computer science teacher, instructional coach, and school administrator. He is also a doctoral student and research assistant to Dr. Vajra Watson at California State University, Sacramento.

de Vera identifies as a Filipino, cisgender male.

ANGELINA KIER //

Classroom Teacher in San Juan Unified School District, Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership

Angelina Kier (She/Her/Ella) is an educational leader with over fifteen years of practical expertise in law, organizational development, and teaching and administration of schools. She brings experience as a teacher and administrator in Mexican schools, along with bilingual/bicultural abilities. She is committed to helping students of culturally and linguistically diverse groups achieve equitable academic excellence. She is currently an educator at Mesa Verde High School in the San Juan Unified School District, a doctoral student, and a research assistant to Dr. Vajra Watson at California State University, Sacramento.

Kier identifies as a Mexicana, cisgender female.

SAYS VISION STATEMENT // ART PROJECT // AFFIRMATION SWAG

DR. IJEOMA "IjO" ONONUJU //

Educational Consultant, Assistant Director of the Graduate School of Education at Touro University

Dr. Ononuju embraces his African roots as one of the most impactful influences in his journey to becoming an empowering and transformative Black leader. An executive leader, innovator, Ph.D., and catalyst, IjO drives systemic change through positive influence, a servant mindset, and an innate gravitational pull that inspires stakeholders around collaborative solutions. Leveraging a number of content platforms to amplify diverse voices, IjO is the strategist behind the launch of a DIVERSITY NOW YouTube series and BLACKADEMX—a funded social media competition show that highlights the innovation and creativity of Black educators.

Since 2020, IjO has served as the Chair of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Education at Touro University in Vallejo, California. He is also the university's Assistant Director for the Graduate School of Education. As an Assistant Professor of Education at Northern Arizona University, IjO serves as the Chair of the Diversity Committee for this Division I public research university with more than 25,000 students and 1,100 academic staff.

IjO holds a Ph.D. in *Language, Literacy, and Culture* from the University of California, Davis, and a B.A. in *Government and Economics* from California State University, Sacramento.

DR. VAJRA M. WATSON //

Educational Researcher Faculty Director & Associate Professor, Doctorate in Educational Leadership at Sac State

Dr. Watson has over twenty years of experience as a teacher, community organizer and scholar. She is the author of three books, *Learning to Liberate: Community-Based Solutions to the Crisis in Urban Education* (2012), *Transformative Schooling: Towards Racial Equity in Education* (2018), and *The Soul of Learning: rituals of resistance, magnetic pedagogy and living justice* (2022). She has published dozens of peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters.

Watson serves on several Boards of Directors, including *United Playaz* in San Francisco (Board President), the *Urban Education Justice Project*, the *National Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, The People's Think Tank, Kingmakers of Oakland* (Board Co-Chair), *Sacramento Area Youth Speaks* (SAYS), and *Elite Public Schools* in Vallejo, CA.

Dr. Watson is the recipient of the UC Davis Early Career Award, Sacramento's 40 Under 40 Leadership Award, the Chancellor's Soaring to New Heights Individual Achievement Award for Diversity, the California Educational Research Association's Annual Award, the Congressional Woman of the Year Award, the NBA Sacramento Kings Woman of the Year Award, and the American Educational Research Association's Social Impact and Social Justice Leadership awards.

Dr. Watson obtained her B.A. from UC Berkeley and holds two master's degrees from Harvard University in *International Education* and *Teaching and Learning*. She received her doctorate in *Administration, Planning, and Social Policy* from the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University.

Watson identifies as a white, cisgender female.

OPENING AND GRATITUDE

The Calling-In

We are grateful for this opportunity to conduct this scholarly inquiry with the San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) as partners working toward educational equity. In October 2021, in a world changed by the onset of what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls "the four pandemics," incoming Director of Equity and Student Achievement, Omar Field-Ridley, tasked a team from the College of Education at California State University, Sacramento (aka "Sacramento State") with investigating practices related to a new intervention in the district. Named Project HEAL (Health, Education, Activism, and Leadership), this program is run by community-based educators from the UC Davis Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) organization.

As authors of this report, we view this incredible opportunity as a serious responsibility. With full access to a school district striving towards *equity-in-action*, it is through d*oing the work* that we learn about the work itself. San Juan Unified School District serves nearly 40,000 students and is comprised of 68 public schools spread across the Arden-Arcade, Carmichael, Orangevale, Citrus Heights and Fair Oaks neighborhoods of Sacramento County, California. Improving any institution of this magnitude takes vision, tenacity, patience and perseverance. Wood & Nevarez (2014) suggest that education leaders critique "structural inequalities evident in the superstructure as well as the flawed assumptions by which they are fostered" (p. 73). To address inequality demands an effective and affective analysis, constantly considering the text, context, and subtext. Toward this end, we emphasize and empathize that the work is complicated and even contradictory. Not everyone defines or approaches equity in the same way. What we have in common, however, is that we are all *learners*. Toni Morrison (1998) reminds us that "What you do know is that you are human and therefore educable, and therefore capable of learning how to learn." Ali Michael (2015) explains, "Just as with calculus, there are skills and concepts that comprise racial competence, and it's possible to learn them" (p. 5).

As human beings, we have the incredible ability to change and be changed. This extends to our interaction with institutions. Any system—like school systems—created by the hands of people can be equally reconfigured and repurposed with consistent care and collective efforts. So yes, we *can* disrupt, dismantle, and reimagine educational equity. But the transformation of a school district is a colossal challenge! It's also a place of great discoveries. San Juan Unified School District—the good, bad, and otherwise—is replete with lessons about transformative practices and community-based partnerships.

The community educators of SAYS like to say that "students are the authors of their own lives." Similarly, as authors of this report, we believe we are telling an urgent story. Schools are in crisis. As such, we must find ways to elevate people who are working as *solutionaries* to move systems towards greater accountability. We want to *lean into the learning* with this initial evaluation. Based upon the premise that we embody our narratives, we

intentionally illuminate individuals who are on the frontlines battling, grappling, succeeding, and struggling with how to navigate a bureaucracy to better serve the needs of all children. Our research is not a blueprint or a magic bullet, but a thoughtful look at this district's burgeoning partnership with SAYS.

Along this research journey, we take our job as researchers seriously. In many ways, we are telling a sacred story of our time–full of *real* people trying to make *real* change in *reality*. As scholars, we are the *soul scribes* documenting and discerning the data. This is what we have been doing over the course of this academic year: refining our questions and digging for answers. To mine the data, we constantly moved from theory to practice to better understand the praxis of educational justice within and beyond the walls of the schoolhouse. Whenever we fail to do this, we take full responsibility.

Our audience for this report are the students of San Juan Unified School District and their families, the teachers and community-based educators who work face-to-face with young people every day, the school board at the helm, and various school and district leaders (including the SJUSD Equity and Student Achievement Department and each school principal in this report who partners with SAYS). This network of stakeholders brought us to the table and trusted us—a small research team at Sacramento State—to help inform the ways this district will learn, move, and grow through deep partnerships *with* community organizations.

As a formidable case study, the innovative work being built between a school district and the SAYS program is fascinating – as if two different worldviews are coming together. The origin story of SAYS starts in 2008 and is birthed from a desire to promote racial justice; in contrast, the District, founded in 1960, continues to wrestle with the "DNA" of inequality and white supremacy reflected in disproportionate disciplinary data, a racist hacking of a school website, climate surveys indicating the discomfort of Black students, and the lack of representation in school staff of many of the diverse groups that make up the district. Here, we have a conundrum that needs further exploration and has significant ramifications for districts across the nation.

Altogether, we are studying both the past and present to recommend an inclusive future. SAYS is a focal point of this investigation because of its mission to serve as a "social justice movement to transform education." As a team of scholars, we were skeptical about how much SAYS could accomplish in one year. However, we believe the following research shows that we "have the receipts." At the onset, one clear finding is that bureaucracies are real: SAYS had planned to be working inside San Juan Schools on a daily basis in the fall, but it took almost nearly the entire school year just to get the contract signed. When planning for innovative partnerships, we urge stakeholders to consider that it takes several years to meaningfully develop and cultivate school change.

Although the speed of systems can sometimes stall great efforts, inroads were made. During the 2021-2022 school year, SAYS provided a range of services at Encina High School (6-12), Thomas Edison Language Institute (K-8), Mira Loma High School (9-12), San Juan High School (9-12), and Rio Americano High School (9-12):

- School-wide assemblies
- Lunchtime open mic events followed by writing workshops
- In-class residencies with a SAYS Poet-Mentor-Educator at Thomas Edison and Rio Americano schools

The implementation of the full-scale SAYS Project HEAL model is still being adapted; nevertheless, these activities have paved the way for future programming. This academic year, we were able to gather data that provides an important starting point for understanding Project HEAL's innovative collaboration with the district. We describe the past year as "Phase One," recognizing that the intervention has only begun. Accordingly, this report focuses exclusively on three main elements:

Part I: Setting the Stage
Narratives of two institutions, SAYS and the District, contextualizing equity work

Part II: Current Findings and Insights
Deep portraits and initial survey findings

Part III: Futures Forward
Recommendations for next steps, including the necessary data for further analysis

Our initial multi--tiered assessment substantiates the SAYS intervention as an effective, culturally relevant strategy that moves marginalized students into the center of reform efforts. Our findings also illuminate *how* SAYS' hands-on pedagogy works and the ways this particular literary arts organization fosters learning environments of inclusivity, belonging, and racial justice. Moreover, the SAYS program consistently elevates the engagement and expectations of Students of Color by empowering them to author their own education. While the district has bold objectives about becoming anti-racist, an important question revolves around how to achieve it. As a collective of scholars, we can confirm that through and with SAYS, the system is moving from an institution of inequality towards an ecosystem of educational equity.

We would be remiss if we did not give a special note of appreciation to the students, SAYS educators, classroom teachers, school leaders and staff, district administrators, and the school board who invested their time, energy, and resources into a unique university-school-community partnership.

Now, as a way to officially open this report, we invite the reader into a SAYS space. At this year's UC Davis Equity Summit (organized and curated by SAYS), world-renowned New Orleans poet Sunni Patterson, said–*point blank*–that she was witnessing "equity-in-motion." Based upon her experience—in and of the present—she freestyled a poem for SAYS that was about SAYS. Her words, delivered through a Zoom screen on June 1, 2022, pierce the heart of our data. We share it below:

Delivered at the

SAYS Equity Summit // 2022

SUNNI PATTERSON

We hear you.
In your broken tongue.
Holding your broken hearts.
Piecing together our parts.
Purple passion and glory.
Sweat, drenched, and dripped.

Liberation comes in many forms.

Pull yourselves out and over.
Over our selves.
Over our differences.
Over our pains.
Into our goodness.
Into our joy.
Into our equity.
Into our heart.
Into heaven.
Right here on earth.
It's possible.

Even when the work is being done on the margins.

We walk a tightrope.
A fine line.
Where we upset the setup.
Where we turn ideas into institutions.
Where we are asked,
what will you do to stop white supremacy
in the world? And we answer:
whatever we can, however we can.

Where we are unapologetic.
Where we're reminded of our own vajra.
Our diamond.

Our Us.
Our We.
Our Names.

Fill our mouths with the wonder of ourselves.
Speak our greatness, our genius, and excellence.
Our safety and sorrow.
We are locating life in the mirrors of each other's eyes,
and stories.
Co-creators of a new world,
knowing that I am you, you are me, and we are one.

Let us co-create, reckon, restore and reclaim a learning that heals, connects, and grows better tomorrows. To all of the participants around the world who heard Sunni's words live, and to all of you reading in this moment, *we thank you and we look forward to our collective next steps*.

In Partnership,

Dr. Vajra Watson, Dr. Ijeoma Onoruju, Shaun de Vera, & Angelina Kier

EQUITY-IN-MOTION

CONTENTS

WARRIOR SCHOLAR ACADEMY

Group performance practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The programming contract between the UC Davis Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) organization and San Juan Unified School District was finalized in Spring 2022, and by the end of the school year, regular SAYS programming was taking place in three schools. Even though logistical challenges delayed the start of the elective course for many sites, in the 2021-22 academic year, we were able to gather data that provides an important starting point for understanding this unique community-based collaboration. We describe the past year as "Phase One," recognizing that the intervention has only begun. Accordingly, this report focuses exclusively on three main elements:

Part I: Setting the Stage
Narratives of two institutions, SAYS and the District, contextualizing equity work

Part II: Current Findings and Insights
Deep portraits and initial survey findings

Part III: Futures Forward
Recommendations for next steps, including the necessary data for further analysis

Our audience for this report are the students of San Juan Unified School District and their families, the teachers and community-based educators who work face-to-face with young people every day, the school board at the helm, and various school and district leaders (including the SJUSD Equity and Student Achievement Department and each school principal in this report who partners with SAYS). This network of stakeholders brought us to the table and trusted us—a small research team out of the College of Education at Sacramento State University—to help inform the ways this district will learn, move, and grow through intentional and strategic partnerships with community organizations.

As a formidable case study, the innovative work being built between a school district and the SAYS program signifies a "pocket of hope" (De los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002) amidst the complications of school reforms. Bridging together the purpose of SAYS and the role of San Juan is fascinating – as if two different worldviews are coming together. The origin story of SAYS starts in 2008 and is birthed from a desire to promote racial justice (2008); in contrast, the District, founded in 1960, continues to wrestle with the "DNA" of inequality and white supremacy that impacts disproportionate disciplinary data, a racist hacking of a school website, climate surveys indicating the discomfort of Black students, and the lack of representation in school staff of many of the diverse groups that make up the district. Altogether, we are studying the past and present to recommend a more inclusive future. The research questions which guide this report include:

> In what way, if at all, is the District actualizing its principles of equity?
>
> How, if at all, does the partnership with SAYS impact class climate, student outcomes, and school culture?

While these are the questions guiding our investigation, this report will demonstrate that for questions like these, there are no quick answers; the process of rigorously investigating is an arduous one. Findings are based on four data collection methods: Secondary School Data, Primary Survey Data, Interviews, and Observations (field notes).

Demographic data provided a glimpse into racial representation in the district. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) teachers and administrators are underrepresented throughout the district. Out of 806 high school teachers, 600 are White; only 32 are Black. Out of 29 administrators, only 3 are Chicanx/Latinx, and 1 is Black (an employee hired in 1995). Conversely, BIPOC students represent over 50% of the student body. This disparity indicates that BIPOC students are not regularly seeing school leaders who look like them or represent the cultures from which they are coming.

Survey data specifically looked at the schools/classes where SAYS programming occurred. Pre/post surveys were administered to three classes in February and June. Findings showed the greatest improvement in questions related to representation in curriculum, acknowledgement of diversity issues, identity development, and incorporating student life and voice in class. Additionally, students varied on whether they felt cared for at their school. Students at Thomas Edison felt less cared for, over the course of the program period, while students at Rio Americano felt more connected.

Important qualitative data are based on eight interviews and fifteen classroom observations over the course of a four-month period. This resulted in a case study of the district's Equity and Student Achievement Department, three portraits of district stakeholders, and an analysis of the classroom observations. Education is a human endeavor, and our study is based inside people's experiences. To build our final analysis, we constantly triangulated among multiple sources in an effort to expose the layers of (in)equity and a direction moving forward.

We hope that this report will provide a glimpse into the impact that effective community-based partnerships have on a school district striving to be more equitable. While the answer is not simple, this report demonstrates the nuances of transformative schooling and how we might move a district towards racial justice. The lessons are not just for Sacramento. Across the country, business as usual is not working and the status quo of school systems is imploding. This crisis provides opportunity for innovation and bolder partnerships. To develop new education models, we must work together in new, collaborative ways.

No single school or teacher can do this work alone; the work is just too heavy and too important. If for nothing else, the students deserve so much more.

ENDORSEMENTS

"Grounded on values of social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion, Equity-in-Motion goes beyond merely observing the process of anti-racism work to issue actionable recommendations that will deliberately address the hurdles obstructing equity in education. This report comes at a critical juncture in the movement to address educational equity, when promising partnerships such as the one between SAYS and San Juan Unified School District need to be nurtured and guided by qualitative analysis and meaningful feedback to achieve lasting outcomes. The research methods and compelling narratives on display here allow a thorough understanding, not only of how inequality impacts educational outcomes, but how to finally dismantle that inequality."

Dr. Carlos Nevarez
Sacramento State University
Interim Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

"This report documents the impressive work that SAYS has done to support students in developing their literacy skills and finding their voices. For schools that are searching for ways to motivate and inspire their students, this report will be an excellent resource."

Dean Pedro Noguera
University of Southern California
Dean, Rossier School of Education

"I am so proud of the work of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) in moving the needle in both student achievement and equity. This work is vital to the affirmative development of our children and youth."

Gloria Ladson-Billings
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Professor Emerita

"The evaluation report of the Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) Partnership with San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) documenting transformative practices and community-based practices to disrupt and dismantle systemic racism in school against Black and Brown students is meticulous, powerful, and policy relevant. Using qualitative data, in the Phase I analysis, this riveting study innovatively and persuasively employs portraiture and case studies to appraise how the SJUSD is actualizing its principles of equity and embodying them through the SAYS Project HEAL class. SAYS gives students a "pedagogy of love" or radical acceptance humanizing them and allowing each student to showcase their brilliance through culturally relevant curriculum and literary arts that interrupts the centering of whiteness in schools. This report mandates a judicious read and its lessons should be applied broadly. I am looking forward to the next report!"

Natalia Deeb-Sossa
Author of: Latinx Belonging: Community-Based Participatory Research; Doing Good
University of California at Davis
Professor Chicana/o Studies

"This phase 1 of the SAYS Project HEAL program evaluation on community-school partnerships is a provocative report that unpacks and calls to question, from a historical/contemporary context, the racial reckoning that San Juan Unified District grapples with to address systemic and institutionalized racism. Simultaneously, this report describes the advocacy of San Juan teachers/administrators/community leaders to counter the latter, by uplifting the impact community-school partnerships can have, particularly its relationship and co-existence with SAYS. As such, the thick narrative of SAYS in San Juan describes how disruption of inequities has to embody a commitment to the journey of our students, their community, and the intentional change to policies/practices issued to maintain the status quo."

Dr. Margarita Berta-Avila (she, her, Ella)
Sacramento State University
CFA Capitol Chapter President, Professor of Education

"Equity In-Motion is exactly what we need in today's public education: A creative non-profit organization of poets, hip-hop artists, and education professionals focused on educational equity like SAYS, working with public school districts to inspire and motivate our youth representing our future."

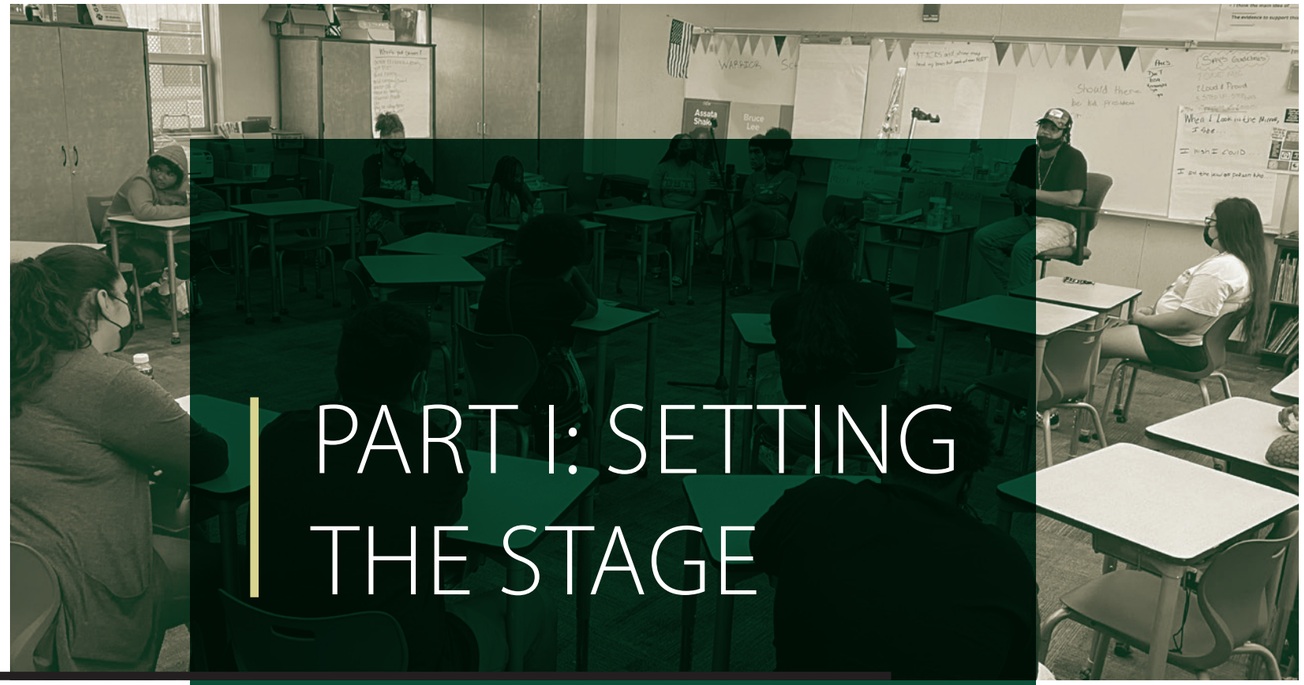
Halifu Osumare
University of California, Davis
Professor Emerita

"The Phase I Equity-in-Motion Report meticulously examines a community-based approach to school reform that is culturally relevant, relational, and local. This research connects our Anchor University Initiative with a focus on educational equity. The lessons are far-reaching and applicable to any school district determined to move towards racial justice in the service of students."

Dean Sasha Sidorkin
Sacramento State University
Dean, College of Education

"SAYS IS A CLASS THAT REALLY CHANGED MY OUTLOOK ON SCHOOL AND GAVE ME AN OUTLET TO EXPRESS MYSELF IN A WAY YOU WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO IN A 'TYPICAL' CLASSROOM SETTING."

– SAYS Student



PART I: SETTING THE STAGE

SAYS ADVISORY BOARD	
HODARI DAVIS	Founder, Edutainment for Equity; former National Director of Youth Speaks, Inc
DR. GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS	Professor Emerita, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison; President, Natl. Academy of Education
DR. VAJRA WATSON	SAYS Founder; Faculty Director Doctorate in Educational Leadership, CSUS
CASSANDRA JENNINGS	President and CEO, St. HOPE; former President of Greater Sacramento Urban League
LINDA CHRISTENSEN	Director, Oregon Writing Project; editor: Rethinking Schools
MARLENE BELL	Commissioner, Yolo County; former California Teachers Association Area Director
DR. PEDRO NOGUERA	Dean, USC Rossier School of Education; former UCLA Distinguished Professor

BACKGROUND ON SAYS

ORIGINS AND OVERVIEW

By Shaun de Vera

Founded in 2008 at UC Davis, Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) is a social justice movement to transform education. Building on a foundation of critical literacy and spoken word performance poetry, SAYS breaks the barriers of underachievement by elevating the voices of students as authors of their own lives and agents of change (SAYS, 2022).

Context: Educational Paradox in the Sacramento Region

Although UC Davis ranks as one of the nation's top five public universities (Times Higher Education, 2022), many of the 243,000 preK-12 students from communities in neighboring Sacramento County live a world apart from the aura of prestige and prosperity that surrounds the campus. Once, the county's namesake city and state capitol ranked as one of the most racially integrated in the United States (Kreutz & Cave, 2018). However, various racial and socioeconomic disparities are evident today.

Context: Educational Paradox in the Sacramento Region

One example that illustrates these disparities is a comparison with the Sacramento County neighborhood called Del Paso Heights ("DPH"). The racial contexts of both neighborhoods are different: Black residents comprise 13% of the population in DPH but only 2.5% in Davis, a city that has a high proportion of temporary resident students (Black Child Legacy Campaign, 2018). Economically, the average family income at Davis is $134,000, much higher than the DPH mean of $33,000. Academically, the proportion of adults in DPH who hold a four-year degree (or higher) is 11.5%, a fraction of both Davis and statewide rates (75% and 35%, respectively). Access to outcomes of happiness and prosperity, which a campus like UC Davis purports to facilitate, is out of reach for many youth only twenty miles away.

Additionally, disparate outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students are well documented, contradicting the frequently repeated maxim of "education as the great equalizer." Extensive scholarly work proves the racial non-neutrality of schooling since the founding of the United States; modern-day examples of this include pushback against curricular movements centering African American and Indigenous realities (e.g. *The 1619 Project* and, more generally, ethnic studies courses). Furthermore, for many BIPOC students, school represents a paradox where those students see stated ideals in conflict with their perceived experiences: empowerment versus control, power versus poverty, promise versus peril, and acceptance versus assimilation. In 2008, one clear indicator that school was not working for Sacramento-area BIPOC students was local schools' California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) English and Language Arts (ELA) scores.

For many BIPOC students, school represents a paradox where those students see stated ideals in conflict with their perceived experiences: empowerment versus control, power versus poverty, promise versus peril, and acceptance versus assimilation.

Innovation as Response

In the same year, Dr. Vajra Watson, incoming Director of Community Partnerships for UC Davis, started to get out into communities, learning of a local "literacy crisis" where many educators from schools in the community expressed that low-income youth of color were by and large not passing the CAHSEE. Inspired by her knowledge of San Francisco's own Youth Speaks performance poetry program, she began to work with various stakeholders to recruit thirty "hardest-to-reach" youth for Sacramento-based writing workshops. This program, intended to fuse critical literacy and leadership development, would attempt to engage young people in educational empowerment.

At first, only five youth showed up. The voice these youth brought into this novel space, however, quickly substantiated the need for this new effort: "We're starving for social justice out here, this is not the Bay." Soon, through relentless recruitment strategies and the growth of an authentic community of youth, participation quickly increased. Sessions would continue throughout the school year, incorporating writing workshops, spoken word poetry sessions, real conversations on educational justice, and impromptu hip hop sessions.

This program would become known as Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. The following spring, thanks to growing participation from youth and support from local donors, 350 youth were invited to UC Davis for the first annual SAYS Summit College Day, themed "School is My Hustle." The engagement of these youth, who were recruited explicitly because they had a 1.5 GPA or lower or had been recognized for school discipline issues, quickly inspired schoolteachers to proclaim that they needed SAYS in their classrooms. A student spoke to the potential of this program: "SAYS is really powerful. It makes me want to be somebody and make a change in my community, society, world. I love the vibe."

"SAYS IS REALLY POWERFUL. IT MAKES ME WANT TO BE SOMEBODY AND MAKE A CHANGE IN MY COMMUNITY, SOCIETY, WORLD. I LOVE THE VIBE."
-SAYS Student

SAYS Pedagogy

SAYS works to break the barriers of underachievement for youth in these communities by forwarding a *critical pedagogy* in the learning spaces it facilitates. This term, popularized by Paulo Freire (1970), emphasizes that the teaching that helps marginalized peoples work their way out of oppression must be multicultural, emancipatory, and relevant. Working through the content of language arts, SAYS promotes a *liberatory literacy* and *educational resistance*, going above and beyond service solely as an intervention to help schools increase CAHSEE scores or GPAs. SAYS delivers and facilitates student-centered instruction, especially in high-poverty, low-performing urban school districts.

SAYS promotes its pedagogy in local schools through two mechanisms: community educators via direct service to students, and partnerships and professional development with classroom teachers. (See Appendix A of this report for more theoretical context of SAYS programming.)

PMEs: Community Educators in Action

SAYS blends grassroots community and youth organizing models to engage, elevate, and empower Sacramento-area youth. To achieve this, SAYS recruits and trains Poet-Mentor-Educators, or PMEs, who are the driving force behind implementing the SAYS pedagogy. Recognizing the power of teen poetry spaces as "symbolic sanctuaries," these PMEs comprise local community activists, hip hop MCs, and spoken word artists – members of the community whose backgrounds are more similar to the community's youth than they often are to their teachers.

These PMEs rely on a host of culturally responsive teaching practices, including code-switching, skillful engagement with students' home languages (such as African American Vernacular English, or AAVE), hip-hop pedagogies, and critical analysis in local and cultural contexts. They continually strive to understand the uniqueness of expression, pain of experiences, and assets of young people in working with participants. They utilize spoken word performance poetry to create community and unlock learning. Three key components sit at the core of the PME philosophy:

1. Learning how to authentically reach students is a precursor to successful teaching
2. Knowing who students are and where they come from allows us to create meaningful and thought-provoking curricula
3. Reading, writing, and speaking are the foundations of academic achievement, critical thinking, and social justice within and beyond the walls of the school

Additionally, qualities of compassion, communication, community building, commitment, and connection, aka the "Cs", feature prominently in the SAYS pedagogy.

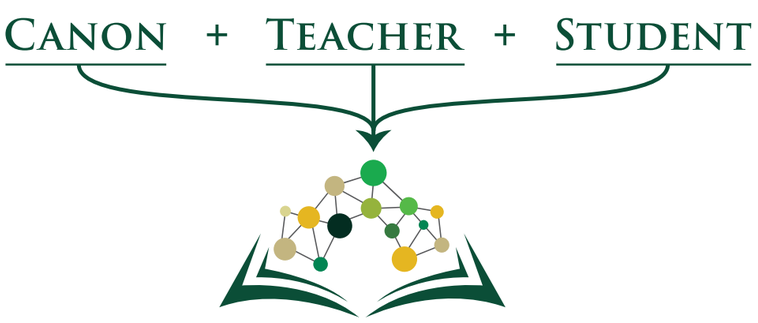
"LITERACY IS WHAT YOU DO."
-Poet-Mentor-Educator

Professional Development: Community-Classroom Partnership In Motion

Soon after its inception, SAYS began to implement professional development programs in response to local area educators realizing the power of its pedagogy in transforming their classrooms. Through one-day workshops or monthly meetings, PMEs worked with school educators to promote the SAYS pedagogy, with a goal of understanding more of what their youth go through.

PMEs promote the idea that there is strength in recognizing multiple-literacy of community youth and paying attention to power, privilege, and purpose in their engagement with the language arts.

PMEs reject the notion that incorporating meaningful, culturally responsive pedagogy means complying with a checklist to ensure that each culture is represented in classroom activities. They promote the idea that there is strength in recognizing the multiple-literacy practices of community youth and paying attention to power, privilege, and purpose in their engagement with the language arts. Knowing that "well-intentioned multicultural educators can subscribe to instructional practices that deter from critical thinking," they model and help teachers visualize more democratic spaces of learning, where the canon (curriculum), student, and teacher must all interact to create learning as a process of interaction and discovery (Watson, 2017).

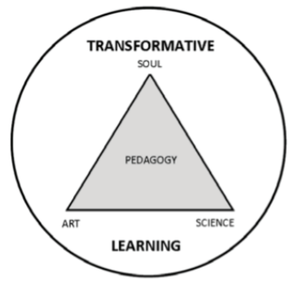


Learning as a Process of Interaction & Discovery[1]

In professional development sessions, PMEs promote dynamic and generative literacy instruction via a social justice curriculum. These sessions are highly interactive and help educators get to know their students, excavate literacy practices that students use every day to navigate through life, and foster a critical bridge between creative writing and other genres of text.

By working directly with youth as well as facilitating culturally responsive learning for teachers, SAYS embodies learning that is radical and rooted to personal awakening and collective meaning-making. In these spaces, youth courageously bring their whole selves – their souls – into learning.

1 From Watson, V. (2017). *Life as primary text: English classrooms as sites for soulful learning. The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, 22(1), 4.*



Pedagogy is the art, science, and soul of teaching.[2]

The SAYS Classroom

When facilitated by a Poet-Mentor Educator, SAYS classrooms are places where youth are challenged to express themselves and be vulnerable – even if it is just for an audience of one, themselves. Each is provided with the tools of the poet – a journal – and all are asked to write.

SAYS classes regularly start with a "mental push-up." Often, these "push-ups" are evocative writing prompts that relate to a political issue, a local safety issue, or something hyper relevant to what the kids are experiencing in their lives.

A core set of SAYS guidelines, which can be modified and remixed based on the community of learners, includes:

1 Mic
Loud-N-Proud
Step up. . . Step Back
Freedom of Speech. . . With Propriety
Create Community. . . No Snitchin
Standard is Yourself: Be You and Do You
Respect. . . Self, Others, and the Space
Patience, Perseverance, Participation,
and Above All: Love

(Appendix B of this report provides illustrations of these guidelines.)

2 From Watson, V. (2017). Life as primary text: English classrooms as sites for soulful learning. The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning, 22(1), 4.

Blood on the Streets

SAYS STUDENT POEM FEATURED IN HOOD CIVICS (2020)

Fatal Attraction.
Trigger happy boys always claiming they're bout that action.
They cling to the streets like it's the latest fashion.
I'm just waiting for #RIP to go out of style.
Heard my brother just got shot 9 times and you expect me to smile.
Dead in a ditch with no friends beside him but a "friend" was the accused and was standing on trial.
One color can end your life, one word can change their minds.
One word scars all our minds.
INJUSTICE!

114 between 2007 to 2018.
How many more dead teens before the truth can be seen?
There's rising violence in my city.
The Capital City.
Divided.
This definitely ain't one sided.
One against another.
Brother against brother.
Police against "other."
I'm waiting for the day when gun laws make a difference and we can stop harming each other.

In these spaces, PMEs, as skilled facilitators, create spaces that heal. They believe that students can write, and they encourage, allow, and protect honest and authentic expression. In any given session, structures such as discussion circles, journals, and evocative prompts open a window into the camaraderie, self-perceptions, aspirations, and fears of participating students. (See Appendix C of this report for a sample SAYS lesson.)

PATRICE HILL, CURRENT SAYS DIRECTOR, SHOWCASES A SAYS CLASSROOM IN THE SACRAMENTO CITY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT[3]

3 See 2022 local news clip at https://www.kcra.com/article/saving-our-cities-special-sacramento-class-helps-students-deal-emotions/39960101

Youth Empowerment

Various research finds that SAYS' programs have empowered youth in distinct ways (Hope & Watson, 2020; Okita et al., 2013; Watson, 2016;).

1. **SAYS youth grew skills related to school success.**

   Classroom teachers reported in surveys and interviews that, compared to students in non-SAYS classes, SAYS participants shared their work out loud more, completed tasks and assignments with higher frequency, and improved their class attendance.

2. **SAYS youth leveraged language arts more skillfully to engage with the world around them.**

   Youth involved with SAYS programming created art through literary expression, wrote about complicated concepts and used increasingly complex language, showed engagement with language arts, and flexed codeswitching and other language tools to better communicate in different contexts.

3. **SAYS youth engaged with personal, relevant topics through expression.**

   Students and adults found that SAYS served as a platform for youth, as students wrote and discussed topics marked by controversy, interest, pain and emotion. Many discussions connected theory to practice by reinforcing the importance of neighborhood and community cultural wealth, defined by "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and contacts used by communities of color to survive and resist… oppression" (Yosso, 2005).

4. **SAYS youth felt an increased sense of belonging in SAYS spaces.**

   In interviews, students indicated they "felt at home" in SAYS spaces marked by love and respect.

SAYS models a literacy instruction that emanates from students in the context of their communities.

These outcomes indicate that SAYS programs, initially designed as a local CAHSEE intervention, helped strengthen learning environments for engagement with language arts. Even though the exam that largely motivated the conception of the program is no longer in use, SAYS' effect on youth empowerment is broader: it models a literacy instruction that emanates from students in the context of their communities, embodying the spirit of Audre Lorde's tenet, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

Featured Interventions

Fourteen years later, SAYS has reached thousands of students, promoting a critical consciousness, and for many – a college-going culture. The program continues to train cohorts of community-based Poet-Mentor Educators annually, landing on Del Paso Heights as the site of its headquarters. Patrice Hill and Denisha "Coco Blossom" Bland, former PMEs during SAYS' infancy, now serve as Directors for the organization.

From the hard work and dedication of PMEs, youth, allied educators, and community members, what began as an evening writing workshop for five students has grown into a movement. Key SAYS projects include:

- **Closing the Achievement Gap Write Now (2010-2014):**
  Funded for $1 million by the California Postsecondary Education Commission's (CPEC) Improving Teacher Quality (ITQ) grant, SAYS' literacy intervention with local school districts included PME-led, weekly student writing workshops, literacy seminars, and teacher professional development over four years. Over 800 students participated, many of whom saw significant increases in academic engagement and contributed to a 1000-page poetry anthology.

- **Project HEAL (2016-present):**
  Funded for $60,000 per year over six years by a violence prevention grant from the City of Sacramento, this intervention was designed to work within the classroom. A vision of current directors Patrice Hill and Coco Bland, this SAYS offering was initially embedded as a daily class period at Sacramento's Luther Burbank High School. Outcomes included a culture of reduced student fighting and increased attendance.

- **Warrior Scholar Academy, SJUSD (2018-Present):**
  This free summer program helped college-bound students with envisioning their journeys after high school. Initial observations for this research project started during this program.

Project HEAL, SAYS' newest innovation, launches SAYS' current equity work with San Juan Unified School District.

BACKGROUND ON SJUSD

THE INSTITUTIONAL DNA OF SAN JUAN UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (SJUSD)

By Angelina Kier and Ana Segoviano

Intro: Why are we here?

As educators and researchers, we want to share data and collaboratively create a story that will benefit the community we serve. To tell a story, we must first understand who the characters are, what the setting is, what the plot is, and what the conflict and resolution are. This is a brief history of the San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) and the foundation for the story that will follow – a story that includes you (the reader) and us (the research team) for a brighter future for our children. As stakeholders of the District, we are responsible and obligated to disrupt and dismantle systemic racism against all students, especially Black and Brown students. Today, many districts are focusing on more inclusive and equitable initiatives, but these approaches are not always effective. Part of the challenge is the historical amnesia often present; leaders inherit institutional inequalities, and it can be hard to break generational patterns.

Just like people, institutions have their own "DNA." We want to understand the history of the San Juan Unified School District to better gauge its mission to move towards equity. If we do not look back, how do we move forward?

If we do not look back, how do we move forward?

History: What's in our DNA?

San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) is situated in the ancestral homelands of the Nisenan (Native Land Digital, 2021). The district's history is long and varied; it includes a period of growth, a period of crisis, a period of redemption, and, in the future, a proposed period of transformation. To accomplish this critical work, we must acknowledge and reconcile with the past while also committing to the future; reconciliation and redemption serve as a bridge to find a solution to the ongoing problems in schools. Thus, it is vital to understand the history of the District.

The DNA of the San Juan Unified School District traces back to the Spanish and Mexican governments' founding of many rancho lands to private individuals (S. L. Commission, 1983). These lands were some of the most fertile in California. Known as "Rancho Grants," the Spanish Mexican Land Grants were given to people to encourage agriculture and industry (Cowan, 2014). These land grants were awarded to soldiers and provided to settlers with no property. The development of the district began with the creation of San Juan Union, the District's first high school, in 1913. Most of the people who made up this part of the area during that time were farmers, reflecting the student population of the first high school.

The San Juan Unified School District was established in 1960 when six districts merged together (Explore School Choices, 2020). The district serves 75-mile areas that include the communities of Arden-Arcade, Carmichael, Citrus Heights, Fair Oaks, Gold River, and Orangevale (Explore School Choices, 2020). Communities within the San Juan Unified School District are predominantly white. The San Juan Unified School District is now California's eleventh largest school district and has an expenditure budget of more

than $367 million, used to employ five thousand individuals and educate students (Explore School Choices, 2020). The commitment to quality education that the community focused on at its inception prevails to this day, but at what cost?

Information and Demographics: Where are we?

During the 2019-2020 school year, the San Juan Unified School District consisted of 50,820 students enrolled in its schools: 26,059 were white students, 3,441 students identified being of two or more races, and 21,320 were non-white (data collected by the California Department of Education, 2020). The analysis of this data allows a concise understanding of the culture and climate that exist daily in these schools. Black and Brown students do not feel part of these educational spaces where they should feel welcomed.

From the district's perspective, serving students of color, the district has publicly stated that they stand in solidarity with ending injustices in the educational system (Explore School Choices, 2020). It seems that the district is following other district initiatives to act in dismantling institutional racism, yet district employees' and students' racist actions do the opposite of this initiative. The San Juan Unified School District wants to take action to serve students of color better, yet its approach does not reflect those words. As data shows, the San Juan Unified School District remains predominately white, and the district's power remains white, so these initiatives are very contradictory (data collected by the California Department of Education, 2020). The district won't move from systems of oppression to ecosystems of liberating and dismantling institutional racism until they realize they must give up their white power (Tuck, 2018; Wayne, 2018).

San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) is situated in the Ancestral Homelands of The Nisenan.

According to the SJUSD Equity Director, Diana Marshall, there has been a change in the student population. At the Smooth Start training event for newly hired teachers, Marshall presented a comparative table between the 2006-2007 and the 2019-2020 school years (SJUSD, Equity, and Student Achievement, 2020, p. 5). The two most significant findings are that even though the number of K-12 students directly served went down from 43,000 to 39,400, the number of new refugee students went up from 50 to 1,900. The data also shows the increased percentage of English learners from 9% to 15% and an increase from four to six major languages. The following chart represents students by race in the district (SJUSD, Equity, and Student Achievement, 2020, p. 6).

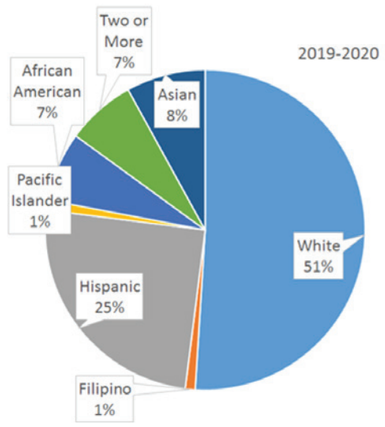


Image 4: Student composition by race (SJUSD, Equity, and Student Achievement, 2020, p. 6)

Brief synopsis of the issue: Whom do we (not) serve?

The 2015-2020 Strategic Plan (San Juan Unified School District, 2019) lists the shared beliefs and demonstrates these beliefs' alignment with the school's mission. It states that SJUSD values diversity and excellence. SJUSD's mission aims to educate and inspire each student to succeed. It provides rigorous, student-focused instruction "in a safe, caring, and collaborative learning community" (San Juan Unified School District, 2019). The plan is a good starting point; however, the Strategy Action Plan only proposes "to identify, model, and integrate strategies to create safe and supportive school climates that are developmentally appropriate and culturally informed." "Culturally informed" is not enough. It is not enough because being culturally informed will not eradicate some implicit biases and microaggressions. In some instances, for Black and Latino families with school-age children, the perception is that teachers do not even try to educate their kids. The fine line between being culturally informed and relying on stereotypes and generalizations of minority groups feeds into racial inequality (Watson, 2018). It creates a vicious cycle from generation to generation, ingraining itself in educational institutions. The following are some examples of the urgent to acknowledge that some of the District's practices contribute to and perpetuate racial injustice and to work to eliminate institutionalized racism (San Juan Unified School District, Equity, 2020).

One example of how an institution feeds racial inequality is the case of a formal complaint (National Center for Youth Law, 2017) against Mira Loma High School. The complaint details events of evident disregard for peer harassment and known discrimination, and disproportional suspensions due to discretionary offenses that negatively impact African American students. (National Center for Youth Law, 2017). The document lists multiple complaints from students regarding vulgar and race-based harassment. It details an incident where a school staff overlooked the fact that one of the students was in the same classroom with a student who called her a "nigger" when she raised her hand to participate in class discussions. There were acts of omission, disservice, and neglect that resulted in one student transferring out of the school mid-year because she felt the school environment was intolerable. Soon after this complaint, the district launched a Welcoming School Survey via the school website (SJUSD, Mira Loma High School, 2020). The district hoped to collect feedback to help improve and obtain guidelines to work with employees. One problem with this type of data collection is its voluntary nature. There may be limited and selective participation, and the data collection may not reflect the school climate. For a positive school climate to emerge, a joint mission must be created, supported, and sustained by the students, parents, teachers, staff, and community (California Department of Education, 2020). It must have a transparent and sustainable effect and be the soul of the educational institution. It should be the institution's core that permeates all aspects of education, not the fire extinguisher used to extinguish flare-ups. According to *The Sacramento Bee* (2018), on February 13, Mira Loma alumni wrote a letter to the school and the District, demanding the school "address systemic racism." The school's response to the demands was to hold *listening circles*.

Additionally, Mira Loma proposes anti-racist leadership programs for students from underrepresented groups. This proposal's flaw is that it gives the minority group the responsibility to educate and create campus consciousness, while the duty to ensure an inclusive education falls on the institution. Another discriminatory incident that caught the media's attention was the case of a teacher at Del Paso Manor Elementary who discarded *Black Lives Matter* Artwork, a product of a unit that a volunteer parent taught. When confronted, the teacher argued that the topic was too political and inappropriate since no shootings had happened in school. The ACLU Foundation of Northern California released a statement via email to the SJUSD (ACLU Foundation of Northern California, 2019). It highlights that, according to the California Education Code, the activities, conversations, and posters related to *Black Lives Matter* are protected. The school response (SJUSD, Del Paso Manor Elementary, 2019) expressed their commitment to developing an equitable environment where students feel safe when voicing their ideas.

At the beginning of the school year 2019–2020, someone hacked the Rio Americano school website and posted a fake publication with racist messages and threats, including a "no black people policy" (The Mirada, 2019). The school responded the next day: "Everyone is welcome" (CBS, 2019). Students are proposing establishing a Black Student Union (BSU), but words without actions ring hollow for some parents. There must be accountability for attitudes, comments, and omissions (CBS, 2019). Change is often painful but always necessary to survive.

Current SJUSD Moves toward Equity – Where do we go?

SJUSD acknowledgement and ownership

The San Juan Unified School District has admitted that the community draws attention to various barriers to equity:

1. Inaction by district and site administrators when there is a concern about a racist action
2. The lack of conversations around race, racism, and anti-racist practices
3. Barriers to equitable access to schools, programs, and rigorous coursework

Moreover, SJUSD has committed to molding its purpose around educational equity. The district's commitment includes 8 Points to Educational Justice (San Juan Unified School District, In Solidarity, 2020).

1. Improve school culture to be more inclusive and provide diverse representation at all sites.
2. Build our collective capacity to have courageous conversations and interrupt both implicit and explicit racial inequities.
3. Expand and prioritize family and students' voices.
4. Require equity training with robust offerings of professional development.
5. Integrate anti-racist/anti-bias instruction within our curriculum.
6. Systematize site/department level conversations around equitable practices and anti-racist/anti-bias actions.
7. Increase workforce diversity through retention, career development, and recruitment.
8. Establish a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) to create equitable access to schools, programs, and rigorous coursework. (San Juan Unified School District PD, 2020).

Proposed Period of Transformation

Good intentions are significant when backed by actions that lead to meaningful and transformational change. There is a disconnect between public perception and data analysis from the district. The public and alumni agree that the commitment to quality education is the community focus. The cost of this limited focus is ignoring the social and evolving system (Watson, 2018). After a series of publicized racist and discriminatory incidents, SJUSD listened to the community's demands. In the fight against racial injustice, passively listening has to move towards intentionally and purposefully creating safe spaces to listen to all shareholders. The San Juan Unified School District is in the middle of a period of redemption. This period started when they acknowledged that some of the practices gave rise to and continued the cycle of racial injustice within the institution. They looked at the data (San Juan Unified School District, In Solidarity, 2020) and admitted their passive position towards racist actions, the omission in the antiracism conversation, and ongoing barriers to equity access.

The SJUSD strategic plan could work if there was a common front between the community, school staff, and district. The same level of community commitment to good education leads to the same level of commitment to getting rid of institutional racism; however, training is not enough to tackle this work -- being culturally informed will not eradicate discrimination. There must be a sincere and coherent commitment to developing an equitable environment where all students are safe when voicing their ideas. Training for educators and staff serving students at SJUSD is not enough; it is part of the change but not the sole solution.

PART II: CURRENT FINDINGS

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

PHASE I

By Shaun de Vera, Ijeoma Ononuju, and Vajra Watson

How is the District actualizing its principles of equity? How, if at all, does the partnership with SAYS Project HEAL impact class climate, student outcomes, and school culture? These are the broad questions we set out to ask in our investigation. Seasoned researchers understand that for questions like these, there are no quick answers; the process of rigorously investigating is an arduous one.

More broadly, discussions about methodology, or how research is conducted, imply that we must grapple with questions that frame our analysis. Firstly, how do researchers' own experiences and worldviews shape what is known? We've included some of our mini-biographies at the beginning of the report to give readers an initial idea of the influences on our positionalities, and we include this information in authentic service of this investigation.

Secondly, what is the nature of the reality in which these questions are answered, and how is that known?[4] What does it mean to actualize principles of equity, or for the partnership to impact those indicators? Many districts believe in an idealized gold standard of quantitative data, premised on maxims such as "numbers don't lie," to indicate the degree to which these phenomena are occurring in SAYS' partnership with the district. However, this follows a post-positivist tradition of research, which can be useful in its own way – but we assert that, as social scientists, there are additional traditions that give our analysis greater depth. We use case studies and portraiture to unearth textured findings. Thus, qualitative data is centered in our Phase I analysis.

In the following findings, we will not have completely answered the questions central to this investigation; as our brief dive into research philosophy hints, we do our best from our diverse research lenses and help provide a rounded picture using numbers, words, and pictures. We have some analyses that start to point us in certain directions. Below, we go over three major ways in which we have been collecting data, along with an initial analysis of some of that data.

4 These concepts are known as "ontology", and "epistemology."

Demographic Data

Near the beginning of this project, we put in a data request to Omar Field-Ridley, Director of Equity and Student Achievement. The rationale for the data we requested was simple: if we were going to unearth findings related to equity in the district, we needed to get a picture of the equity story as it currently is told.

We were able to obtain some of the data we requested. Other data, such as student disciplinary data stratified by race and gender, we are still waiting on; we assert that a commitment to equity includes easier access to transparent, accurate, and relevant data that can paint a picture of progress toward equity for all stakeholders. However, immediately the phenomenon of racial representation in the district became clear, illustrated by the following graphic:

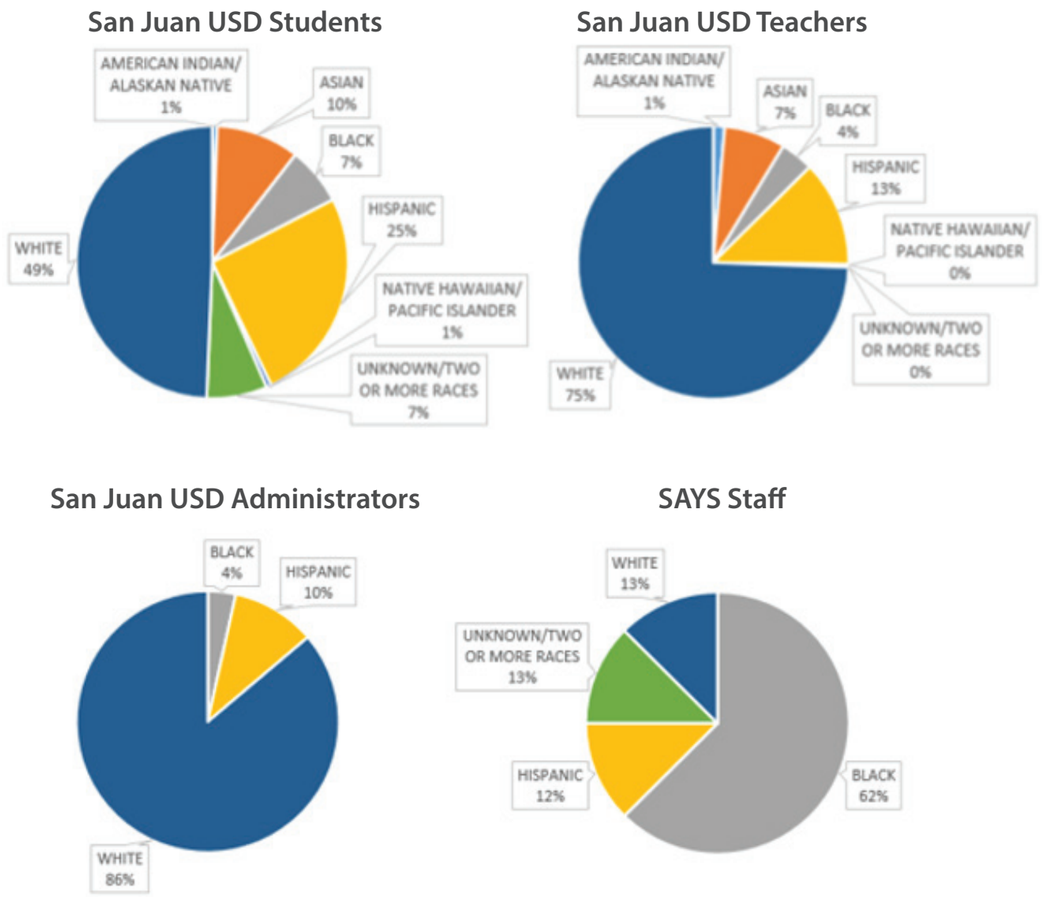


Image 5: Demographic Survey Results

With this data, we can provide some analyses. First, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) teachers and administrators are definitely underrepresented. Out of 806 high school teachers, 600 are White; only 32 are Black. Out of 29 administrators, only 3 are Hispanic, and 1 is Black (an employee hired in 1995).

Survey data

As part of our evaluation efforts, we also conducted pilot student pre- and post-surveys for all participants. Survey questions are listed in the Appendix. The surveys were administered to three classes over two schools in February and in June. It included multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank questions designed to gather students' thoughts on how they saw equity in their school spaces.

The following table characterizes the respondents:

SCHOOL	MARCH	JUNE
RIO AMERICANO HIGH SCHOOL	21	7
THOMAS EDISON LANGUAGE INSTITUTE (K-8)	39	40

Based on the preliminary results of this pilot survey, we highlight a few observations. Respondents were asked to rate many statements on a 4-point scale ("Not at all", "Not really", "Kind of", "Definitely"). The highest increases in average ratings for all respondents corresponded to the following statements:

- The curriculum (class assignments and lessons) at school includes examples of my racial, ethnic, and cultural background in the lessons/activities. (+0.4)
- The curriculum at school acknowledges and discusses diversity. (+0.2)
- The curriculum at school empowers me to have courageous conversations in my life. (+0.2)
- The curriculum at school helps me with the tools to work out my problems. (+0.2)
- I have witnessed/experienced racism or racial discrimination at school. (+0.2)
- I enjoy poetry and spoken word. (+0.2)
- I feel proud about my racial/ethnic identity. (+0.2)

The highest decreases in all respondents' average ratings corresponded to the following statements:

- The curriculum helps me connect with other students. (-0.4)
- I have a classroom at school that encourages me to write and speak my own opinions. (-0.4)

Additionally, there were several questions in which differences in response averages varied between Rio Americano and Thomas Edison. For example, students' average responses to "I know an educator/teacher at school who cares about me" decreased by 0.4 for Thomas Edison respondents but increased by 0.7 for Rio Americano respondents. Additionally, the statement "I look forward to coming to this class" also decreased for Thomas Edison respondents (-0.3) but increased for Rio Americano respondents (+0.4). These differences may partially reflect the decrease in respondents between pilot survey administrations at Rio Americano.

When asked in the post-survey "What are 3 words you would use to describe your school?", students had a variety of responses, visualized by the following word cloud[5] (in which higher-frequency responses have larger fonts):

The following word cloud visualizes responses to the question "What are 3 words you would use to describe the SAYS program?":

5 Generated July 2022 by freeewordcloudgenerator.com

We caution the attribution of meaning to this preliminary data, collected by the pilot survey, in Phase I. First, the set of respondents varied between the pre-survey administered in February and the post-survey administered in June. Additionally, many students left several questions unanswered. We also received some feedback during the pilot process that will help us ensure a more valid and reliable survey for a possible next iteration of SAYS, when the logistical challenges created by the district's response to the pandemic in the 2021-22 school year will likely be mitigated. Our next steps include refining the survey measurement and participation so it better captures information useful to the analysis of SAYS in the district.

Interviews and Observations

We collected eight interviews and conducted fifteen observations over a period of four months. In the following pages, we present an analysis of classroom observations for SAYS, a case study of the district's Equity and Student Achievement Department, and three portraits of district stakeholders whose interactions with SAYS inform us of where we need to go in Phase II.

Education is a human endeavor, and our study is based inside people's experiences. As a process of scientific inquiry, when conducting our evaluation of the SAYS partnership with San Juan Unified School District, we used each person's frame of reference, including our own, to shape—but not solely reflect—the final picture that composes the Portraits in the subsequent chapters.

Since research is personal, purposeful, and political, the methods we use to investigate our questions are as important as the findings. To humanize the data collection process, we relied on Portraiture. Portraiture is a qualitative research methodology that bridges science and art, to merge "the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6). Portraiture is rooted in a style of vivid storytelling that allows the reader into the moment. This kind of account permits a multifaceted reality to unfold that feels, and is, alive and authentic.

Developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Portraiture seeks to unveil the universal truths and resonant stories that lie in the specifics and complexity of everyday life. *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) serves as a seminal text of this relatively new methodology that illuminates the complex dynamics and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. As the pioneer of this qualitative research process, Lawrence-Lightfoot's own work becomes a roadmap for ideas and insights about how to develop the arc of an investigation. Her scholarship serves as a source of inspiration for more and more social scientists who utilize her methods (e.g., Chapman, 2007; Harding, 2005; Hill, 2005; Ononuju, 2016).

To humanize the people within San Juan Unified School District, Portraits were carefully crafted. The depth of writing was meant to show, rather than tell, the process of transformation and empowerment that the data unveiled. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), Portraiture is a practice of emancipation, unfolding in the form of human archeology. As a qualitative tool, our methods share commonalities with ethnography, but are distinct in five particular ways:

1. The portraitist does not simply listen to the story; they listen for the story.
2. The portraitist utilizes the entirety of their being to unearth answers to complex questions told through the lives of individuals who embody some semblance of the answers.
3. The portraitist explicitly guards against fatalistic, pessimistic inquiries into problems but searches for solutions by examining nuances of goodness.
4. The portraitist does not make participants anonymous, nameless factors but seeks to acknowledge, honor, and validate their stories by using the real names of people and places.
5. The portraitist is committed to sharing findings that are accessible to audiences beyond the academy as an explicit act of community building.

Guided by these pillars, Portraiture allows a soulful narrative to emerge—but this does not imply subjectivism. Drawing mainly from grounded theory, we used various tools to systematically analyze the data. First, to ensure descriptive validity, we tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews verbatim, including words like "um…" and "you know." We processed field notes within one day of observation and conducted initial open-coding. Second, we wrote reflexive memos and kept journals. Furthermore, we approached the interview data aware that they were representative of a process of co-construction where teller and listener create meaning collaboratively. In this way, we kept strict notes of personal impressions and thoughts as we gathered information. Third, to ensure interpretive validity, we systematically emphasized evidence in analytic memos and narrative summaries by citing participants' own words and documenting transcript page numbers to connect our interpretations back to the data. We examined discrepant data against working observations to assess whether or not we should consider alternative explanations. Fourth, we conducted member checks by having participants review their interview transcripts and clarify or expand on any issue raised. These strategies are important tools for developing validity and for guarding against researcher bias. Fifth, we triangulated across several data sources (e.g., participant observation, questionnaires, interviews, surveys, and supplemental documentation) to reduce the risk of chance associations and biases due to data collection methods. Sixth, we solicited feedback regularly from colleagues: skilled researchers not intimately connected to the data. We shared transcripts, memos, and matrices with these colleagues to identify discrepant data and to strengthen coding strategies and analytic tools. Such alternative interpretations are necessary to forge accurate findings and appropriate conclusions. Seventh, we mined the data for seeds of the solution that could be replicated and sustained. This final process ensures that the answers to our questions inform a greater good.

As we pivot to the portraits, please consider the metaphor of a tree. A lot of research focuses on the leaves, the facts and figures that are byproducts of certain kinds of work. Then there are studies that emphasize the branches, those correlations of how, why, and where the leaves connect. And there are plenty of examinations that simultaneously consider the historical context: the roots. Our focus in this section, however, was to dig (literally and figuratively) through years of information and layers of discoveries, constantly triangulating among multiple sources, to uncover the seed of the story—for it is the seed that holds the soul of the work—its essence. Building on this metaphor of a tree, neither policymakers nor practitioners can plant a tree with leaves, limbs, or roots. To grow this work in Sacramento and beyond, seeds need to be planted, nourished, and cultivated. It is the people who plant these seeds.

INSIDE THE SJUSD EQUITY AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT DEPARTMENT

EQUITY SOUNDS LIKE…

By Ijeoma Ononuju and Vajra Watson

One of the drivers of this evaluation report is this query: How does San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) actualize its principles of equity? On the website, the school district asks all who visit to "join San Juan unified employees and administrators in pledging to take action to make lasting change." The pledge states:

> "Recent events across our nation have targeted the African American/Black community and they reflect the institutional systems of thought and behavior that harm other groups as well. When systems cause harm to specific groups, the damage affects the entire community. This is why responsibility for changing the school climate at this time must not fall on African American students, families, and staff alone. Every member of our San Juan Unified community can respond by pledging to make lasting change. We cannot fulfill our mission of achieving educational justice if our campuses are unsafe and unwelcoming to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students, faculty, staff, and community, or if we fail to educate all San Juan Unified students for success in a diverse twenty-first-century world."

The Equity and Student Achievement Department (abbreviated ESAD for this report) is tasked with leading the embodiment of this pledge within SJUSD. But its efforts extend beyond this pledge. Through "policies, practices, programs and decisions," there is a concerted effort within SJUSD to "reduce the predictability of which students fail by utilizing an equity lens to eliminate barriers for our specific populations." Thus, the actualization of its principles of equity is measured not only by SJUSD's ability to disrupt status quo outcomes, but also by its ability to develop a "systemic sustainable culture" that eliminates harm and develops more inclusive, empowering and welcoming learning spaces for students and families. Given that a significant amount of the ESAD's time is devoted to addressing the metaphorical and real swastikas that have been "burned into the grass," and other forms of hatred, the road towards realizing an anti-racist "systemic sustainable culture" is long and heavy – and for many, not in sight.

Towards this reality, the ESAD has sought authentic multi-year partnerships with community-based organizations to provide the type of learning and enrichment that can meet the needs of students now, while the district builds its capacity. As Mrs. Diana Marshall, the former director of ESAD and current program manager in human resources (HR) for the district, explains:

> "I know the conversations that we've had with kids probably prior to this year about the impact that SAYS has had or IYT or [Armoni] has had... I think they're a shining example of how you have to sit where the kid is at and determine the needs of what that kid needs right there at that moment and then still be there the next day or the following day, that they still have a structure... I think that's what's key."

This section focuses on the ESAD because the department has been tasked with leading the equity charge, and it is vital to understand how they are going about that tremendous task. Sports fans often attribute the personality of a team with the personality of the coach: if the team is fiery, it's because their head coach is fiery. Conversely, if the team is reserved, fans will often say it's because their coach is reserved. If we apply this same logic to schools, then classrooms are often a reflection of the teacher; schools reflect the principal; and departments reflect the individuals who lead them. So, in order to understand how ESAD is taking on the challenge of ensuring the SJUSD equity pledge is not just empty words, we start by engaging with the most recent directors who have presided over the department.

Mrs. Gloria Ervin was first tasked with leading ESAD. Known by some as a "turnaround principal", Mrs. Ervin took her strengths as principal of San Juan High School to become the founding director of ESAD, serving from 2013-2016. Upon her transition in 2017, Mrs. Marshall became the next ESAD director, followed by current Director Mr. Omar Field-Ridley, who began in 2021. Though Mrs. Ervin laid the foundation for ESAD, Mrs. Marshall was tasked with carrying on her legacy. As the current director, Mr. Field-Ridley states:

> "I definitely have to give Diana just kudos in that she had her fingers in all these different possibilities. I had so many different things kind of moving along. So, for me, it was never an issue of starting from scratch. Just really what's the next layer that I'm going to be adding."

Student Voice and Representation

For Mrs. Marshall and Mr. Field-Ridley, student voice and representation is quintessential to actualizing For Mrs. Marshall and Mr. Field-Ridley, student voice and representation are quintessential to actualizing equity in SJUSD. In her interview, Mrs. Marshall speaks to this when she says, "I'm clearly hearing from students that they want people who look like them standing as the teacher in their classrooms." In Mrs. Marshall's articulation of the equity that is going towards increasing representation, the impetus was not solely student data, but rooted in student voice. This is noteworthy because it demonstrates how Mrs. Marshall, in her capacity as a change agent, prioritized and valued student voice in equity work. In fact, her prioritization of student voice inadvertently allowed the district to actualize movement in that Mrs. Marshall was able to transition into a position in human resources that brings her "the biggest joy." Recruitment and career development, providing opportunities for greater representation in the district, so that students see themselves in the adults they interface with was one of the ways Mrs. Marshall was able to expand the vision ESAD and connect it with HR.

Mr. Field-Ridley has picked up the baton from Mrs. Marshall and continues to push representation through the department. However, his impetus for movement is different. Representation goes beyond the student's seeing themselves in the teachers and staff that serve their schools. Representation also matters in the actualization of policy and practice. That is, it matters to know what it feels like to be "the only Black male" or "the only Black educator." Mr. Field-Ridley discusses a time when he had to serve as a substitute teacher at one of the middle schools, and the reaction that some of the Black students had when seeing him in that role. He describes the moment, saying:

> "In the morning they're doing their walk around the blacktop and a little Black child walks by me with his two friends. And they're watching me like this. And he says – and I hear them, I hear them say this – 'He's Black!' And the Black kid goes, 'I know.' You know, it was just like, he was shocked. It was crazy, but it's like that."

To be a unicorn (or in Mr. Field-Ridley's words, "the only one like me") is to know representation and equity from an intimate place. Mr. Field-Ridley has children who are students in SJUSD schools. So, when he overhears Black children marvel at the fact that there is a Black man on campus who will be subbing, he doesn't just hear representation through the lens of the director of Equity and Student Achievement. He hears it as a father; as the teenager who was turned away from teaching; and as the unicorn who is often "the only one" in spaces that are tasked with serving so many who look like him. The voices of those youth who marveled at seeing a Black educator on their campus resonate intimately with Mr. Field-Ridley.

In his interview, Omar Field-Ridley makes note of how student voice is part of the district's 8-point commitment to educational justice. In fact, when you look at SJUSD's 8-point commitment, expanding and prioritizing family and student voice is listed as the third commitment on the list but permeates throughout all of the remaining commitments. Mrs. Marshall speaks about having conversations with kids and being responsive to those conversations by bringing in organizations like Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS), Project Optimism, Improve Your Tomorrow (IYT), and United College Action Network (U-CAN), she speaks to how the impact of student voice reverberates in the commitments to improving school culture, building collective capacity to interrupt racial inequities, integrating anti-racist and anti-bias instruction within the curriculum, and increasing workforce diversity. Building on this sentiment, Mr. Field-Ridley shares:

> "We are working towards... learning environments that are authentically integrated with student voice... To really do something authentic, where we're talking about student voice being part of who we are, or part of how [a] site functions, it's that integration piece that needs to occur even before there's an issue."

Equity Sounds Like… Diana Marshall

Mrs. Diana Marshall was the director of the ESAD and led the department through the beginning of the most recent COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with an unprecedented crisis, Mrs. Marshall went to what could be considered her signature equity move and turned towards the community. As she describes this moment, she says "In the middle of the pandemic, we had over eight listening sessions in the month of June and 300 plus community members and staff participating in them and what came out of that was the San Juan 8-point commitment to educational justice." Patrice Hill, the Director of SAYS, describes Mrs. Marshall's commitment to community partners. She shares:

> "Diana Marshall was instrumental in bringing community partners to the table to support transformative culturally relevant work inside SJUSD schools. Her organization and collaboration... provided an authentic space where community partners could be honest and authentic regarding how equity was viewed and practiced in SJUSD. Diana Marshall believes that community partnerships are vital to moving the equity needle and has proven this time and time again."

There is a quote from Denis Leary that says, "crisis doesn't create character, it reveals it." Mrs. Marshall's character in many ways was revealed during the pandemic. Her vision of equity was built around the engagement of community partners who were working together "with a common vision to interrupt the institutional racism," she says. For Mrs. Marshall, she believed that the answers did not just rest with her but could be found by engaging with local stakeholders who had vital connections to families. Altogether, community-based solutions could be identified that could impact learning outcomes.

While there have been successful inroads, the work has been challenging. In her interview with Dr. Vajra Watson, Mrs. Marshall recounted an interaction she had with an African American woman in the HR department after she transitioned over. She states that after spending some time working with each other, the woman said to her:

> "Diana, I always struggled with you as Director of Equity... but now that I've gotten to know you, you weren't missing anything because you literally treat everyone the same... You treat everyone with equity. You do whatever you say to one person, you will say to the next person, and make sure that they get the same benefits."

The fair treatment of people is core to Mrs. Marshall's expression of equity. As a white woman, she intentionally roots her definition of equity in equality. This is demonstrated in her actions. The notion of treating everyone the same reverberates throughout her work ethic. It is how and why she advocated for community partners to be treated with knowledge, expertise, and respect.

Traditionally, schools have not been receptive to community cultural wealth (Emdin, 2016; Love, 2019; Valenzuela, 1999), defined as "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (Yosso, 2005). Education systems, in general, have not been responsive to non-credentialed individuals working in a capacity that allows them to impact the curriculum and culture within a school. Their expertise has not been valued and is often marginalized, if not dismissed altogether, as having no place within an academic environment. But with something as simple as treating "everyone the same," Mrs. Marshall was able to invite folks to the table who haven't been invited before and give them an opportunity to define equity on their own terms.

To understand this approach, you must know the philosophy behind it. Mrs. Marshall's commitment to continuing the work of Mrs. Ervin and strengthening the position of ESAD in San Juan Unified started with self. Speaking to her preparation when taking on the position of ESAD director, Mrs. Marshall says:

> "I believe that every individual on this planet is on their own equity journey whether they're conscious of it or not... when I moved into director of equity, I really immersed myself in my equity and I just started reading and listening to books all around social justice."

From a developmental approach, it started with pursuing her own knowledge and being open to narratives of harm. She also understood that the journey is lifelong, and that who we are in equity and how we display it will shift and mature as we engage in the work.

Whether it be the youth and parents, teachers and staff, or her community partners, core to her philosophy is the practice of listening to the people in the room. This, however, requires delicacy because not everyone is in the same place as it relates to their connection to racial justice. As she described in her interview:

> "Well, equity has a zone of proximal development, and… if the people you're working with, if they are not in that zone of proximal development, then they're not learning... If they are out, if you're pushing them too hard, they just shut down and they're not listening to you at all, and they think that whatever is coming out of your mouth is hogwash. You've actually moved them backwards because now they're more convinced that this work is not the right work."

In many ways, in her statement, Mrs. Marshall encapsulates that the core job of the ESAD director is to listen and connect people – some of whom view equity as "hogwash." This is what makes the work that Mrs. Marshall did in the role of ESAD director that much more impressive. Her positionality demanded that she stand in the gap and create opportunities that didn't exist prior, while also bringing along those who did not want to engage in critical conversations about race and racism. And for some, she was not bold enough. Everyone did not agree with her balanced approach to equity. She even had accusations levied against her that she was supporting white supremacy, but this did not stop her consistent work with grassroots organizations like SAYS, IYT, or Project Optimism. As a bridge builder, she strategically ushered in a new path for community-based partnerships as well as BIPOC leaders.

Equity Sounds Like… Omar Field-Ridley

Equity sounds like.... Well, that's just it. For Mr. Field-Ridley, the sound of equity is silence. That may be an oversimplification of it, because within that silence is a tremendous amount of action and words. When Dr. Ijeoma Ononuju asks Mr. Field-Ridley "who influences the work you do?" Mr. Field-Ridley responds by telling the story of when his mother threw the television away when he was 10 years old and then proceeded to go the next 20 years without a TV.

> "My mom was in college from before I was born until I was 17 because she was working and trying to get through all at the same time... You saw what she did and that's how you do it. You go to work and you make sure you get your education, and in fact, when I was 10 years old, mom decided that we were watching too much TV. So, she unplugged the TV, had us walk out to the big giant apartment dumpster [and] watched her launch that thing over the edge. It's funny now. It wasn't funny then."

For Mr. Field-Ridley, equity is the embodiment of his mother forging through adversity, putting in the hours to earn her multiple degrees, and then holding her children to a standard so high she instilled in them the priority of education and purpose over entertainment. But it is also the face of the racism he experienced as a teenager which almost caused him to walk away from his dream of being a teacher. Reminiscing on his experience facing prejudice from his math teacher in high school, Mr. Field-Ridley remembers how that moment stole his joy of teaching:

> "I always thought I wanted to teach, I really did when I was in high school, and I had a teacher though who turned me away from it for a while... I had a test that I was making up and she calculates the grade and starts exhaling and like just shaking her head and she's like, 'I hate this, I hate this. You Black kids just, I can't stand this.' And what happened is I got an A on the test. I got an A in her class because of my score on that test, and she was not happy about it."

Equity sounds like never feeling like a victim, because despite not having a dad at home and growing up in a low socio-economic status, his mother always made him feel like a King. But equity is also the moment when you are forced to confront prejudice and someone's attempt at stealing your dream – when their hatred for your race, your skin color, or your being pours out publicly and is amplified by your greatness. More importantly, for Mr. Field-Ridley, equity is that moment when he realized that education and teaching were still his passion. As he says, "That's where I belong. This is still the work that I should be doing and [I] got my teaching credential, my master's degree, and just started working my way through."

Futures Forward

Now that Mr. Field-Ridley is the Director of Equity and Student Achievement, he has the challenge of picking up where Mrs. Marshall left off and crafting a vision of how equity will be actualized in the district moving forward. In addition to bringing in community-based organizations like SAYS, Mr. Field-Ridley describes the work that he is tasked with doing as both adaptive and technical.

> "There is the adaptive piece, which is mindset [and] the foundation for real change. And that's the stuff that's going to take a long time. But there's also the technical piece, and that's the things that we can do on a daily basis. The things that we can ask, the things that we can suggest, and build consensus about... You know, there've been plenty of bright people out there that say that the action comes before the mindsets change."

The challenges of both the adaptive and technical is highlighted by the limited staffing of the ESAD. There are only four staff members in the department, and three out of the four are new to the district. When it comes to the technical aspects of the work, the limited staffing is illuminated through work that ranges from "addressing needs because something happened at a school. It can be, you know, there were swastikas burned into the grass over here… or there's conversation and craziness that happened at a school and we're

called in to address" all of it. This kind of work requires conflict management skills, as well as an understanding of the historical contexts of the school district and the communities which it serves. Mr. Field-Ridley smiles and recognizes that he has "100% embraced that part of the job."

The juxtaposition of the limited staff in the ESAD and "the needs of 66 schools and 37,000 people" highlight the importance of adaptive work. Going back to Ms. Marshall and the intention behind the zones of proximal development that she saw for the equity work, the real task is for the department's work to live within each of the other departments within SJUSD. As Mr. Field-Ridley states:

> "The fact that I got four people, there's no way we can handle the needs of 66 schools and 37,000 people. Absolutely not! What it is, is gradual and intentional, but a gradual expansion of the understanding that we all have to build and grow our capacity to do the work at our sites. And that's when we become more of the supports for things as opposed to the answer, right?"

Building on the visionary leadership of Mr. Field-Ridley, equity work in SJUSD is centered inside the Equity and Student Achievement Department. They are the answer for the things that are inequitable, and for a district the size of SJUSD, it is impossible to be the solution for every school, every person, every problem. However, given the Equity Pledge of Support – that proudly displays the names of administrators, staff, and teachers who are in support of the pledge – demonstrates that SJUSD is building capacity.

As the work continues to grow, partnerships are an essential pathway forward. Genuine collaborations will stretch this work farther and wider. Mrs. Marshall's community collaborative nurtured intersectional organizing between programs including Project Optimism, the Youth Development Network, U-CAN, IYT, American River College TRIO Student Support Services, Sac State's College of Education, SAYS, and others who are demonstrating how to work together to move the mountain of school reform. So yes, solutions are within reach. But in the coming years, how will the district choose to move forward?

San Juan Unified School District can transform into an ecosystem of racial justice that serves all students successfully. To actualize this vision, we pivot towards teachers and school leaders on the frontlines who have been working with SAYS to reclaim education as the embodiment of equity. Let's turn to them now.

DIANA MARSHALL AT THE SAN JUAN YOUTH SUMMIT (BACK ROW ON THE RIGHT):

PORTRAIT: DR. MARY PONCE

MOVING TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

By Vajra Watson and Angelina Kier

Dr. Mary Ponce is the Program Manager of the Office of English Learner and Multicultural Education in San Juan Unified School District. She began this position in July of 2021. Prior to joining San Juan, Dr. Ponce served as Principal for thirteen years of Korematsu Elementary for Social Justice (Davis, CA). She also spent over a decade serving the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District as an Assistant Principal and Dual Immersion teacher. These are just some of her teaching and administrative roles over the last two decades.

Dr. Ponce is a career educator who has a track record for student-centered systems change.

Since 2018, Dr. Ponce has served as an Equity Fellow with the National Equity Project (Oakland, CA) and in 2018, she received her Doctorate in Educational Leadership (Davis, CA). In her LinkedIn profile, she describes herself as an "equity justice leader. My passion is to work WITH people. Transform, liberate organizational systems from the inside out. Disrupt the predictable inequitable outcomes that exist in systems and institutions. I strive for justice: a world that works for all!" Her passion is palpable, and echoes throughout her resume and reputation throughout the region. What is less known is why she has dedicated her life to schools and how her work as an equity warrior within San Juan connects with the district-wide partnership with Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS).

To gain insight into equity initiatives throughout the district, we learned from practitioners on the frontlines who are struggling to interrupt both implicit and explicit racial inequities. This quest led us to into the office of Dr. Mary Ponce and the themes of this portrait focus on linguistic justice, the vast network of educators connected to SAYS, courageous rebel leadership, [6] and developing ecosystems of educational equity.

From Maria to Mary

All great narratives begin with a name. Our names matter. Names help identify us amid and among our cultures, ancestors, place, and land. Naming is a process of locating us in space and time. Similar to sacred teachings that refine our internal compass, names also play this essential function. Names help point us to ourselves. This is why Kendrick Lamar explains, "If I'm gonna tell a real story, I'm gonna start with my name." A conversation between Angelina Kier, a teacher at Mesa Verde High School and second year doctoral student in educational leadership at Sac State, and Dr. Mary Ponce, a leader for multicultural education in San Juan Unified School District, begins this way: "My mother and father chose my name…"

As the story goes, Mary's name was supposed to be Maria de Lourdes Bonser. This name had spiritual, cultural, and familial significance, signifying a "holy landmark" in France "where people do pilgrimages for healing." Mary sighs and continues, "at the registering of the birth certificate, I was colonized and assimilated." These words land inside the interview and force a pause. "Someone changes Maria to Mary," she explains, "but they kept Lourdes because it wasn't translatable." Her parents "just assumed the government and systems had good intentions. They didn't want to push back, and they went along with the systems." Mary empathizes with their need to assimilate as an act of survival for themselves and their children.

6 According to the National Equity Project, rebel leaders make "good trouble." They practice seeing, engaging, and acting in ways that build empathy and commitment; foster healing and increased agency; and activate equity, justice and belonging. Rebel leaders make inequities visible; disrupt reproductive discourse, practices and policies; and discover new ways to engage and co-design with their communities.

Mary admires her parents for their bravery, immigrating to a country when they "didn't even know the language." When speaking of them, she uses words like "resilience" and "fortitude." Her love and respect for her parents permeates with pride and comes across, almost viscerally, through Zoom screen.

Mary was born in Freemont, California in 1970. Her father was a migrant worker at the time and then eventually transitioned to construction. "He ended up owning a house (which was not common in his tribe)," she shares, and he made sure the entire family had full health benefits. "I mean, I didn't really have to worry about anything." She reflects on these early years: "We ended up in Vacaville in '77" and by first grade, she was attending schools on the Travis Airforce Base. She recollects that "I was raised on civilian living in Vacaville" and then "bussed to Travis Airforce Base" in Fairfield for all schooling. Even at a young age, she "could feel that we were special" driving onto the base through the main gate, being immersed in an environment of "great diversity," and "there was an expectation that they were going to college." Back home in Vacaville, "our tribe was very tight" and Mary was surrounded by cousins galore.

Mary's father only had a third-grade education and yet, within a generation, Mary persevered and went as far in school as possible, eventually obtaining her doctorate in education from UC Davis. To some, this achievement embodies the American Dream. But Mary is a lot more skeptical of this idealistic slogan. She experienced first-hand the inequalities of opportunity and experience. Her worlds of Vacaville and Fairfield—seemingly next door to one another—stood in stark contrast: "We always did things connected to the Airforce and so I kind of lived parallel, not even parallel lives, I lived a couple of different lives." Living different lives relates to code-switching, translation, and the complicated identities developed when traversing between multiple (often incongruent) realities.

According to Mary, her home was a place of safety, acceptance, and comfort. Unfortunately, this did not extend to her schooling experiences. Mary admits that for the most part, "schooling did come easy to me," but in first grade, she had a "bad experience." Phonics was the only form of foundational skills being used to teach, test, and track students. "I remember taking some assessment in first grade, I did not know the vocabulary" and the label stuck: "I was not a good reader." She shakes her head, "they did not see my intelligence or my possibility."

To counter the low expectations, "my dad really had mentors and people that really supported us and gave us tools of equity without knowing they were doing that." Mary's Godfather "always gave me value, made me feel special, always gave me agency." She was also influenced by her paternal grandmother. Once a year they'd visit her in Mexico and she'd just listen and learn from her: "I was always attracted to the elders" because "I always wanted to sit there and listen to their stories and their wisdom." These seeds superseded what was going on in the classroom.

Something was planted deep inside Mary and it started to take root. She could determine her own destiny – and not even a racist tracking system or short-sighted teachers could stop her.

Mary then smiles wide as she remembers her second and third grade teachers. Both were Black and "they saw my excellence." "That's the first time," she admits, that an educator told her point blank: "Don't lose that Spanish!" Instead of viewing her native fluency as a deficit, these teachers got her tutoring and reinforced that she could learn to read in English: "You're smart, you're intelligent." Even with these support mechanisms in place, Mary struggled. Based upon academic groupings, she was in high math and middle reading. It wasn't until she was about 26 years old that "my reading comprehension really clicked." Given the resources in Travis Unified School District, this seems a bit startling. Mary shrugs and explains the ways inequities get operationalized inside low expectations.

Mary and her brothers and sisters all attended school on the Travis Airforce Base. "I think because we were so well behaved, they kind of let us go" and graduate with subpar skills. When students are "so well-liked," it's common for teachers to "pass them." Mary shakes her head and Angelina probes to find out how Mary made it to college.

Even though Mary didn't have "anybody to mentor me because none of my family have gone to college," she had a peer group that changed her trajectory. Her friends "all knew about college in their families" and Mary soon realized she had to get into "gateway" courses to get on a college-bound pathway. "I mean no one ever told me that Algebra was the gateway and AG requirements. I was learning that kind of stuff from my friends." Mary studied "the top students" and then did her best to match their course schedule. "I *had* to push. I *had* to go to my counselor and force them to put me in the honors classes." She talks of "Mr. McDougal," her high school counselor, and her unapologetic insistence: "I know another language and maybe my English isn't the best, but I *can* learn and I *need* to be pushed." Mary was adamant, "I told him I wasn't going back to class until I got into honors."

Mary got what she wanted, but it was not what she expected. Throughout high school, she was appalled by the honor English classes, in particular. She describes the courses as "horrible" and a "waste of our time." The instruction underscored for Mary that "grades were inequitable, unfair, unjust." And the Eurocentric curriculum reinforced whiteness: "I don't know how many times or how many different readings of King Arthur we had to read." She repeats, that "he was horrible." Despite the challenges, she studied hard. She also started to see schooling in a different light: "I started expressing and having agency and I would push back on comments that I knew were just not right from certain teachers."

School had a complicated role in Mary's life. She loved to learn but encountered a series of low expectations that could have derailed her. In many ways, she was discovering her voice at school through her critique of it. At no point in her K-12 education did she think she would become an educator. And yet that has been one of her greatest callings.

Who We Are Shapes How We Lead

Mary Ponce becomes a freshman at UC Davis. She's interested in political science and she wanted to know about pre-Columbian times. She credits this curiosity to her annual trips back to Mexico ("stay like a month, miss school") that really opened her mind to "worldly experiences." Mary had first-hand knowledge of different governments and had a burning question that stayed with her, "How does the system work?" When asked where this question came from, she pauses, and then dives in:

> "I think maybe that was because we were immigrants. You know, my parents didn't know how the system worked and so I was very attuned that we had to figure out the system to get ahead in this game and when you're bi or multi-lingual or cultural, you know the differences between societies and cultures—you see them."

Mary thought she could learn how the government worked, and then make an impact. She got an internship with Thomas Hannigan, who at the time was the house minority leader of the California State Assembly. While Hannigan "did a really good job of modeling what he believed," Mary saw the underbelly of the political world. "I saw the politics [of] people wheeling and dealing. How people use each other and how they try to get a piece of you." She was discouraged.

Around this same time, her friend calls her and says, "Hey, they're hiring bilingual aids in Fairfield." Mary was living in Vacaville at the time and it seemed like an easy fit. She got the job and was responsible for helping immigrant students ("newcomers") navigate school. Students spoke Spanish, Nam, Vietnamese, Punjabi and

Mary literally "fell in love." She smiles wide, "I was so fulfilled! I could see the kids in me!" She says again, "*I fell in love.*" Soon thereafter, she decided to get her teaching credential and she was hired as a bilingual kindergarten teacher at Crescent Elementary. She stayed for a decade.

Crescent was not only the place where Mary worked, it rekindled her passion for learning. Mrs. Sheldon was her partner teacher and "she taught me how to read all over again and love literature." Again, Mary's eyes sparkle with excitement as she describes the power of story-telling. "Mrs. Sheldon…" she begins and then inserts quickly that, "I'm still friends with and her husband." They had this "grandmother house" filled with literature books she had collected over the course of her career. "I was like a little kid in a candy store," Mary quips. Mrs. Sheldon opened a "world for me" and Mary's thirst for literature was insatiable. Now, when she would travel to Mexico to visit her Godfather, she would seek out "authentic Spanish literature from Mexico or Central America" written by "authentic poets and writers." She became determined to bring "authentic material" back to her students and share with them that "literature is beautiful, it really is."

The word *authenticity* takes on a recurring rhythm of its own. Mary struggled to learn how to read in English, but in retrospect, it was never about her skillset and capabilities. Rather, there was simply a vast gap between her and her teachers (and what they were forcing her to read) that inhibited her connection to the content. As an educator, Mary understands that authenticity is the bridge to intellectual awakening. Her insistence on authenticity encourages some clarification. According to the Spanish dictionary and Webster, to be auténtico/authentic means:

- of undisputed origin; genuine
- true to one's own personality, spirit, or character
- not false or imitation: real, actual

Armed with a pedagogy of authenticity, Mary continued to make gigantic leaps with primary school age children: "I became a reading specialist—the irony!" She eventually shifted positions and became a Vice Principal in Fairfield.

DR. MARY PONCE

With a proven track record, Mary was then recruited to work as a Principal in Davis ("someone dropped my name from Fairfield… you guys got to grab her, she's phenomenal"). Mary became principal of Valley Oak elementary. It was the only Title One school in the district with the largest low-income and largest Latino population. Mary loved the school because of its diversity: "It was a beautiful mix [of] oppression and privilege." She continues with pride, "the teachers were beautiful. They were fighting the good fight, they didn't even have the words for it," but they were truly "social justice champions." She chuckles a bit, "They're lucky I was single. I lived and breathed being principal and I loved it. Loved it!" Although the school was thriving on many indicators, the district decided to shut it down because of declining enrollment.

Here's a blatant lesson in inequality. Families on the "rich part of town" of Davis wanted their own school so they built Fred T. Korematsu elementary in 2006. This construction caused decreased enrollment at Valley Oak as some students switched schools. Mary is serious that "it should never have been built," but it was. So, the wealthier families "got their school" and "named it after a social justice civil rights advocate." Mary shakes her head, "The irony."

"Valley Oak is closed, it's my second year. I have to close it down. I have to help all the teachers, staff, students, and parents matriculate to all new schools." As part of the transition process, the community wanted to know where Mary was going to be principal. As irony would serve Davis Joint Unified School District, yet again, she chose Korematsu. Teachers and families relocated with her and she began to develop a school culture at Korematsu rooted in values of social justice.

One of Mary's students, Tsadiku Obolu, approached her about what it would mean to *really* have a social justice school. "I think he was in fourth grade" and "he would tell me about his mother. That she worked for UC Davis and just published a book. He was so proud." Mary was fully unimpressed: "Oh God, another UC Davis PhD parent." She shrugs: "there was a bias and a stereotype." But something happens when you begin to know someone through their children. A natural connection started to form between Mary Ponce and Vajra Watson (Tsadiku's mom). "Vajra helped me access information, research people. Doctor Vajra connected me with people like Pedro Noguera, the Latino Equity Project, and fellowships." Mary also started attending Dr. Watson's annual UC Davis Equity Summit and that's where she first experienced the impact of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS). While Mary thought she fully understood the meaning of authenticity, her literary expectation expanded when she watched young people make new worlds with their words. From that moment on, she was determined to get SAYS at Korematsu elementary school.

SAYS Brings Literacy to Life

"I want SAYS to come to my school. I want that!" Mary told Vajra, rather emphatically, she would find a way to make it happen. By this time, Vajra's son was in middle school and her daughter, Adiyah, was in 5th grade. To begin the partnership, Mary booked a SAYS assembly where poets would perform a griot (a griot is basically poets popping-up in all directions spitting spoken word performance poetry).[7] The audience does not know where the next poet will emerge so it is extremely interactive. An additional surprise occurred that day that shocked all of us. The SAYS babies – the children of Patrice Hill, Denisha Bland, and Vajra Watson – all decided they wanted to participate in the griot. So, it was elementary school kids performing spoken word poetry for other elementary school kids. Talk about authenticity! There was a literal explosion, remembers Mary. "It was just roaring. Everyone clapped and something happened that day and then they stayed to do a writing workshop. It was so powerful!"

7 For more information on the origin of SAYS griots, see: https://www.niot.org/nios-video/vajra-watson-protest or https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2020/4/sahel-sunjata-stories-songs

QUADIR, ADIYAH, & AZZA'KHARI AT THE SAYS ASSEMBLY AT KOREMATSU ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN JANUARY OF 2016

QUADIR, AZZA'KHARI, ADIYAH, & AALIYAH AT THE SAYS-SAN JUAN WARRIOR SCHOLAR ACADEMY IN THE SUMMER OF 2021

During the assembly, Mary felt a deep connection to SAYS. Not just as a school principal, but as a parent. She began attending SAYS poetry slams in the community—often bringing her husband and son along with her. She also began making monthly donations to the organization, determined to see its growth and development. Mary shares, "I really believe in it."

Over the years, Mary has participated in SAYS professional development trainings offered by the current Director, Patrice Hill. Inside these spaces, she attests, something breaks open. "I've been at workshops and, oh God, she made all of us cry, but we were so liberated!"

Mary Ponce describes SAYS as "agency, value, and liberation." As Mary pieces together the impact SAYS has had on the region, she connects it to the song *Elevate* (from the new Spiderman movie).

Elevate

DJ KHALIL

Stepped out of my zone
I had to get out all alone
And figure it out on my own
And I know what I really want now

Can't stop me, can't break me
What don't kill me, gon' make me
Shoot for the stars, no safety

They wanna fight
I'm just gon' let 'em hate
I gotta go high
I gotta elevate

You better choose a side, you gotta choose a side
You gotta pick
You better do what's right or you gonna lose the fight

...I'm everything that you wanna be plus more
Since there's no hearoes anymore

...They will slander me, I just plan to be
Somethin' powerful for my family
Tried to balance life and my sanity
Show a different side of humanity

"That's what SAYS does," she affirms. It's a different side of humanity and a different side education. A schooling process that elevates literacy through authenticity. Wherever SAYS teaches, students elevate. She is eager to see the work take root and grow wings in San Juan Unified School District.

Equity-in-Motion

SAYS practices a familial form of literacy and creates spaces for students to feel at home. This means that home language is encouraged inside the writing workshops. In fact, SAYS has entire workshops called "My Write to Go Home" and "I matter," among other topics. Through the creative self-expression within the literary arts, linguistic justice moves from theory into practice. This is equity-in-motion.

"We're all learners, we're all curious, we all want to learn." Mary believes that we can learn equity, too. After multiple trainings, personal relationships, and mothering a son who is Black and Mexican, she became more self-aware of "how blind I was." She asserts, "I became a Black ally and I understood my privilege as a white Latino." For Mary and others, equity is not a destination, but a journey towards justice. Unfortunately, equity inside schools can be performative. As Nicole Martinez will mention in a forthcoming section, there is a lot of "rhetoric" without an understanding of how to "manifest it." That's why these school-community partnerships are so vital.

Inside spaces like SAYS there's a practical embodiment of what education could be, instead of what it is.

Mary has learned a lot over the years. Based on personal awakenings and professional experiences, she knows that when children are seen and valued for all of who they are, something transpires that is life affirming and life changing. Now, as the interview comes to a close, it's clear that San Juan Unified School District is in good hands with equity warriors like Dr. Mary Ponce. This is not just her job; it is her calling.

Mary's love and commitment to bilingual families is genuine and real, as she intimately knows the harms of assimilation without authenticity. Like the pain of being called Mary and not Maria. The harm caused when she internalized the idea that she was not a good reader. Her struggles to find her place inside a schooling system not designed for her multicultural literacies. Mary's self-efficacy and agency is awe-inspiring. At the beginning, she spoke with reverence for her parent's tenacity to thrive against all odds. And yet she equally illuminates these same characteristics. She is surely their reflection, resistance, and legacy.

MARY'S PAPA Y MAMA

PORTRAIT: NICOLE MARTINEZ

INTO THE HEART OF TEACHING

By Vajra Watson and Angelina Kier

Nicole "Novela" Martinez currently teaches at Greer Elementary School in San Juan Unified School District. She has worked in education for over twenty-five years, serving as a classroom teacher, afterschool provider, substitute, and community-based arts educator.

In the summer of 2021, Patrice Hill and Denisha Bland were operating the Warrior Scholar Academy at Greer. "It was housed at Greer elementary, but students from Encina, Greer, and Katherine Johnson participated," shares SAYS director, Mama P—as the kids call her. At the Warrior Scholar Academy, Nicole worked as a Poet-Mentor Educator, delivering daily instruction to students. offering mentoring support to the students. From her presence on campus during the summer, she found out about a permanent position for an elementary school teacher onsite. "I got that job as a direct relationship of SAYS. I was helping with the summer program and SAYS already had a partnership with the principal" so "I was able to get an interview."

Nicole brings all she can to her students – while also nourishing herself and her family's needs. Over the years, she has proven to be reliable, trustworthy, and an exceptional mentor and educator. Any school would be fortunate to work with her.

A young person in SAYS describes Nicole as "always bringing a light of hope wherever she goes. A warm spirit. And very smart!" She is also considered a stable in the community: "She shows up for people," a colleague mentions. "She's at the birthday party or monumental gathering," another student shares, "and consistently gifts us with sage, sweetness, and wisdom." Nicole's reputation in Sacramento runs deep and has nourished generations of young activists, artists, and organizers. But Nicole rarely talks about herself. It's possible to know her for decades, and still not understand the totality of her story.

While this portrait cannot do justice to Nicole, it tells a small piece of her participation in Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) and how this multi-year partnership with San Juan Unified School District can center students and teachers in new ways.

Learning to Connect

Nicole identifies as Chicana and Indigenous whose ancestral lands are from northern New Mexico. She moved around a lot as a child because her father was in the military. As she says, "I was a military brat" who struggled in school, specifically around learning how to read. By second grade, she "landed here in Sacramento" and this has been her home ever since. "Growing up hip-hop and ranch, you know, speaking Spanglish" defines some of her ethnic and cultural identities.

Who Nicole is shapes what she does and how she lives her life. As she says, "your walk is your way."

Nicole's skillsets are impressive and far-reaching: in addition to being an educator, she is a sought after photographer and DJ ("DJ Novela"). As a natural bridge-builder and connector, Nicole's network is expansive. Locally, she works with Sol Collective, Mahogany Urban Poetry, SAYS, and other activist organizations. Nationally, she is the Arts Director for the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC), co-founded by Drs. Rita Kohli and Marcos Pizarro. Their website states that Nicole "provides beats, rhythms and soul to ITOC both on the turntables and off." This aptly describes the vibe of being around Nicole Martinez.

During her college years, Nicole worked in Los Angeles Unified School District. Since then, she has also been employed in Sacramento City Unified School District, Elk Grove, West Sacramento, and now San Juan. She has a broad understanding of the school systems that shape this region, as well as the persistent patterns of inequality.

NICOLE AT THE SAYS-SAN JUAN UNIFIED WARRIOR SCHOLAR ACADEMY, 2021

Over ten years ago, Nicole was feeling a bit stifled in her role as a classroom teacher. "There's a lot of pressure for different reasons," she explains. "The teacher is accountable to testing and evaluations" and it can become stressful and overwhelming.

In search for something new, Nicole drove to San Francisco in 2009 to attend the annual *Teachers for Social Justice* Conference. It was there that she attended a Youth Speaks workshop: "I had always been interested in poetry," she recalls, and "always attended community open mics." Naturally, Nicole gravitated to this presentation on spoken word performance poetry. She immediately thought to herself: "I wish I had that here in Sacramento. Wouldn't that be great!" After the conference, Nicole reached out to the Founder and Director of Youth Speaks, James Kass. He said, "If you're interested in this in Sacramento, you should have heard of Dr. Vajra Watson. She's doing something out there."

Nicole quickly reached out to Vajra. "I called her and she said, *Hey, we're having a meeting. We're organizing. Just come through and bring whoever you can*." Nicole takes a breath and leans forward, "It wasn't even SAYS yet… It was really grassroots at that time." Looking back, Nicole actually attended a SYS gathering. It sounds funny now – referring to SAYS as SYS. But for the first year, participants called it *Sacramento Youth Speaks* (pronounced *sis*). Such is the organic nature of building an organization in real time, and slowly landing on its rightful name. It was a collective process of identity-building and meaning-making.

Nicole remembers that her first meeting took place at the Sierra Health Foundation off of Garden Highway and there were "about twenty people" in attendance. "It was just meetings to like organize" and "get people to know each other" as a way to spark the connections that would lead to larger impacts. "There were more and more meetings," Nicole admits, but they didn't feel boring or burdensome. Rather, they felt like unique "community gatherings" and there was always food. Nicole chuckles and clarifies that it was "catered food" and something about it felt "special, polished, supported." Nicole continues, "I had never been at that point in my life invited to community organizing meetings where there were catered meals … Vajra had the sense to have those things for us as community."

In those early years of SAYS, Nicole describes herself as a "bystander." She just "wanted to have poetry as part of my curriculum." What she experienced, however, was something more profound. Something that engaged all parts of her. Something that made her stay and become part of the SAYS familia over the last ten plus years.

"Early on, like the very first team … they didn't really have coaching in place, so I would sit-in and talk to the kids and kind of listen to their poems. So, in that sense, I've been like a mentor." Nicole smiles wide as she talks about some of the original SAYS students, many of whom are still connected, in some capacity, to the organization: "We know those students fifteen years later, when they have their own kids." She continues, talking specifically about her shifting roles. "Later, as it started to grow, I wanted to document the program. I saw that it was really special in the way that it was organizing and the growth that it was making. I started taking pictures of a lot of the young poets and the events."

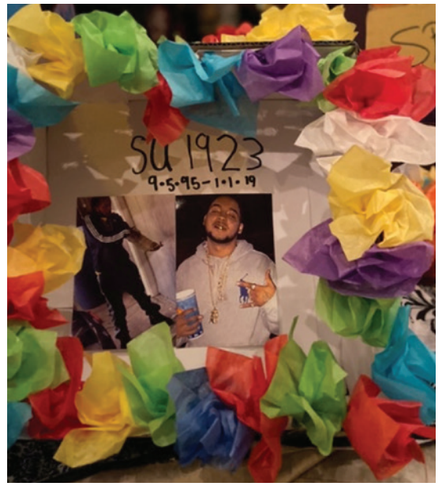
NICOLE TAKING PICTURES AT A SAYS EVENT

Nicole's work behind the camera became its own narrative and cultural keeping. She even started to teach SAYS youth the art of photo voice and photography. Over the last couple of years, Nicole has also joined the teaching staff to provide art workshops inside SAYS classroom residencies, specifically around particular holidays like Dia de los Muertos.

What began as a small community-based writing workshop at Sierra Health Foundation grew exponentially. To date, SAYS has reached over 10,000 young people throughout the Sacramento region. According to Nicole, this is because "Vajra definitely did SAYS differently than other organizations where it wasn't an after-school program. She was getting partnerships and district contracts." SAYS was "pushing-in *during* the school day." When asked what SAYS was *doing* inside these schools to be so successful, Nicole exclaims, "good question," and then provides insights.

"When SAYS started, all those years ago, it was brand new." She quips, "nothing was there" and nobody was "coming to schools that even represented our own truth as we walked this world outside of the school." To walk the world into schools, so to speak, SAYS empowers the community as educators.

According to Nicole, SAYS authentically "brings the community into the school" through various programs—from assemblies to in-class residencies and elective courses; from after-school writing workshops to poetry slam competitions. She emphasizes that it's the people who make a program: "The folks who are leading SAYS, who are teaching SAYS, they are of the community from the schools." Accordingly, "they're very knowledgeable about the areas because they've lived in those areas." While a keen awareness of the neighborhoods is vital, it is also important to mention that "they physically reflect the populations of the students that we serve."



An essential component of the SAYS culture is the unabashed "connection to the students." It's first, front, and center, explains Nicole. "The way they show up, the way they talk, the way they dress, the way that they relate to students is huge." Nicole is adamant that "ten years ago, conversations in education about connecting to students and relationship building were not in people's mouths. That was not what people were saying at all." SAYS not only talked about youth engagement, it showed educators how to do it—and do it in a way that positively elevated the identities of each student.

The curriculum is student-centered; life is the primary text. SAYS allows and encourages "folks to completely [be] themselves." So, to model this philosophy, the "poet-mentor educators" show up authentically and holistically as themselves. As poet-mentor, MmaMma Laura, espouses, "immobme." Building on their own internal work as "real models," the SAYS staff nurture the authenticity of each student. The program consistently focuses on relationship building and "talks to the kids about what matters to them" as a basis to co-create the learning space. "Making sure students feel heard and seen, appreciated, valued, that their voice is center, that's what SAYS brought and continues to bring." Nicole shakes her head again, "If I look through this journey of education I've been on, specifically in the classroom, that was not there ten years ago."

Nicole continues to delve into the SAYS curriculum and talks at length about Project H.E.A.L. which stands for Health, Education, Activism, and Leadership. It was a course developed by Patrice Hill and Denisha Bland. "It's more a newer program," explains Nicole. "When I visit that program, I see [that] those students know who their SAYS teachers are, they know Miss Patrice, they know Miss Coco, they look for them, they wait for them, they know where the classroom is." As an elective class built into the school day, Project H.E.A.L becomes "a place for them to feel loved and cared for and understood." In many ways, it's a "safe haven in the middle of the school." Nicole describes moments "where I've seen kids walking in that classroom just hot and upset [and] mad that somebody said something or another teacher said something." A lot of it has to do with students "really feeling like they haven't been listened to." "The first thing that I see Patrice and Coco do," shares Nicole, "is like sit everybody down and say *Hey, let's check in, let's talk about it, and let's work through some of this*." As a pivotal learning objective, there's a commitment that says, "let's see how we can get everybody to feel okay before we leave here today."

Nicole is firm and convincing in her tone: This is "really grounding" the work we're supposed to be doing in schools—it's bringing us back to our highest calling as educators and future ancestors.

Ancestral Futures

If education happens everywhere, then there are probably powerful lessons inside some unlikely places. Nicole Martinez is a student of life and attunes herself to nature for balance, healing, and harmony. Amidst the stress of long school days, she appreciates the soliloquy found in sweetgrass, elder wisdom, and spending time with her mother and daughter. To holistically grasp the gravitas of Nicole, the hummingbird can help us. [image[8]]

While hummingbirds are relatively small, they signify powerful, positive energy. According to many indigenous traditions, hummingbirds are healers. Building on this symbolism, there is a story told in the Hopi and Zuni tradition of a famine that plagued the land. Because food and water were scarce, a mother and father were forced to leave their young son and daughter behind as they went searching for supplies to sustain their family.

To pass the time while waiting, the boy carved a hummingbird out of a piece of wood. When his sister threw the toy into the air, the small bird came to life and played with the children. However, upon seeing that they were hungry, the hummingbird began to worry about them. So, she went searching and returned everyday with an ear of corn to sustain them. Realizing they would need more to eat, the hummingbird flew to the center of the Earth to beg the God of Fertility to replenish the land. Impressed by the beautiful and sincere little bird, the God of Fertility delivered rain, which fed the soil and helped the crops to grow again."

8 "Mary's Prayer" by Jerome Martinez, in honor of his mother. San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico. Image: Pueblo Prints.

A close colleague confides that Nicole is really a "revolutionary healer." Similar to the hummingbird in the story, the innovative and collaborative ways she lives her life nourishes, nurtures, and replenishes the future. Altogether, Nicole Martinez is not just a San Juan teacher and SAYS organizer, she is a connector. A connector of neighborhoods, people, and traditions. A mover and shaker, a pollinator of potentiality. While many speak of diversity and inclusion work, Nicole seeks to manifest it.

In the previous portrait, Dr. Mary Ponce reinforced a pedagogy of authenticity. Nicole is definitely authentic, but she moves differently. She pulsates between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Perhaps she personifies a pedagogy of ancestry.

In the opening of the report, we called-in poet Sunni Patterson's powerful words. She proclaimed that, "We are locating life in the mirrors of each other's eyes, and stories. Co-creators of a new world, knowing that I am you, you are me, and we are one. "[9]

In SAYS spaces, life itself is the curriculum. Learning is relational. Literacy is alive. A place of healing through connection: *In Lak'ech*.

In Lak'ech

Tú eres me otro yo.
You are me other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
I do harm to myself.

Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

This poem by Chicano playwright Luis Valdez connects to a Mayan epistemology of oneness that Nicole Martinez often personifies. When the roots of learning have a different origin, the whole world can take on new meaning. This is significant.

The Children

There are commonalities across continents, from the Mayan tradition of *In Lak'ech* to the Masai Warriors of East Africa. These infamous fighters in Kenya, regardless if they have children of their own or not greet one another by saying, "Casserian Engeri." It means, "How are the children?" They do not ask each other, "How are you?" or "How's your day?" but rather they ask about the next generation. This simple statement provides insight into a cultural tradition that prioritizes the needs of the young. SAYS resounds with this same ethos.

How are the children in SAYS? Nicole confirms, "it's a place to let students shine." Often, it's those who might not always get that opportunity." This sentiment is echoed throughout the data on SAYS. In a forthcoming portrait of classroom teacher, Aaron Brown says the same thing as Nicole:

9 https://multoghost.wordpress.com/2016/11/06/how-hummingbird-saved-the-children-a-hopi-folktale/ and https://www.longlongtimeago.com/once-upon-a-time/myths/more-native-american-myths/muyingwa-a-hummingbird-and-two-children

> "A lot of our students are not succeeding in what would be traditional academics (you know As and Bs on the college track to go to four-year university), a lot of them were struggling with grades or even attending [school]. But once they get into SAYS, then they have something that they're looking forward to and they're getting to go to these slams and speak on a microphone and parents are showing up and now it's a celebration."

Through the SAYS community, now they experience what it is like to "be celebrated, to be seen and heard" within and beyond the school day. Students are not just active at the school site, they get more involved in the regional activities, like poetry slams and the SAYS Summit at UC Davis. These spaces are often "multi-generational" because "parents are coming, grandparents are coming, little brothers and sisters." Nicole attests that, "SAYS provides family to students and their families equally."

Nicole looks down and takes a deep breath before continuing. She expresses herself calmly, softly, and slowly: "You see all those pieces that we would love to see in our classroom at these SAYS events." She continues to reinforce this point. Students actually experience what it's like to be "seen, heard, and loved on." Her eyes tear up. "As much as I want my classroom to be different, the physical space of my classroom leaves so much like I can't do sometimes. It puts barriers or the bell schedule, or because your classroom is operating within a structure outside of that… you also have to adhere to it in certain ways, or because you teach with a team." Nicole describes teaching within some of these confines of high-stakes testing, Eurocentricity, and external institutional pressures that can be suffocating—literally taking the love out of learning.

Instead of allowing these ailments to consume her professional apparatus, Nicole has reached out and connected to community. SAYS signifies that lifeline. It reminds her that there's a difference between education and schooling and important differences between teaching as job versus teaching as a way of life.

"Believe it or not," Nicole says, "whether I've seen SAYS do mass assemblies with like three hundred kids to just small classroom workshops, it's kind of the same theme." She continues, "once SAYS starts to become a part of the school, kids know what it is, and they look for it." Why? Because "students know it makes a difference!"

For Nicole, SAYS reminds her that it is possible to reclaim schools. With SAYS at the school site, "now students have folks they can lean on, trust, come to, that represent members of their family in the long run. Like, you know, someone is going to check in on them, make sure they're still keeping up, trying to get to class, try to be their best selves." Nicole says that this ethic of care cannot be overstated. "If a student is struggling with academics or just even wanting to be at school, then SAYS is a support system." She extends this idea to add that, "I think we just kind of represent an extended family and a support system for students."

Again, Nicole Martinez and Aaron Brown share similar perspectives. Both are teachers in San Juan Unified School District who experience the value of SAYS. When Aaron was asked, what does SAYS sound like, he was quick to give a one-word, definitive answer: "Family."

Unfortunately, schools often test what students know but disregard how they grow. While this is changing, as educators we can continue to work together in new ways. Building authentic community-based partnerships—with classroom teachers—is a step towards actualizing San Juan's 8-point equity initiative.

San Juan Unified School District is investing in innovative solutions to student success amidst national atrocities. It's imperative to visit and revisit the question, *how are the children?*

In America, inside our schools, how are the children? The white teenager who murdered 10 Black people in Buffalo, NY, was the by-product of our education system. Same with Uvalde, TX. This is not to put the full responsibility of society on schools, but we must pause and reflect on the ways schools mirror our social

ailments (and often reproduces them). Can we teach in a way that helps put the world back together?

Education is such radical work. James Baldwin was adamant that "A teacher who is not free to teach is not a teacher… to teach, is a revolutionary act." If we are not allowed to teach towards racial justice, teach towards peace, and teach towards oneness, we must make peace with all of this war.

There is a war about curriculum in our schools. The children are experiencing it. As a small solution, "SAYS has seeded a movement," in Sacramento, explains Nicole. This is because SAYS infuses its pedagogy with a connection to ancestry that disrupts white supremacy.

Nicole shares that SAYS did not just appear out of nowhere, but is based upon an ancient lineage of liberation: African and Indigenous first world peoples. Those roots that take us to West African Griots, Aztec cosmology, and the infamous poets of Somali. Words that reflect Carter G. Woodson, Zora Neale Hurston, Tupac, and June Jordan. A collective network of knowledge that brings us to the bookshelves Paulo Freire, Gloria Anzaldua, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Sister Souljah. These are not just the posters and texts that adorn SAYS spaces, they signify a remembrance that embraces the children for all of who they are (not merely what we want them to be).

To close this portrait on Nicole, we turn to nature for lessons on the heart of teaching towards transformation. Have you heard the story of the Sequoias? Sequoias live for 3,000 years and these trees, in particular, like the Redwoods and Oak Trees, are indigenous to California. Yet the Sequoias are especially sacred because Sequoias reproduce when intense amounts of heat—blazing hot temperatures—breaks open the outer layer of their shells and set the seedlings free.

There are many ways to look at the crisis of schools, inequality, global warming, and the fires which continue to ravage California. But don't forget that amidst all of the destruction, forests of Sequoias are being planted and will grow. Building on this wisdom, sometimes it takes a massive fire to turn a single seed into a forest. As the poet-ancestor June Jordan reminds us, "we are the ones we have been waiting for."

NICOLE WITH HER DAUGHTER AT A SAYS FAMILY GATHERING

PORTRAIT: AARON "A-SLAM" BROWN

BEATS OF FREEDOM

By Angelina Kier and Vajra Watson

Aaron Brown has been a SAYS advocate for the last decade. Whether teaching in Yolo or Sacramento counties, he is one of those individual teachers whose been fighting an uphill battle to bring SAYS to the youth. For the past seven years, he has been advocating for SAYS in San Juan Unified School District. His determination, diligence, and advocacy earned him the title of "A-Slam" at his school site. After two years, he convinced the district office to invest in SAYS. In many ways, he singlehandedly built the bridge between the SJUSD Office of Equity and the UC Davis SAYS Program. The current multi-year, district-wide partnership is a direct by-product of his simple, yet soulful tenacity.

Dr. Watson cannot stop talking about Mr. Brown. She said we could not complete Phase I of this evaluation without his voice and insights. She cleared her schedule to find time to sit down with him (over Zoom) and dive into his connection to SAYS. This was the first time Dr. Watson really got to know Mr. Brown. Up until this point, he worked almost exclusively with the SAYS executive team: Denisha Bland and Patrice Hill. Mr. Brown is considered part of the "SAYS family" because of his long-term professional connection with "Ms. Coco" and "Mama P."

In the forthcoming interview, we will learn how Mr. Brown got involved in SAYS and how it improved his classroom culture. He reinforces the finding that SAYS is student-centered and often creates pathways *into* education for students far too often pushed *out* of school.

Harmonica & Guitar

Mr. Brown's story is filled with rises, leaps, pauses, and starts, a unique arrangement of sounds that lead him to where he is and compose who he is. Born in Escalon, a small and agricultural town of 3,000 people in the Central Valley, his educational pathway is not a traditional story. He graduated high school in 1990, attended Chico State, and earned his bachelor's degree in the six-year plan. He notes that there was a lack of diversity growing; there was only one African American student in High School. Although he feels his upbringing was sheltered, as the son of a teacher, he uniquely experienced schooling.

Teaching is a well-known song for him and his family. Aaron's siblings are all in education. His brother is a superintendent in the Bay Area. His sister is the Head of Food Services for the Escalon School District. He recalls fondly that the final ten years of his mother's career were spent working in a secondary continuation school. "All the toughest kids loved my mom, and when they got out of juvenile hall, they would come knock on our door to let her know they were free." He was raised with a profound appreciation for people and a desire to do right by them.

> "I kind of grew up with this kind of understanding about human beings about caring about them. And so I just witnessed that my whole life."
> -Mr. Brown

Deep down he knew he was going to become a teacher; it took him some time to take the teaching pathway. As he recalls attending to Chico he realized that if he was a kid, he would not listen to a 22-year-old graduate. In addition, he enriched his life playing music. He worked through his 30s as a musician, milling around and doing odd jobs to the tunes of Americana, blues, and rock through his guitar and harmonica. To this day he still gets together with his high school friend to do harmonies and bust out Simon and Garfunkel tunes.

However, a song in his head kept playing: "Okay, I gotta get my shit together." This is when Mr. Brown decided to get his emergency credential and started working as a substitute teacher for the Butte County Office of Education. His first contracted job was at the Butte County Juvenile Hall, where he served for a year. During this moment of his career, he witnessed how the system negatively affected minoritized communities. While recalling this stage of his life working at the Butte County Juvenile Hall, "It was a complete eye-opening as to the system and how ineffective it really is for these kids."

"It was a complete eye opening as to the system
and how ineffective it really is for these kids."
-Mr. Brown, referring to the Butte County Juvenile Hall

AARON BROWN

Kids would approach him and say: "Aaron I'm out. I can't wait. You're never gonna see me again." He would send them off with the faint hope of those words to be true, but sadly two weeks later, they would be back strung out in bad shape. Mr. Brown grasps that although it was tragic to witness what the kids went through, he also believed that to a certain extent it was rewarding to give them positivity in the time that they were together.

Music is a constant element in Aaron's life. He moved to Sacramento to join a band with his friend Mike. He also got a job at a clinic called ECI, Educational Clinics Incorporated. He explains that ECI had a contract with Grant High School and would take all the students who had been expelled, who were basically trying to get back into Grant. Even though he did not have his teaching credential yet, the experiences with youth and his love of all kinds of kids made him realize that working there was a chance to work with kids who had been in some rough situations.

"I didn't have a teaching credential, but I just had this experience and
this love of all kinds of kids, you know. I wasn't intimidated to go in there."
-Mr. Brown

His work here ended after a couple of years because ECI lost their contract with Grant. This inspired Mr. Brown to obtain his teaching credential in 2005 through a San Joaquin County Office of Education internship called Impact Program.

For Mr. Brown, the blues harp of teaching started in Fern Bacon Middle School, in Sacramento City Unified. This experience he sums as "a trial under fire." After this, he served in Woodland for seven years, and lastly Mira Loma High School, in San Juan Unified, where he is currently teaching.

I Heard it Through the Library Grapevine

San Juan Unified School District has a multi-year partnership that they're developing with many community-based organizations and SAYS is one of them. During an interview with the Equity and Student Achievement Director, Diana Marshall, it was disclosed how much influence Mr. Brown had in the partnership between SJUSD with SAYS. Diana Marshall, the Director of Equity and Student Achievement at the time, shared: "You know, I never really knew about SAYS. Aaron Brown was an advocate for it, you know, kind of way before it was on our radar."

It was around 10 or 11 years ago, while working in Woodland, that Mr. Brown first heard about SAYS. "I heard about SAYS through our campus librarian." As a committed teacher he engaged in activities that would expose his students to enriching opportunities, and the SAYS Summit was one of them. Throughout the SJUSD and SAYS partnership Aaron has been instrumental as he was one of the first to advocate for the program in the district. However, it was not an easy song to sing. As he recalls: "In the early years I just got denied over and over again" even when school leaders recognized the program's value, it was not clear there were funds for it. Mr. Brown did not cease and worked relentlessly with Mama P to bring the program to San Juan. Years went by when the budget did not consider a program like SAYS a priority; however, a civil rights complaint against Mira Loma changed the tune, and the district had to listen to the music.

MISS DENISHA 'COCO' BLAND SERVING AS A POET-MENTOR EDUCATOR IN MR. BROWN'S CLASS

> "Mama P is like a superhero in a way...
> her ability to connect to kids. It was amazing."
> -Mr. Brown

SAYS' Rhythm

San Juan Unified School District listened and started trying to do some outreach and community building around our Black and Brown youth. A lot of history goes to the IB program. Mira Loma is known for its international baccalaureate program. As Aaron explains: "We're one of the top programs in the nation in terms of students that graduate with an IB diploma." He started to realize that to the district, the Passport program at Mira Loma was not in the best light because the Passport program had all the students of color. He pondered: "Why aren't they in the IB Program? Why do they have to be in the Passport program?" Mr. Brown battled the idea of being part of a program that tracked students who were the same kids he cared about and advocated for but were also affected by structural racism.

Soon after a civil rights' complaint was made against Mira Loma High School, San Juan partnered with SAYS. It was Mama P's outstanding ability to connect to kids that made it possible. It was by word of mouth through a certain group of kids who and eventually more kids started to sign up and showed interest in participating. As Mr. Brown reminisces that he had a group of Special Ed kids, he points out that the SAYS class started without any sort of pre-classes or an official mentor, it was Mama P. and Miss Coco's lyrics of critical literacy. Aaron relates joyfully how he really got to experience the writing strategies, the mentoring element of the program, and all they bring to the classroom. It moved him to attend the SAYS summit for the first time. It was in Mr. Brown's words: "an epic experience."

> "And all of a sudden, they started getting interested in trying to do some outreach and community building around our Black and Brown kids. Like, oh, Mira Loma is not racist. And so, I think that kind of helped us in a way."
> -Mr. Brown

In Mr. Brown's words, the chord of SAYS' pedagogy that reaches and teaches students is how they treat the kids with respect in a nonjudgmental space. A space where kids can express themselves following the guidelines, where the expectations are presented in a clear and communal form. These guidelines allow kids to feel like they are in a safe space, that they could be vulnerable, and they do not need to read out loud if they are not comfortable reading out loud. He continues, "And even if you could only write, you can only share one line of something you wrote, you were celebrated and, you know, you got your snaps."

Mr. Brown highlights that his favorite part of SAYS pedagogy is the social justice focus. He argues that discussing social justice issues with students is a missed opportunity, even when they are not politically active. He recalls how powerful it was to witness his students "open their eyes because we went through a lot of social issues in the years where we had SAYS on campus." After the murder of Stephon Clark in March of 2018, alongside the rise of The Black Lives Matter Movement, SAYS allowed learning about activism and how vital protest is for social change. SAYS pedagogy offers students a set of skills to participate in robust discussions.

MR. BROWN AND MISS COCO'S FIRST AFTER-SCHOOL SLAM TEAM AT MIRA LOMA

Mr. Brown shares that his favorite artist is Bob Dylan, as he describes the positive impact that SAYS pedagogy brings to his students, along the schooling disruption because of the pandemic, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" comes to mind.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

SONG BY BOB DYLAN

Come gather 'round people, Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters, Around you have grown
And accept it that soon, You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin', And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone, For the times they are a-changin'

Come writers and critics, Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide, The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon, For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who, That it's namin'
For the loser now, Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'

Come senators, congressmen, Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway, Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt, Will be he who has stalled
The battle outside ragin', Will soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls, For the times they are a-changin'

Come mothers and fathers, Throughout the land
And don't criticize, What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters, Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly agin', Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand, For the times they are a-changin'

The line it is drawn, The curse it is cast
The slow one now, Will later be fast
As the present now, Will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin', And the first one now
Will later be last, For the times they are a-changin'

Tuning in to Students' Voices

The community built around SAYS allows teaching advocacy. Mr. Brown notes that while in a traditional classroom with a traditional teacher, these kids might be wary of participating because they might have experienced that the person at the front of the classroom has the power to s the power to tell them what to think. In contrast, we tune in to students' voices and ideas in a SAYS classroom. What do y'all think? We wanna hear where you're coming from?" This could be a first for many kids where there was a safe space to say how they felt. "At SAYS and with our crew, you just say it, and we're we're gonna listen to what your point is not to the way that you said it." It is a practice of freedom.

Similarly, Aaron refers to the writing workshops as a high interest element for the kids. To achieve this the mentor poets connected with students by using hip hop lyrics and culture, which allow them to bond well with the kids. Mr. Brown shares one of his most favorite moments that will stay in his memory forever:

"The kids had bonded with our mentors and she [Ms. Coco] did an activity where it was one of those things where you write something, and you crumple it up and you throw it in the middle of the pile and then she takes it out and reads it. Some kid wrote "Mr. Brown sucks." I know kids feel that way, but man, Coco was not having it. She's like, "Mr. Brown, you go shut that door. Shut the door." And she let those kids have it." She got serious. "How dare you talk to Mr. Brown? He cares about you guys." As Aaron stresses, even though it did not hurt his feelings, it was the principle of the guidelines that was at play. The students' reaction was physically visible in their wide-open eyes. As Ms. Coco commanded the room at that moment, Mr. Brown felt validated, a validation that prevented an incident like this ever happening again.

For Aaron, working at Mira Loma was a different scene. As a special ed teacher, he was eager to support the Passport program; as a special ed teacher, he had envisioned that the program could help lift students with college and career readiness however, he soon realized that this program was no more than a great intention. It lacked themes and variation. Often, students assigned in this program were the ones who did not have other classes. If a student had room in their schedule, they would ask: "Well here, why don't you just go to Passport?" As Mr. Brown got to know the school's dynamics and students through the Passport assemblies and Passport activities, he realized that SAYS pedagogy would be an opportunity to uplift his students and support them. His advocacy to use poetry slams to center students' voices during meetings earned him the nickname A-SLAM. He will promote and boast about SAYS and how many positive outcomes from this program they could have: "We gotta get SAYS in here, our kids are gonna love it. It would give them, you know, academic support and attendance and all sorts of positive things would come out of it." Aaron underlines the many benefits that this pedagogy offers to students looking for a reason to want to come to school. "They will get excited about this."

> "We gotta get SAYS in here, our kids are gonna love it. It would give them, you know, academic support and attendance and all sorts of positive things would come out of it."
> -Aaron "A-Slam" Brown

Melodies of Equity

From Mr. Brown's point of view, San Juan Unified School District needs SAYS because of its diverse student population. It is in this diversity that SAYS pedagogy shines. SAYS can give a lot of kids a strong, supportive, and affirming community. Sadly, it is known among some teachers that for many kids at Encina, or El Camino, their after-school club is detention. "That's where their community is formed. And so, you're like, *I'm gonna give you a detention*. "Oh, okay. Well, I get to go, I'm gonna hang out with all my other friends who get detention all the time." This is an echo of the school-to-prison pipeline.. "Here, we're gonna show you a little taste of what's to come." Aaron condemns this: "It is horrible". This is where SAYS provides a positive outlet for kids to have community and to have something positive to do, because it becomes a family. "I mean, that's why it is Mama P and Mama Laura, you know."

Aaron describes how it took a couple of years to build up the SAYS program. It started with two solid poet mentors who aided in building their reputation to market and bringing people in. Over time, more and more students attended the program: 20, 22, and 24 kids in the sixth period. It grew to the point that they started offering the class after school. While the idea was to support the students in the Passport program, in the after-school class, there was a self-motivated group of seven kids who regularly attended with a poet's soul, notebook in hand, spitting lyrics and truth. They were the inspiration to organize the first Mira Loma Poetry Slam.

The event was widely promoted on campus. Three teachers showed up and supported Mr. Brown to put on the slam. During the preliminary phase, an unassuming and very quiet kid appeared on the stage. At this moment, Mr. Brown's thoughts were: "Oh, no, this poor girl doesn't know what she got herself into. His thoughts were since she was not a student from the SAYS class, she heard about the poetry slam and decided to participate. As she walks up on stage for her first poem, a profound poem about high stakes testing and the pressure put on students to perform to arbitrary testing standards. Mr. Brown's jaw hit the floor, and the audience was blown away.

Alex[10] answered the call to participate in the Mira Loma Poetry Slam. She had this notebook and this desire to share her poetry. After the event, Alex bonded with all these kids, all these Passport kids, and all these non-program kids. It was at this moment where the silos were destroyed. Through SAYS, they became hey became a little family, a little crew.

Mr. Brown describes a culturally responsive educator as someone willing to listen, ready to learn, willing to do better, value diversity, and being kind that educators feel like it because they are the "experts they are the talkers, and everybody else is listening. But I think one of the things that I think maybe would be a strength for me is understanding that I don't know everything, and I don't know what it's like to be a grandkid of a Vietnamese family or you know, of an immigrant or somebody who came here to work in the fields, and you know, or I don't know, and I don't pretend to know those things. And so, I think that's why listening is so important because you learn by listening, you don't learn by talking."

> "I try to hear the kids because I consider myself a lifelong learner and I do have some expertise in some areas, but I know that there's a lot that I don't know."
> -Aaron "A-Slam" Brown

10 Alexandra Huynh is the 18-year-old 2020 United States Youth Poet Laureate from Sacramento, CA. She is one of Sacramento's 2020 Youth Poet Laureates and is the 2021 National Youth Poet Laureate of the United States.

ANALYSIS OF SAYS CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

A SPACE OF LOVE AND HOPE: FIELDNOTES FROM SAYS CLASSROOM SPACES

By Angelina Kier and Shaun de Vera

In this preliminary report, we considered it crucial to provide you with a compilation of classroom observations. We hope this field notes section will provide a preview of what is yet to come. Now that you have met the people, we invite you to go inside the classroom. In these observations, we aim to show the SAYS class in action to provide a window into what SJUSD will experience. These snapshots are a sneak peek into *Equity in Motion* at SJUSD.

Image 6: Word Cloud of Observation Data

What does a SAYS classroom look like?

When we enter a SAYS classroom, we see a pedagogy of love in action: students are valued; students' voices are encouraged; students' experiences and wealth are centered; and educators are warm demanders that showcase students' brilliance.

- **Students are valued:** one interaction I (Angelina) recall was when the group was asked, "What is your legacy?" And one student who identified as Mexican American said that their legacy was "to give back to my community." Ms. Coco then went back and forth with four prompting questions to dig deeper. And it was a moment where I felt-I experienced my skin, got goosebumps, and the student was finally able to-she felt safe enough to express what she wanted to express in such an eloquent way. "I want to become a lawyer and come back and protect the girls who walk in the hood, so they can walk and feel safe." And the reaction that I got was that I understood exactly what she meant. Because I experienced the harassment of walking down the streets as a daily, normalized thing that nobody talks about. And for her to feel the need to pursue higher education, to become a lawyer, so that harassment toward little girls stops, is so powerful and so inspiring. Who else thinks of that, besides someone who has experienced it?

- **Students' voices are encouraged:** in Shaun's observation, I saw students taking part in the debates. And she-Coco-specified that you don't have to let your emotions, even though she let them express how they felt about their position-agree or disagree-she specified that this was about facts, not emotions. And the pedagogy of love in that lesson-she was not disregarding what students felt about it, but instead teaching them the lesson. The debate was about facts and defending the position. And when you go out into the world, nobody is going to give a shit about your feelings. Without censoring them, without disregarding their feelings, there was learning in motion.

- **Students' experiences and wealth are centered:** There is a community that accepts them, and how they are, and what they bring. Their culture, their word choice, their language. There's no censorship. There's no linguistic correctness. There's a clear understanding of their value. I never heard in any of the observations that any of the teachers correct the students on "ain't" or any word choice. And that, I think, reflects their acceptance of what they feel. Radical acceptance: come as you are. Come as you are and be brave and bold and better. Instead of pointing out shortcomings, they're lifting them. I've been to so many classrooms where students are being shamed, corrected, and subjected to infamous power struggles. You don't see that here. It's notably absent. It's a strong community.

- **Educators are warm demanders who showcase students' brilliance.** The affirmations offered by educators would call them "queen", "king", or "say it again." The students replicate the encouragement that the educators initiate. They affirm that their point of view is worthwhile.

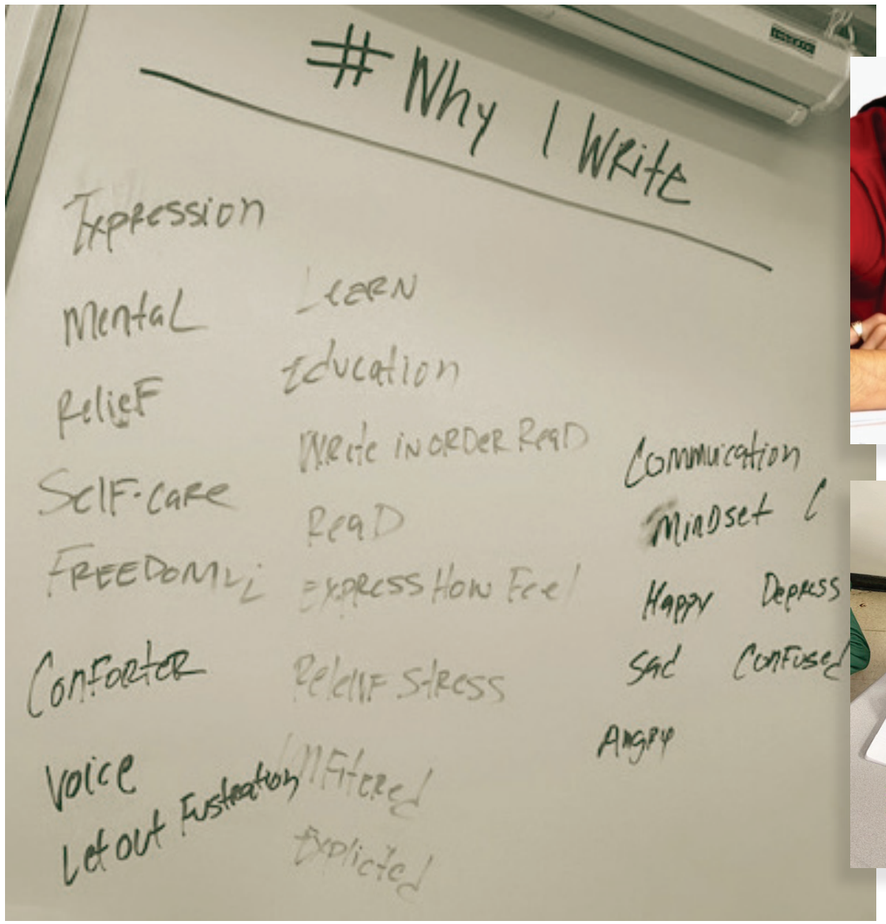
Metacognition

SAYS gives students empowerment, self-esteem, and courage to speak the truth, and to be themselves. They feel valued, so they start acting as valued individuals. For Shaun's observations, he was very analytical in the way that I saw vignette in his observations. He saw a vignette, and he processed it in his brain. Reading his thoughts-what is the work that happened that this interaction could take place? What was the frontloading for this interaction to happen? Was a debate, a writing activity, or being spoken word-what was behind this? This was the vignette I saw in his observations. In Shaun's observations, he described metacognition in the classroom. And that is golden. You do not always see metacognition when you do observations. As an observer, it's a privilege. Most of the time, you see a script of a class. But when you go to SAYS, you see authentic relationships and you see trust in the learning process. like an intention behind the curriculum.

Pedagogy of Love

I (Angelina) saw literacy pulled from pop culture, so when they use Hip Hop, when they quote Tupac, when they bring the experiences of students with real-life situations to build on literacy, that is an art form as an educator, that is the pedagogy of love. You need to know your subject. Without knowing your students, you cannot love them, students learn when they are loved, how can we teach our kids if we don't understand who they really are? Love is acceptance. You must accept the complexity of the individual for you to know them as a whole. Not just part of...

In the SAYS classroom, there's no censorship of the students. There are guided conversations for them to express themselves better. Or, to build better relationships. Like when they were not sitting or talking, the teacher just had this really heart-felt conversation with them. Both Coco and Fernanda had these conversations with them. And I think that is the difference. Because when you go to a classroom, what would happen if a student talked a certain way or said something? First the censorship, then the punitive. So, I see relationship building instead of discipline.



"

Everyday I go to school with the **WORLD** on my **SHOULDERS**

Thinking of what ***complications*** these ***teachers*** have in order

you do your work on a daily
that still isn't **ENOUGH**

I think these teachers be
PLAYINGME
purposely making it **ROUGH!**

the BLACK SKIN on my body **and the strong** POWER in my HEART

I honestly think thats where all the ***complications*** start

They see me TRYING as HARD as I *can*

But yet all the ***white kids*** got all the ***A's*** in hand

All my BROTHERS & SISTAS
going through the same things

Don't give up
They needs to USE US on them TV SCREENS

~ SAYS Student

"

PART III: FUTURES FORWARD

CLOSING AND NEXT STEPS

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

By Ijeoma Ononuju, Vajra Watson, and Shaun de Vera

This report looked at Phase I of the SAYS Project HEAL program and partnership with SJUSD from 2021-2022. The first two sections of the report—Setting the Stage and Current Findings and Insights—aimed to provide the thick description necessary to contextualize *how* the SAYS-SJUSD partnership is promoting equity. In this section, we will look forward to Phase II of the partnership, specifically next steps and the necessary data for further analysis.

What impact do community-based partnerships have on a school district striving to be more equitable? In order to answer this macro-level question, we will rely on both qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitatively speaking, the next phase will include student and family interviews, conversations with school site administration and teachers, school board members, other CBOs working in the district, as well as other stakeholders relevant to the SAYS-SJUSD partnership. Pre- and post-surveys will also be utilized to measure social-emotional growth, academic perseverance, and academic engagement in all treatment classes.

Quantitative analysis will utilize secondary data, provided by the school district, based on attendance, grades, disciplinary information, and college interest/acceptance. The data will be used to provide a descriptive and correlational analysis, the latter of which seeks to understand the relationship between facts and variables. Additionally, we hope to co-create an equity scorecard, which will look at various domains and indicators of equity, to indicate the quality of implementation around the 8 equity principles in SJUSD and at SAYS Project HEAL sites, with the goal of moving toward systemic change and sustainability.

These mixed methods approaches to Phase II will provide an opportunity for deeper analysis. As detailed throughout this report, San Juan Unified is a district in growth. As such, a nuanced examination towards evaluation is best suited, in order to capture the complete story and nuances around its pledge and movement towards educational inclusivity, diversity, and equity.

And here, appropriately and aptly, is a poem to close us out:

Closing Poem

ADIYAH MA'AT OBOLU (2022, SAYS YOUTH POET)

We are marvelized in the simplicity of the tree
Because it proved to thee that everything was designed with purpose and perfection.
To find justice we just needed to re-root recollection
And somehow, bear a new fruit worth living for.

With Gratitude, We Embark Together Toward Equity

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SAYS THEORETICAL CONTEXT

EMBODIED JUSTICE: WE ARE THE DIVINE TEXT

By: Vajra Watson [11]

Introduction

Throughout history, poets have served a sacred role as storyteller, teacher, and communicator. In many societies, these lyrical artists are heralded as cultural keepers and soul shakers. Consider for a moment the legacy of literary arts in West African Griot traditions, the clout of poetry in Somalia, the innovative, South Bronx street-based literacies that grew into hip-hop, and the contemporary youth spoken word performance poetry movement thriving from Sacramento to Soweto.

Unfortunately, within this ancient legacy of transformative praxis, there have been interruptions and injuries. Inside modern colonial classrooms, the literary arts were placed inside a literature canon where they were suffocated from the pulse of recitation and innovation. It is no surprise that far too often, the word poetry conjures up images of dead white men. This erasure colonizes poetry and moves it away from its original nature and nexus of power.

In response to the larger oppression on learning, Maxine Greene (2009) explained that "of course we want to empower the young for meaningful work ... but the world we inhabit is palpably deficient: there are unwarranted inequities, shattered communities, unfulfilled lives." So, she asks, "How are we to move the young to break with the given, the taken-for-granted—to move towards what might be, what is not yet?" (p. 84). To answer Greene's question, poetry provides a unique platform to play with words and picture alternative futures.

Between what is and what could be, there is poetry.

To explore this sacred connection between pedagogy and possibility, this chapter explores the teaching of spoken word performance poetry through the lens of divine reading. This investigation is guided by an overarching question:

How do we educate the whole person in ways that nurture personal transformation and collective belonging?

To answer this questions, the research context will be provided followed by three core concepts in the literature that frame the analysis: research on spoken word performance poetry, the connections between art and activism, and the spiritual practice of slowing down to become more fully present. How these ideas are enacted and embodied will then be demonstrated inside disparate spaces—from continuation schools to juvenile hall facilities, from urban high schools to university lecture halls, from junior high school kids to professional development trainings for adults. Irrespective of the environment, these findings suggest that as we deeply and divinely read each other's words, we enact what I call *rituals of awakening*.

11 Adapted from a previously published chapter in *The Whole Person: Lectio Divina as Transformative Practice in Teaching and Learning* (2019). Editors: Jane Dalton and Maureen Hall. Rowman & Littlefield.

Research Context

Sacramento Area Youth Speaks (SAYS) was founded in 2008 as an innovative critical literacy and teacher professional development organization designed to engage under-performing youth of color and educators in Sacramento, CA. With hip-hop and spoken word performance poetry at its core, SAYS community-based poet-mentor educators work inside middle and high schools to provide culturally relevant instruction to predominately Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian students via workshops, courses, mentoring, the citywide SAYS Poetry Slam competition, and a large youth conference that takes place at the University of California, Davis.

Over the last decade, SAYS has developed an award-winning youth empowerment model that moves so-called "high-risk" youth to/through higher education. SAYS has also created employment pathways for former SAYS students to become poet-mentor educators and formal teaching artists. In this capacity, they complete a rigorous training that focuses on critical pedagogy, social justice instructional strategies, and the literary arts. Subsequently, they work in schools and community spaces to reach and teach the next generation of artists, activists, and academics (Watson, 2013, 2016).[12]

Inside various SAYS spaces—whether in the community, university, or schoolhouse—participants engage in intensive writing workshops and subsequently share their work during community circles. The sharing circles are highly personal and many times the participants have to hold space for one another to heal (Watson, 2017). Marcelle Haddix (2013) describes this act of critical engagement as "listening face-to-face" and "eye-to-eye." The SAYS vision of embodied learning is for each person in the room to be fully seen and deeply heard as an active member of the whole—a concept that will be contextualized through the literature and elucidated in the findings.

Poetry for the People

Writing can embody its own birthing process. As a practice of insight, what is believed starts to get conceived. As poets, this happens upon the page. And then through the sharing process—literary performance—artists publicly give birth to their words; now their ideas live outside of the self in/of community with the wider world. This communal process of sharing one's story has pedagogical implications.

Paulo Freire asserts that "human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" (2000, p. 28). In poetic writing workshops, the prompts are personal (e.g., *When I look in the mirror I see; I am not who you think I am*) that guide participants to expose themselves to themselves. Often, during the "free-write" response time, everyone sits in a circle and writes side-by-side; each person is encouraged to let go of the rational thought and forego the technicality, skill, and product and intuitively dance with their own voice, play with words, and experience limitless creative expression.

For Audre Lorde (1985), the practice of poetic creation is rooted in Black feminist theory. In Sister Outsider, she explains that within each person there is a dark, ancient, deep reserve of emotional power. She urges us to "respect those hidden sources of our power" and to "train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared." She then urges us to use words to only contemplate reality but to reimagine it. She continues, "And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives." This kind of *poetry for the people* is distinct and disruptive: "I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without

12 For more information on SAYS, visit says.ucdavis.edu.

insight" (pp. 36-7). In teaching poetry, it's important to acknowledge its orientation towards resistance and understand its roots.

Building on Black poetic traditions, spoken word performance poetry and hip-hop pedagogies have expanded into a worldwide phenomenon—especially within youth culture. The literature base has also been growing rapidly. In the last two decades, empirical studies on spoken word and hip-hop have blossomed fruitfully (e.g., Akom, 2009; Emdin, 2016; Fisher, 2007; Jocson, 2008; Hill, 2010; Love; 2012; Watson, 2016; Weinstein, 2018; Weiss & Herndon, 2001). A number of these studies focus on how adults and youth work together to create physical, intellectual, cultural and emotional spaces where each participant may "insist upon [their] right to exist and declare [their] divinity" (Moon, 2014, n.p.).

Spoken word poetry is written for community; the intended publication is on stage in front of a live audience. This contrasts with the *literary* or *academic* or *page* poem, which is written primarily to be read on the page in isolation. Defining different kinds of poetry purely by their mode of operandi can be problematic, however; for some, spoken words' poetic difference is located in its ideological orientation, described as a democratic approach to aesthetics and public pedagogy (Hill, 2010; Stanton & Tinguely, 2001). In this approach, artistic excellence is decentered in favor of participation in an experience that encourages radical vulnerability, truth-telling, and courageous encounters.

A growing number of scholars are examining the ways multimodal literacies are holistic and embodied (e.g., Enriquez, 2016; Jones, 2013; Schmidt & Beucher, 2018). This is especially true in a poetry slam competition. Here is a basic example of this unique literary extravaganza.

Generations of people from various backgrounds gather together at the local Opera House for the Youth Poetry Slam Finals. The event is sold-out. Participants watch, snap, stomp, and applaud as middle and high school youth share stories, give testimony, and recite their lives on the mic. Each poet has only 3 minutes and 20 seconds to proclaim their piece to the world. Often, the short time span belies the depth of expression. These students have learned various writing and performance techniques (using minimal words to have a maximum impact); they have completed intense editing to reach this moment—when the poem is ready to share publicly. Their artistic mastery is often mesmerizing.

Prior to this penultimate moment on stage, there are important pedagogical implications of this literary arts movement that deserve exploration. At SAYS, we encourage students to become the authors of their own lives and agents of change. Our stories are not just for ourselves, but can serve a wider purpose. There is strength in struggle, power inside pain, and even our existence embodies a form of resistance. The poem is teacher and student, art and activist.

Artivism

Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre (2008) define artivism as a "hybrid neologism that signified work created by individuals who see the organic relationship between art and activism" (p. 82). They posit that for Chicanx youth, artivism is often deployed as a means to transform themselves and their communities. Dalton echoes this sentiment: "Art is change agent" (p. 16).

Historically, marginalized populations have leveraged poetry as a genre and method to articulate their politics, and often to dissent in/on their own cultural terms. Sandra Faulkner (2009) argues that poetry often pays attention to the "particulars" of embodied knowledge, providing insight into ideologies of new realities. Furthermore, women and youth have utilized poetry within social movements where they have been silenced. Cheryl Clark (2005) and Jeanelle Hope (2018) posit that Black and Asian American women and youth in the 1960s were major poets of the period as they often used poetry as a form of activism.

The SAYS Poet-Mentor Educator, Denisha 'Coco Blossom' Bland, has a similar outlook on artivism and defines it as "using your art to do better for your community… I actually learned it over the years, but just political art." She explains:

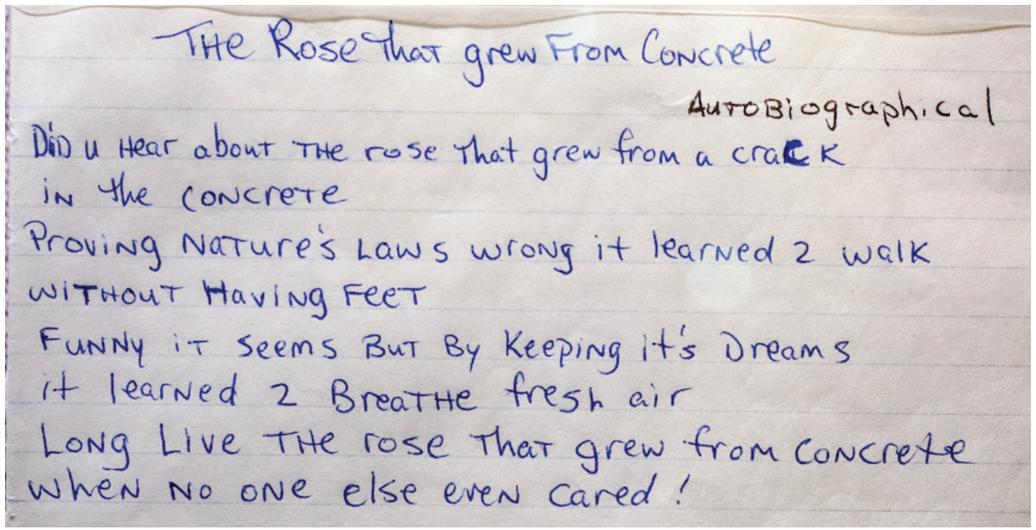
> "I always have that on my mind every time I sit down to write a poem that's like one of the first things I think about: Is this poem for me first? Is it something I just need to write and put in my book? Or is this a poem finna be something that I need to give to the people … SAYS actually helped me learn that."

Speaking truth to power is at the core of the art of spoken word poetry and performance. Armed with nothing more than a microphone, spoken word artists have been disrupting the status quo, confronting injustice, and advancing critical engagement within communities, campuses, and the world. My own research follows the disruptive oral genealogies developed and imaginatively explored by poets and performers of color such as Amiri Baraka, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Kendrick Lamar, Mahogany Brown, Sunni Patterson, Tupac Shakur, and Nikki Giovanni, to name just a few.

It is important to acknowledge that the next generation of artivists are in our classrooms *now*. They desperately need platforms that illuminate and celebrate who they are becoming.

The German poet and playwright Bertoldt Brecht once said, "You can't write poems about the trees when the woods are full of policemen." Although Brecht was from a different place and time, his account is an accurate reflection of a "reality pedagogy" that strives to meet students where they are (Emdin, 2016). Poetry is not always pretty and that is because it is meant to be truthful.

Consider for a moment the below handwritten poem by a young teenager, the now iconic Tupac Amaru Shakur (June 16, 1971-September 13, 1996):



The above quote is from the posthumous book released in 2006. In his writing, he further explains: "You see you wouldn't ask why the rose that grew from the concrete had damaged petals. On the contrary, we would all celebrate its tenacity. We would all love its will to reach the sun. Well, we are the roses. This is the concrete. And these are my damaged petals" (p. 3).

As life becomes primary text, the poem serves as an extension of the person. Liberating literacies is quintessentially about the poem. Not poem as rarefied object, but poem as revealer and healer; poem as movement maker.

This form of artivism demands action. Yet in the realm of community organizing and the urgency to fight injustices, the work itself can become heavy. Slowing down might even feel selfish amidst the immediacy of inequities, police brutalities, and constant emergencies. So we run and run and often barely catch our breath. Yet justice—literally and figuratively—demands balance. Thus a transformative praxis does not just live in our heads, but also in our hearts—and most definitely in our hands and feet. In other words, it is not merely what is conceived that is revolutionary, but what is achieved, daily, in how we are *living justice*. Thus liberation becomes the poetry of our lives.

P…A…U…S…E

There is a popular slogan in community organizing work: "Pause for the cause." This is an important pedagogical concept. In 1968, Thomas Merton discussed the "innate violence" of being too busy with the "rush and pressure of modern life" (p. 81). Dalton extends this idea when she writes, "Ignoring my body and my heart, I force personal will to complete my 'to do' tasks, despite signs of fatigue or stress. I become oriented toward goals and making things happen, pushing against the very loud messages I receive to pause" (p. 21). Professional busyness can serve as a distraction from areas of our life and parts of our self that need attention, perhaps even healing.

Moving from the personal to the political, slowing down connects to decolonial practices—consciously reorienting oneself in relation to space and time (Patel, 2016). Pausing can serve as a productive interruption to competitive ways of being, doing, and knowing.

So then, where is the pedagogy that embraces the pause? One possible answer is divine reading. Dalton (2018) writes, "The process of reading slowly, savoring and allowing words to be 'felt' or embodied, is counter to the pace of academia where the emphasis often requires grasping new ideas and concepts, oftentimes superficially skimming literature" (p.18). As demonstrated in traditions worldwide, *rituals of awakening* reorients time and space, and more importantly, shapeshifts the space between us. As we draw closer towards one another—in this case, through poetry—classrooms become fertile ground for the creation of beloved communities.

We are The Divine Text

There is a fast-paced nature to life, and this often spills into SAYS spaces. Participants enter into the classroom quickly and loudly, distracted by their phones and competing activities. Crucially, this is not merely about young people; adults can be just as difficult to engage in a process of slowing down.

To counteract this pace, today, all the chairs are in a circle. Two-dozen tenth grade students from Grant Union High School in Del Paso Heights (D.P.H.) shuffle into class and grab their journal from the box labeled 5th Period. On the white board, the following statement is written:

> Come In
>
> Place Your Notebook
>
> And Pen/cil
>
> Under Your Chair
>
> Sit Still
>
> And talk to the person sitting closest to you.
>
> Ask them…
>
> Who are you grateful for and why?
>
> (Take turns answering this question. You have 3 minutes each.)

Following this conversational warm-up, students transition to focus on the learning or literacy activity. Through call-and-response, we first review our intentions:

As we grow as learners, we will read ourselves, one another, and this world anew. Throughout this process:

- We commit to practicing freedom.
- We strive towards radical vulnerability.
- We represent personal and collective accountability.
- We recognize that our full presence inspires our full humanity.
- We will hold each other's words, hear each other completely, and will heal holistically.

Today we are going to read an *I am from …* poem that one of our classmates submitted the other day. She gave me permission to share it with all of you.[13] We only have one copy of her poem for the entire class to share. Let's begin our reading ritual.

We go around in a circle, passing the paper, each student reading one line at a time.

> *We enter into a moment of silence.* [14]

13 Denise is a student in this class; she is sitting amongst her peers within the circle

14 I simply set my phone alarm for 30-seconds and then the sound of chimes brings our focus back together.

We go around the circle again, but this time when each student reads a line, we all repeat the line. This form of call-and-response fills the classroom with the voices of the students who are repeating each stanza in unison.

> *We enter into a moment of silence.*

I ask the class which line speaks to them and/or their lived experience. Students explain what aspect of the poem moves them and why.

> *We enter into a moment of silence.*

One student is selected to read the entire poem to the group. If the author of the poem happens to be in the class, they will be the one to read it out loud to everyone else.

> *We take a final moment of silence.*

To close the ritual, we go around in a circle with each student reading one line at a time (similar to what we did in the opening).

D.P.H.

I am from a large crowd that is not all the same.
I am from the thud of a body drop after a bullet hits throw [through]
a little black boy's brain.
I am from whips, chains and physical strains that my
ancestors had to go throw [through]
so that my people to remian.
I am from D.P.H.
The deepest part of hell
and the name reminds me of the clossing doors of a cell.
I am from the thug life looking for a saivor.
The demons on my block because the devil is my neighbor.
I am from the quarter that drops into a hobo's cup
or the greedy eyes that look at them like their shit is out of luck.
I am from the long long lines of soup kitchen
where people fights just to eat.
I am from scattered tears on abused child feet.
I am from a song by R. Kelly called I wish I wish I wish and
I hope the lyrics come true as I wish my way out of this pit.
I am from a place where fear and hate concurs [conquers] our dreams.
There you will find what poverty truly means.
I am from a place with lost love where everybody seems to lose faith
in you even the God above.
I am from a place where the words hope and pray
are only used when you have to go to court trial the next day.
I wish that I could have made this poem
a little sweeter before I begun.
But sadly it's just not sugar coated where Im from.

Below is the poem we are reading through the pausing and reflecting process of deep reading.

Through our reflection exercise, Denise shares with us that she needed an outlet for her anger; instead of having to fight, she learned how to write. Building on this sentiment, I direct the class to take out their notebooks and write a letter to poverty.

> *Dear poverty…*

After four minutes, the students are told to put their pen/cils[15] down and take a deep breath. Stretch a bit. Tell a person near them, "Thank you for coming to class today. We needed you here."

And we begin again. I offer them the next prompt.

> *What is your response to this quote by Bryan Stevenson (2014) in Just Mercy:"The opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice."*

Students sit writing with music lightly playing in the background. Five minutes before the bell rings, we specifically thank Denise for sharing and inspiring us. We collectively acknowledge her radical vulnerability that opened us for deeper reading and more radical writing. Notebooks are placed back into the bin and students leave class.

Now, from a pedagogical standpoint, what just happened during this 5th period English class at a large urban high school? A divine reading process was used as an embodied and liberatory practice. Through the SAYS pedagogy, literacy turns communal. The reader repeats words and practices forms of meditation with the text such that one is able to listen through the ear of the heart. As a way to enact mindful literacy, slowing down "can inspire in us a reverence for word and thing and for one another" (Hall et al., 2015, p. 55).

Building on this literary legacy, inside SAYS spaces, student's writing is as precious as any other piece of art. Because it is an authentic piece of who they are and what they created; a piece of what puts us all back together—in peace. As demonstrated above—we slow down to contemplate the poem—and in the process, the person who wrote it experiences the transcendent reciprocity of seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard.

Conclusion

SAYS strives to create spaces wherein student's lives are the primary text (Watson, 2017). To fully appreciate this idea, Jeanette Winterson (2011) teaches, "A tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is. That is what literature offers—a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place." Similarly, in the best-selling memoir, *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon (2018) provides an astonishing account of his childhood, coming of age in Mississippi, and his relationship with words, white folks, and the generations of Black women that raised him. He shares, "I realized telling the truth was way different from finding the truth, and finding the truth had everything to do with revisiting and rearranging words. Revisiting and rearranging words didn't only require vocabulary; it required will, and maybe courage" (p. 86).

Many of us, like Winterson and Laymon, have survival stories. Experiences and intergenerational traumas that eat us alive and torment us into a form of nihilism and numbness. This is not all of who we are, but pain can be paralyzing. Often it is that which we bury that weighs us down. In a quest to be free from our own suffering, poetry can become a cathartic emancipatory exercise. The poet Khalil Gibran echoed something similar in his own poetry: "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars."

SAYS wants participants to experience that they are already whole and holy—we are all just trying to put the pieces back together. Spiritually grounded practices (e.g., Palmer, 1993) such as this move us from piecemeal to peace, from disconnection to connection. Offering a fresh way of doing poetry in schools today, SAYS embodies of form of educational resistance to a system wrought with inequities and dehumanizing pedagogies.

15 Shorthand for pens and pencils.

We are the *divine text*, or as June Jordan recites, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."[16] The divine text is *us*. Through systematic and solution-oriented *rituals of awakening*, learning becomes the soul of social change. We use words to generate new worlds.

Looking forward, SAYS classrooms are sites for opening up in community, growing, and healing. Unfortunately, far too often, we expect students to compartmentalize tasks and engage with curriculum that is irrelevant to their lives. Holistic strategies, on the other hand, activate and actualize a sense of full belonging. We have to get our hands, heads, and hearts together. A deep reading paired together with spoken word poetry, provides a platform for personal and interpersonal discovery, artistic creativity, and emerging imaginations. This form of transformative pedagogy aligns art, science, and soul—helping develop the world we want—and not just the one we inherited.

Essential Ideas to Consider

- We are the authors of our own lives and agents of change.
- Poets have served a sacred role as storyteller, teacher, and communicator. In many societies, these lyrical artists are heralded as cultural keepers and movement makers.
- Spoken word performance poetry, in particular, is deeply emotional, provocative, and public. It embraces full-bodied knowing.
- Speaking truth to power is at the core of the art of spoken word poetry and performance. Poetry isn't always pretty, but it seeks truth as a matter of justice.
- Between what is and what could be, there is poetry.

16 http://www.junejordan.net/poem-for-south-african-women.html

APPENDIX B: SAYS GUIDELINES

1 Mic:
Nas popularized this sentiment, but we use it every time up in here. If one person is speaking, we listen. It's that simple.

Loud-N-Proud:
When you do speak, own your words and speak so that we can really hear you. Raise the roof with the power of your voice.

Step Up … Step Back:
If you like to run your mouth like I do, make space for someone else to speak by keeping your mouth shut once in awhile. But if you are shy, we genuinely want to create a space for your voice to be heard. So take a risk and share what you're thinking. Sharing is caring and a closed mouth can't get fed.

Freedom of Speech … With Propriety:
Speak your truth, but remember someone is always listening. Be conscious of what you say and how you say it. Even the grimiest rappers have radio versions these days so recognize that there is a time and a place for everythang.

Create Community … No Snitchin:
Whatever is said in this room, stays in this room… No playin.

Standard is Yourself:
Be You and Do You: Raise the bar for yourself and challenge yourself to do more and be more. And if that fails, let your haters be your motivators.

Respect ... Self, Others, and the Space:
Aretha like to sing it, and we are going to try and live it: R-E-S-P-E-C-T/Find out what it means to me/R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Patience, Perseverance, Presence, Participation, and Above All: *Love*:
Changing the way we teach and learn is hard work and we need to have patience for one another and for this process. But no matter the hurdles, our perseverance and our participation is our collective power. We will make this road by walking, but please remember that this journey is fortified with love, hope, and a commitment to see you grow. I love you. You might not know it now, but you can see it in my eyes. Real talk: I love you!

APPENDIX C:
SAYS SAMPLE LESSON

ACCEPTANCE WORKSHOP SUMMARY

(12 steps to getting to know a deeper part of our selves and each other)

Step 1: First put "Acceptance" on the board and ask the students: What comes to mind when you think about *Acceptance?* [Probes: What does it take to be accepted? What does it take for you accept someone? What does it take to be accepted at school? In your family? Your neighborhood?] Write all responses on the board. *After the board is full, explain that the students created a collective definition of acceptance and a word pallet. Read out loud all of their responses that are on the board.*

Step 2: Tell students to pick 6 responses from the board that resonate with them and write them down on their pieces of paper.

Step 3: Ask them to circle 3 that appeal to them the most

Step 4: Ask them to cross those 3 out

Step 5: Tell the students the challenge it to use the 3 remaining words/lines in the upcoming free-write exercise.

Step 6: Explain the rules of the free-write (A hand in motion stays in motion—keep writing! Don't think too hard, if your mind wanders, it's okay, but write down your thoughts in real time. Ex: if your leg starts to itch, don't itch your leg, write about your leg itching. Ask them if they are ready to begin.)

Step 7: Finish the following sentence and keep writing using the 3 words/phrases:

> I AM NOT WHO YOU THINK I AM … (have students write continuously for 3-5 minutes. Pencils down.)

Step 8: Have students draw a line on their paper to prepare for the next prompt. Pencils in the air.

Step 9: Write down 3 specific moments that have made you into the person you are today. What was the year, the season, that made this experience so significant? Take us there. Write.

Step 10: Have students draw a line on their paper to prepare for the next prompt. Pencils in the air.

Step 11: Write down 3 questions in which the answer is you. Be sure to write the question and your full name for each. (Ex: Whose mom would sing angels into room when she put her baby girl to sleep each night? Vajra Mujiba Watson)

Step 12: Go over the SAYS Guidelines and ask participants to share what they wrote. Anyone sharing must read what they wrote verbatim (no paraphrasing) and they must read all three sections all the way through.

APPENDIX D:
SAYS WEEKLY SCHEDULE MAY 2022

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
	Thomas Edison Langauge Institute 9:15–9:55 a.m. 1st class—8th grade **PME: Fernanda**	**Encina High School** 12:22–12:52 p.m. Lunch **PME: Coco**		**Encina High School** 12:22–12:52 p.m. Lunch **PME: Coco**
	Thomas Edison Langauge Institute 10:05–10:45 a.m. 2nd class—7th grade **PME: Fernanda**			
				Encina High School 2:00–3:00 p.m. **PME: Theo/Fernanda**

Note: For the 2021-22 school year, one-time assemblies were also held at the following schools (and are not reflected on the weekly schedule above):

- Mira Loma High School
- San Juan High School

APPENDIX E:
STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS SAMPLE

SAYS Project HEAL Student Survey

SJUSD Spring Semester 2022 (Post-Survey): Thank you for taking your time to give us honest feedback. Please set aside 15 minutes to do this survey. When answering these questions, think about your general experiences with your school during this school year.

Please fill in one bubble for each line/question below. Your responses are anonymous and will be kept in a confidential file.

Section I

Think about your school experiences in general (what you are learning? how you are learning it?) when answering the following questions.

The curriculum (class lessons and assignments) at school...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Includes examples of my racial, ethnic, and cultural background in the lessons/activities.	○	○	○	○
Makes me want to come to class.	○	○	○	○
Helps me connect with other students.	○	○	○	○
Helps me feel meaningfully connected with an adult I can learn from.	○	○	○	○
Acknowledges and discusses diversity.	○	○	○	○
Celebrates diversity and contributions of people from BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities.	○	○	○	○
Tries to make everyone feel like they belong here.	○	○	○	○

Section II

Now, what do you see, notice, and feel in your classrooms?

I have a classroom at school that...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Helps me really express myself when I talk.	○	○	○	○
Encourages me to write about my own experiences.	○	○	○	○
Encourages me to write and speak about my own opinions.	○	○	○	○
Encourages students to express opinions in class discussions.	○	○	○	○
Empowers me to interrupt racial inequities I see in my world.	○	○	○	○
Empowers me to have courageous conversations in my life.	○	○	○	○
Helps me with the tools to work out my problems.	○	○	○	○

To respond ☒ *or* ● papersurvey.io

I have a classroom at school that...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Helps me enjoy writing.	○	○	○	○
Encourages me to use my voice.	○	○	○	○
Empowers me to advocate for myself or those I care about.	○	○	○	○
Invites input and participation from my family members.	○	○	○	○
Helps me enjoy sharing my writing or other work I produce.	○	○	○	○
Empowers me to advocate for issues that are important to me.	○	○	○	○

I have a classroom at school that...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Builds my ability to identify racism and bias in the world around me.	○	○	○	○
Builds my capacity to fight racism and bias.	○	○	○	○

Section III

Think about the adults (teachers, educators) you interact with in these classroom spaces. What are they like?

I know an educator/teacher at school who...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Understands what my life is like.	○	○	○	○
Notices when I'm not here	○	○	○	○
Cares about me.	○	○	○	○
Believes I will be a success.	○	○	○	○
Encourages me to write and speak about my own opinions.	○	○	○	○
Encourages me to get good grades in school.	○	○	○	○
Believes in me.	○	○	○	○

Section IV

In these next questions, please describe qualities that are true about you and your experiences.

I...	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Have witnessed/experienced racism or racial discrimination at school.	○	○	○	○
Get kicked out of class often.	○	○	○	○
Get into fights often.	○	○	○	○

To respond ☒ *or* ● papersurvey.io

I...

	Not at all	Not really	Kind of	Definitely
Enjoy poetry and spoken word.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Am interested in school.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Look forward to coming to this class.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Want to attend college.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Want to do better in school.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Have goals and plans for the future.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Can work with someone who has different opinions than mine.	◯	◯	◯	◯
Feel proud about my racial/ethnic identity.	◯	◯	◯	◯

I would describe my current grades as... *Choose ONE response*

◯ As ◯ As and Bs ◯ Bs ◯ Bs and Cs
◯ Cs ◯ Cs and Ds ◯ Ds ◯ Ds and Fs

Which of the following best describes you? *Choose ONE response*

◯ Asian or Pacific Islander ◯ Black or African American ◯ Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx
◯ Native American ◯ White or Caucasian ◯ I prefer not to answer

If Biracial or Multiracial, please write here: ____

Which of the following best describes you? *Choose ONE response*

◯ Male ◯ Female ◯ Other/Non-binary ◯ Prefer no answer

What school do you attend? *Choose ONE response*

◯ Encina HS ◯ Rio Americano HS ◯ San Juan HS ◯ Mira Loma HS

Zip code where you live: ☐☐☐☐☐

How many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) teachers have you had since Kindergarten?

0 ◯ 1 ◯ 2 ◯ 3 ◯ 4 ◯ 5 ◯ 6 ◯ 7 ◯ 8 ◯ 9 ◯ 10 ◯ 10 or more

If you don't remember exactly, select the best estimate! Choose ONE response

Section V

Almost done! Please do your best to answer the written questions below with thoughtful responses.

A. Are you involved with any other clubs, sports, or leadership groups (in or out of school)? If yes, please list up to 3 below. A1 ____ A2 ____ **A3** ____

B. What 3 words would you use to describe the SAYS program? If you don't know anything about the SAYS program, leave this blank. B1 ____ B2 ____ **B3** ____

C. What are 3 words you would use to describe your school? C1 ____ C2 ____ **C3** ____

D. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Provide 3 words that really describe yourself. D1 ____ D2 ____ **D3** ____

Anything else you want to share with us? Feel free to write or draw.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. We appreciate you!

To respond ☒ or ● papersurvey.io

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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"Between what is and what could be, there is poetry."

—Dr. Vajra Watson

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