Thinking Beyond Traditional Schooling: A Historical Case Study of Alternative Sites of Education

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Abstract:

Inspired by the rich history of Black education, my project explores four different sites of Black radical leftist educational programs to ultimately theorize what separates these sites of liberatory education from traditional schooling methods. Through the thorough examples of the Highlander School, Citizenship Schools in South Carolina, the Mississippi Freedom Schools, and the Black Panther Oakland Community School, this project aims to outline the characteristics and methods that make them both a space of radical learning and reckoning for their students. By choosing to use examples that follows a timeline of Black liberation and freedom struggle in the 20th Century, I hope to paint a narrative of how Black organizers, mobilizers, leaders, and educators built educational spaces outside of the public school system that did not serve their Black students. Finally, I will conclude with the lessons, methods, and theories that contemporary leftist groups have been reconciling with and being inspired from this history. My capstone aims to teach about the valuable lessons from the history of radical Black education so they can appropriately reconcile with how students are learning today.


This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.
Introduction:

**Mis-Education in Public Schools**

When Carter G. Woodson wrote the Mis-Education of the Negro in 1933, it was illegal for Black students to learn from textbooks with the Constitution nor the Declaration of Independence printed in them. Yet, Black students were not barred from the entirety of American political history; they were forced to learn about the valiant deeds of white slaveowner figures such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. However, without the information to reconcile the political beliefs that both Jefferson and Madison held, Black students were starved from understanding the political theory and power that these figures wielded. Instead of being able to reconcile with Jeffersnonian ideals of democracy wherein the government derives power from the consent of the governed, they were to revel empty icons of white supremacy. This is the “mis-education” Woodson theorized. Through the public education system, Black students are forced to assimilate into the understanding of white history by revering white leaders but having none of the historical context. Instead, young Black students hear stories of the Founding Fathers but only hear about themselves and their ancestors as descendants of slaves, not detrimental to the history of America. How can marginalized students reconcile with their citizenship status as non-white people if they are taught as afterthoughts?

As an adequate education empowers students that their participation and existence is key to the betterment of their community, the students that do not receive this education cannot fully reconcile the political space in which they occupy in society. To quell the criticism of the lack of a political education, the state, under the guise as of educated “pseudo-historians,” find ways to

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1 Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. 40
weaponize the public education system\textsuperscript{2}. Through a disfigured version of history, conquerors, colonizers, and other nationalist groups were able to indoctrinate marginalized groups into believing that their race was a mark of a failure and that to become a citizen, they were to assimilate to the best of their abilities into white culture. This curriculum validated by ‘educated’ white supremacists, rewrote local and national history of state making in the perspective of the dominant white narrative. In this rewritten history, slavery was benevolent and logical, masters were humane, and abolitionists were meddlesome and unnecessary “fanatics\textsuperscript{3}”. This distorted and damaged education is extremely harmful to Black students. To be free of these implicit biases taught by oppressors, often against oneself, it is vital to unlearn them to be liberated from these structures of violence. However, as Carter G. Woodson theorizes in his book, this lack of political education is not accidental. History has shown how oppressors both distort the education of the oppressed and actively bar marginalized people from political knowledge to stay in power.

Schools are a tool that the state use as a “socializing mechanism that help maintain existing hierarchical relationships of power and privilege\textsuperscript{4}.” Therefore, a corrupt education system acts as a tool to oppress marginalized students and inculcate in them a history of racial hierarchy. This is best theorized in Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil’s definition of oppression as both a state and a process\textsuperscript{5}. The state of oppression in schooling manifests in physical inequalities: Black students are more likely to be in dilapidated school buildings, and other material inequalities in their schooling experience\textsuperscript{6}. Likewise, the process of oppression manifests in its “institutional and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{2} Woodson. 41
\bibitem{3} Woodson. 41
\bibitem{4} Potts, “Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities.” 174
\bibitem{5} Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil, “Sociopolitical Development as an Antidote for Oppression-Theory and Action.”
\bibitem{6} Gamoran, “American Schooling and Educational Inequality.”
\end{thebibliography}
cultural systems of domination that marginalize, demonize, and rob the target group of dignity."

Essentially, a distorted education is violence. Omitted knowledge is the deception of masses of young people and Black people have suffered from our current public education system. Therefore, the importance of these educators in these spaces who recognized that “they were working with people who were accustomed to being the underclass, and what they tried to offer [them] was information that would allow [them] to appreciate a country that, despite local environment, embraced the idea of freedom liberty and equality.” In this capstone, I utilize ways in which schools use social reproduction to explain how traditional schools have been used as a tool to reproduce innate hierarchical structures in the manner it reproduces both racial and capitalist structures.

Oppressors are aware of the power that a liberating education gives marginalized people the power to counter their incorrect schooling experiences. Therefore, there is continued pressure to block a liberating education. In fact, most tellingly, because they taught liberatory content Black people, many of the educators I refer to in the subsequent case study such as Septima Clark and Esau Jenkin’s daughters, are consequently barred from teaching in public schools.

If marginalized people became radicalized with political and civic knowledge, it would surely disrupt the “peaceful relations,” that white people, or the dominant oppressive group aim so hard to maintain. Frederick Douglass spoke of his own education:

To use his own words, further, he said, “If you give a n****r an inch, he will take an ell. A n****r should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now,” said he, “if you teach that n****r (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit

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7 Potts, “Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities.” 174
8 Hale, The Freedom Schools. 118
9 Potts, “Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities.” 174
10 Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.” 404
11 Woodson, The Mis-Education of the Negro. 42
him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.\(^{12}\)

Education is vital to reaching Black liberation. If all citizens were meant to have equal rights, a comprehensive education would not only inform students but reconcile with the vile history and mechanisms that sustains capitalism, racism, fascism, and any other agent of inequality. However, as it is not the case, the fight for an access to education is a fundamental struggle of Black history. W.E.B. DuBois once said, “public education for all at public expense, in the South, was a Negro idea.\(^{13}\)” This radical way of thinking exemplified a tenet of Southern Black ideology for education as a tool for liberation for collective freedom. To clarify, this education is not synonymous receiving formal traditional schooling in which one attains a diploma or certification, a liberating Black education serves many purposes. For example, for marginalized people, this includes the freedom of knowledge to understand what is being withheld\(^{14}\), the ability to transfer cultural knowledge\(^{15}\), and the ability to be liberated from oppressive structural violence. In history, Black people have rejected this sole reliance on traditional schooling and instead found ways to educate themselves through alternate sites of education. How do people recognize their rights to be educated outside of traditional education?

Although a liberating education can teach students to be productive, cooperative, and empathetic citizens, a bad education can do as much harm. Oppressors utilize this form of education to keep marginalized people from realizing their political power. A century has passed since Carter G. Woodson wrote the *Mis-education of the Negro* and the ways in which we

\(^{12}\) Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.” 29

\(^{13}\) ANDERSON, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935*, 6

\(^{14}\) Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.”

\(^{15}\) Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.”
discourage political education has simply evolved. However, similarly, Black people have continued to recognize this educational inequality and have throughout history, reimagined liberation through the radicalization and education of historically disenfranchised people. Inspired by Paulo Freire, Black leaders have taken this action into finding new spaces outside of the government.

"Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?"

Essentially, as Black people have no agency within the confines of traditional schooling, they cannot find freedom and true liberation from what is taught in the current public education system. To summarize, to understand education in the current educational landscape in America is to understood education as a political tool to promote social reproduction. Social reproduction is not inherently harmful, using emancipatory education, Black educators can find a way to empower their students.

In this capstone, I am interested in this type of education that acknowledges the failures of the American government in adequately being able to teach Black people and instead, provides an alternative for the community. This thread of alternate sources of education has been passed down through the history of Black people in the forms of churches, music, and community spaces. School and churches overlap in the ways that they were sites of Black communities and political empowerment. Although, alternative education exists outside of traditional even schooling centers, my capstone is interested in spaces of education that mimics more formal schooling in the form of leftist liberatory sites of alternative education.

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16 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 45
17 “‘The Black Church in America,’ a Brief Story.”
Scope of Research and Research Question:

The existing school system exists to push a cultural narrative and socialize students to fit in to the greater American society, but what happens when you are not part of the dominant culture?

In my capstone, I aim to ask the following research questions:

- What is the history of Black radical leftist political education in American schooling traditions?
- What lessons / methods / modes of thinking / theories can contemporary educators draw from this history?

In my research, I will first build an understanding of what sites of alternative education looks like in the context of radical Black education. I hope to do this by deducing defining characteristics of these spaces that are found in several sites. However, as I am focusing on the movement and liberation for Black people in the 20th century, I am not inferring that all spaces of alternative education for radical left learning share the same pedagogy styles and structure. In addition, my research does not aim to propose a solution into reforming the current state of education, instead it is an exploration in what we can learn from the past and to show how current leftist organizations carry on this legacy. Instead, I hope to showcase the innovative pedagogies educators designed and the resulting successes of these education centers.

Methodology:

My capstone explains how Black educators and leaders designed a liberating political education in community sites and how it was effective in empowering and educating students. I am focusing on spaces of education because first, I believe mobilization in contingent on actors becoming enlightened in their positionality in society. Specifically, leftist education is focused
on empowering students into being able to confidently understand their situation they can then make decisions to right them.

I chose this medium because I wanted to follow the flow of several Black educational spaces throughout the history of Jim Crow and the resulting Civil Rights Movement. First, I begin with Highlander, a school opened by Myles Horton in the 1930’s. Horton’s school inspired a legion of civil rights leaders from his leftist progressive school. One of the students, Septima Clark went on to partner with the Highlander school to create the resulting Citizenship Schools that spread across the American South. Then, from the influence of the Citizenship Schools, Freedom Schools as part of the Freedom Summer Movement played a huge part in organizing the continuation of voting efforts led by the Citizenship schools. And finally, I end with the Liberation Schools of the Black Panther Party in the form of their education program, specifically the Oakland Community School.

For each historical case study, I include a summary of its history, what their main goals were, the purpose, and the results. I also include about the unique characteristics of each site. My research is from a range of sources from primary documents such as manifestos, proposals, interviews, and videos, and secondary sources from historical research done on the topic. I believe that each site brought a specific characteristic to add to the greater understanding of Black political education and in tandem with each other, vital in rightfully illustrating the plight of Black education.

Part 1: Black Alternative Spaces of Leftist Education
In this capstone, I am focusing on sites of education that contains both Black liberatory and leftist political educational pedagogies. First, emancipatory African-centered model of education can be best defined by Randolph G. Potts’ definition of this pedagogy:\(^\text{18}\):

1. Explicitly address social oppression, situating community problems (and targets of primary prevention) within historical context
2. Acknowledges students as agents for social change
3. Affirms African cultural resources for healing and social transformation

These spaces radically affirmed the experiences and the tribulations of Black people. By including a curriculum that is embedded with racial socialization, students are in a community that holds them in solidarity with one another which acts as a “buffer” against negative experiences\(^\text{19}\). With a liberating education, students can be free from this helplessness. For example, by explaining power structures that create poverty to students who are impoverished, they will then understand that the hardships they endure are simply material consequences of a history of capitalistic violence rather than from direct consequences of their own. Affirming a child’s race and experience in this manner has been associated with overall beneficial physical health and educational and sociopolitical outcomes\(^\text{20}\). In short, when you affirm students, they are affirmed into viewing themselves and their backgrounds as positive and consequently, have better self-esteem. As aforementioned, having a distorted education is not without its consequences. By indoctrinating racial hierarchy in students, they begin to believe in their inferiority and feel helpless in the environment around them.

This works in tandem with the purpose of a leftist political education as these systems exist to solve an issue, an injustice, or a wrong. Leftist education is a form of “crisis education\(^\text{21}\).” It is

\(^\text{18}\) Potts, “Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities.” 175
\(^\text{19}\) Potts. 176
\(^\text{20}\) Potts. 176
\(^\text{21}\) Jacobs, The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change. 184
born out of injustice, struggle, pain, violence, and continuous mistreatment of marginalized people. This rejects former notions of education as schooling, and instead, considers an education to revolutionize society and mainstream ideals\textsuperscript{22}. The goal of this education is for eventual liberation and freedom of all people from capitalism, racism, and other destructive imperialistic forces\textsuperscript{23}. A leftist political educational system is meant to be a foundation and a platform for students to then further mobilize and organize in non-institutional means\textsuperscript{24}. In the examples of the Citizenship Schools and the Freedom Schools, both educational sites created space for students to learn while giving them the skills and the foundational knowledge to then mobilize outside of the classroom.

I also use the word ‘alternative’ to specify that these liberating pedagogies cannot exist in the current traditional education, specifically in the public school system. Therefore, it is more than culturally sustaining pedagogy, it is a revolutionary way to tie in community with identity and self. This leftist space seeks to move past traditional forms of reform in which they focus on “positivism, ahistoricism, and individualism\textsuperscript{25}.” Instead, these spaces aim to attack the root of the cause by exploring the larger historical context the harm and cycles of violence in the community. It is to facilitate group dynamic that helps people understand their situations, give them the power and the knowledge to then make decisions to right them.

**Structure of a Leftist Educational Sites**

A leftist political educational system is a non-hierarchical, democratic space whose lessons derives from the students\textsuperscript{26}. Therefore, to mimic the purpose, leftist political educational systems

\textsuperscript{22} Myles Horton reader, 34 and 176
\textsuperscript{24} Jacobs. 270
\textsuperscript{25} Potts, “Emancipatory Education Versus School-Based Prevention in African American Communities.” 175
\textsuperscript{26} Jacobs, *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change*. (29, 50, 49)
are organized to be a space where people gather and learn from their collective experience. Rather than a lack of structure, the organization has structured itself out of a decentralized structure\textsuperscript{27} which creates a community learning experience based on shared experiences and diverse friendships\textsuperscript{28}. Likewise, there is a type of democratization in the mode of learning in the space. Rather than opting to regular forms of discussion and learning, these organizations adapt to different learning styles.

Specifically, leftist organizations shy away from lecturing and strict curricula, but instead, center discussion and collaboration between the students\textsuperscript{29}. The rejection of the traditional notion of a teacher-student relationship is vital to the existence of leftist modes of political education\textsuperscript{30}. In this mode of teaching, the school exists to create a space for these students and then to move out of the way of students while they create their own solutions within the group\textsuperscript{31}.

Next, this mode of education rather than focusing on a set curriculum, centered the person as the subject matter\textsuperscript{32}. By focusing on the social potential of every person, these organizations were able to mobilize and build confidence within the traditionally “un-educated” populations to get them to find value in their knowledge\textsuperscript{33}. This alternate form of education will meet people where they are. Instead of valuing current academic notions of intelligence via benchmarks and diplomas, they valued the experiences that students were able to “draw out” from each other. Here, people are recognized for their untapped capabilities\textsuperscript{34}. Those who are marginalized do not

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\textsuperscript{27} Jacobs. 179, 218
\textsuperscript{28} Jacobs. 211
\textsuperscript{29} Jacobs. 5
\textsuperscript{30} Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. 79
\textsuperscript{31} Jacobs, The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change. 15
\textsuperscript{32} Jacobs. 6
\textsuperscript{33} Jacobs. 48
\textsuperscript{34} Jacobs. 10
\end{flushleft}
need to study and read to recognize that they are marginalized. Instead, they need to be able to reconcile with why and how to demand better from their environment and current existence.

At the Highlander school, this included a wide range of attendees from the local poor Appalachian mountain folk to Black Southerners under Jim Crow. The organizations recognize the innate motivations within students and guide them towards a community that can collaborate and make decisions that would allow them to make substantial change within their communities. This educational system gives educational agency back to the people. Those who organize gather because they have a purpose. They face an injustice and want to learn how to have it solved. The students use the space to then unite within the group and decide what decisions and what issues they choose to focus on. This idea is that their education and experience from their lives would be able to be in collaboration with others. Not only are they in charge of what they learn, they oversee how they are learning, and even who they are learning with. This is vital as a lot of the students that were part of these Black educational spaces were often alienated from traditional forms of education but have a rich life experiences that often went overlooked.

This education centers the Freirean idea of Conscientization which “refers to the process in which men, not as recipients, but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the sociocultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality.” The purpose of this education is to give students the tools to be able to understand what is happening around them and how to react to them. Therefore, it is vital to recognize that it is more than what is culturally sustaining pedagogy, it is a revolutionary way to tie in the community with identity and self through education.

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35 Jacobs, 31, 213  
36 “Highlander Research and Education Center - History - 1930-1950.”  
37 Freire, “Cultural Action for Freedom.”
Black liberatory and leftist movements have always emphasized an importance in sharing information in a manner that rejects the sole reliance on conventional, orthodox sources of information. These sources include state sponsored education, mainstream media, and modes of mass communication. Likewise, a leftist political educational system differs with traditional schooling for several reasons.

Many educational scholars have theorized these foundational principles of radical educational pedagogy. Paulo Freire spoke on rejecting the banking method and John Dewey has theorized on how education is separate from schooling. In fact, Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander School, recognizes the importance of this distinction. He does not call for a total disregard for the current schooling system, he proposed to work from the inside of the system out. He chooses to dismantle the oppressive system whilst acknowledging the outside power dynamic. Often, alternative sources of education do not see themselves as an entity to replace schools rather an entity to revolutionize what an education could be. The purpose of public schools provided by a state government is to produce productive agents acceptable under their definition of citizenship. By acknowledging this, leftist educators sought their students to recognize this and create their own understanding that could withstand the schooling they receive by the state. All should be able to partake in a public school system built for the community and instead of forcing students out, these institutions gave students to tools to reconcile this issue so they can make the changes necessary to fix it.

38 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 75
39 The banking method is a traditional form of pedagogy in which teachers deposit information into students alike a bank.
40 Dewey, “Democracy and Education.” 14
42 Jacobs. 66
43 Jacobs. 288
The revolutionary power these educational sites had made them easy targets for the opposition. These educational sites were often destroyed by white nationalists. The Highlander School was burned down\(^44\), many churches were destroyed and bombed during the Freedom Summer\(^45\), and the United States Government under the COINTELPRO, intervened to thwart the mission of the Black Panther Party\(^46\). Yet there is value in this struggle. Horton stated that struggle is educational, it forces students to learn in a unique yet experienced way. Likewise, this violence validates that education is a force to be reckoned with. Education can revolutionize the masses and oppressors will use any violent means necessary to quell those who seek liberation.

Liberatory education cannot look like the current education system. Specifically, liberation cannot come from a space that teaches you to replicate what your authority wants you to do. Instead, we must educate in the form of discussion, debate, critical thinking, analysis, to give people the ability to think for themselves and to return their agency. This is vital to this educational pedagogy, educators had to find “creative teaching strategies to reach young people who had been disenfranchised through an inferior education\(^47\).” This education is born from a need for liberation and is vital for successful action.

**Part 2: Case Study**

**The Highlander School**

Political educational programs are an important leftist force that aim to target structural inequity and injustices. Historically, these organizational centers have relied on collective power

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\(^{44}\) Rosenberg, “After Massive Fire at Famous Civil Rights Center, Officials Found a ‘White Power’ Symbol Nearby.”

\(^{45}\) “Amistad Digital Resource: Mississippi Freedom Summer.”


\(^{47}\) Hale, *The Freedom Schools*. 123
of those who seek to find solutions outside of classical institutional means. Instead of relying upon traditional means, they sought to “minimize our loyalty to institutions that do not share the needs of the people.” In the US, many educational centers were created to combat misinformation, train mobilizers, and build community within those who needed to act. The Highlander Folk School for one, is an example of one of these political non-institutions.

Founded in 1932, the Highlander Folk School was an adult educational center founded by Myles Horton, a white rural Tennessean. Horton inspired by the works of Dewey, his love of his community, and his experience of seeing the suffering of his neighbors in rural Appalachia, created his own center as a space “minimize our loyalty to institutions that do not share the needs of the people I say this somewhere I hear.” The Highlander school was vital to the successes of many causes including numerous labor movements and the Civil Rights Movement in which he hosted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Bernice Robinson, and countless other notable organizers. Through the work of the Highlander School, Horton created an alternate space of education, built for people looking for the agency and the empowerment necessary to find liberation outside of the existing power structures.

In its inception, Highlander Folk School began as a space for the ongoing progressive labor movement for workers in the South. From 1932 up until the mid-1940s, Highlander was a vital part of Southern labor union and held workshops and organizing efforts for the afflicted workers. However, after differences began to interrupt the relationship between the school and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the school began to hold workshops inviting

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49 Thayer-Bacon, “An Exploration of Myles Horton’s Democratic Praxis:”
51 Thayer-Bacon.
52 “Highlander Research and Education Center - History - 1930-1950.”
Civil Rights workers for integrationist efforts. Highlander is unique in which it operates as an incubator that hosts different programs within the schools.

Highlander’s involvement in radical pedagogy was immensely vital to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement. In fact, many of the leaders of the subsequent Black alternative schools were trained at the Highlander School including, Septima Clark, and Bernice Robinson. With the training they received, these leaders took with them the ethos of Highlander Folk School with them to their subsequent placements. Specifically, Highlander set up the foundation for the radical alternative sites of education.

Myles Horton, inspired by other radical leaders of education, built the Highlander school as a site of liberating education. Highlander’s approach to education is grounded upon the empowerment of the student and the determination they intrinsically have in wanting to change their community and their surroundings. Although Highlander was facilitated through the leadership of Horton and other workshop leaders, the ultimate responsibility of decision-making was placed on the students of the center. This included who was to attend the workshop with the organizers, what they would discuss, and how they would resolve conflict within the groups. Horton famously called this the “draw out, not pour in” style of teaching. Although at times students felt uncomfortable and pressured in this responsibility, the Highlander Folk School taught organizers and leaders that they have both the positive liberating agency and the challenging responsibility of decision making not only within the educational center, but more importantly, within in their lives and their communities at home.

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53 Glen, “Highlander Folk School.”
54 Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.” 413
55 Jacobs, The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change. 15
The Highlander School is one of the most consequential sites of education. Its legacy has inspired leagues of educational centers and leaders and its structure has remained foundational to the creation of leftist schools. A typical day at the Highlander School included small group discussions and workshops facilitated by Highlander staff but led by the students. Instead of giving students outside motivation, Horton appeals to give them the confidence to respond to their intrinsic motivation. Its simple yet effective principle of centering student experience, knowledge, decision-making, and process of enlightenment has inspired the following schools in this study.

The Citizenship Schools

In 1958, under the guidance of Myles Horton and Septima Clark, the Citizenship School was founded as a community-based educational center for Black adults who struggle with illiteracy. Although the original focus of the school was to overcome the Jim Crow barrier of literacy tests at polls, the school did more than strengthen Black electoral power. From its unique pedagogy derived from similar principles of the Highlander school, it created a space that empowered student learning from its uniqueness of its Black adult learners that combined “and explicitly had a political approach to education that assertively linked the acquisition of knowledge with collective efforts to overcome racism.”

Although the Charleston Citizenship School was built on the “painstaking pedagogical experimentation and political networking” devised at Highlander, this was not done without locals Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins providing an important connection from Highlander to

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57 “Highlander Folk School.”
59 Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.” 389
the Citizenship School. Septima Clark, a Charleston native and elementary school teacher, had attended Highlander when she heard of its revolutionary pedagogy and invited Esau Jenkins, a local community leader known for his work in community organizing in the town. The foundation for the Citizenship school began two years prior in February 1955 when Clark was hired as a part time worker by Highlander to lay the foundation for the community organizing. A major part of organizing is gaining trust and getting community support, so her work was vital in getting local support and interest. Myles Horton also travelled to Charleston a couple of times to visit and to meet the locals, he did this by fishing with them, helping with farm work, and playing with children. The official start of the first Citizenship School class was in January 1957 and when it formally ended in 1970, over twenty-five thousand people were educated through the program.

As aforementioned, a lot of the pedagogy of the Citizenship School was derived from the Highlander Folk School. In short, both centers relied on the same structure of learning where teachers are placed in equal standing as their students. This is especially important as the Citizenship School was comprised of adult learners like the Highlander School. To appropriately reach adult teachers, there is a “fundamental belief in dignity, life knowledge, intellectual competence, and capacity for growth in adult learners. Citizenship school leader Septima Clark argues that a good teacher balanced and united the interests, aspirations of students with their own beliefs of what knowledge actions and values should be promoted from the learning

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60 Levine. 392  
61 Levine. 393  
62 Charron, Freedom’s Teacher. 3  
63 Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.” 406
experience. This student-centered education found its power in a curriculum that listens to the needs of students.

The students who attended the school were domestic workers and other blue-collar workers. Although many struggled with literacy and traditional markers of education, they were rich in their culture and their life knowledge and experiences. Instead of radically different from what these students knew, the curriculum was set up so the education affirmed what they knew from life. The students were wise from their rich experience in their ancestry, in their work, and in their children and family. This affirming education was so successful that to enroll more students, the program began initiating “each man get a man” initiatives to increase membership.

The Citizenship school was successful for several reasons. First, it was a testament to good teachers. The ingenuity and the thoughtfulness of the teachers is what truly made the education center so effective. Teachers came from all backgrounds and instead of being detracted for not being a traditional teacher, their life experience was a bonus. Teachers who were seamstresses could also add a sewing portion to their classes if needed. The only qualifications volunteers needed was to have some high school education, the ability to write legibly, and have a desire to serve the community. Valuing the life experience of the student and the teacher is vital to having a good classroom.

Instead of introductory and repetitive readings, teachers taught with a wide range of media to teach students literacy; this ambitious curriculum was a major reason why the program was extremely successful. This positive rigor convinced students that they could be taken

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64 Levine. 410
65 Levine. 405
seriously and challenged appropriately. The political and consequential nature of the program was one of the very important tenets that brought student to learn. Their education was innovative and participatory and their “dynamism flowed from their political nature.” The literacy class aspect used useful and real-life examples such as newspaper supermarket ads for easy math, vocab words from voter registration tests, verses from the bible, tracing signatures over cardboard, ordering from mail order catalogues and filling in money orders so people could practice filling them out. In addition to individual life tasks, they often worked literacy studies in with a political campaign. For example, with their newfound knowledge, students were able to advocate for more paved streets for their neighborhood through their political activism and new voting abilities.

Through a relationship with the local organizers and the Highlander School, the program was successful in increasing civic participation among black people. Many were able to pass the voter registration test and many other efforts were inspired in its wake. Esau Jenkins began the “Self-development of People” program that students from the Citizenship school could enroll in after they gained literacy skills. As they were now able to vote, the program taught the students how to understand the political system so they could make informed decisions for themselves. Jenkins also opened the Citizens Committee of Charleston County, directly inspired by citizenship classes to create a mobilization force that provided for the poor and helped them access social services, lobbied for more Black jobs, school integration and basic consumer education. These organizations gave citizens the students skills that directly improved their lives and the pathway for them to continue their work if they felt so impassioned.

66 Levine. 406
67 Levine 399-400
68 Levine, “The Birth of the Citizenship Schools.” 410
The Citizenship School was immensely important because this radical education was the intersection between education and political action. According to Levine, illiteracy was a “double oppression” in which people were not only denied participation in life activities such as jobs, civic power, cultural connection, and written communication but also psychologically diminished self-worth as society equates a lack of formal education with inferior intellect. When people became literate, they gained the ability to write and read letters without depending on white people to read the correspondence to them. They were also able to keep track of their work and keep physical proof and records, this gave them the agency to exist without outside dependency. However, the Citizenship schools did more than help students gain literacy skills. The individualizing education empowered and encouraged students to share what they care about, add their experience to their discussion and ultimately validate and give them the space to share their story. The citizenship school was not only a space of education, but it also became a community that people could rely on for community support.

Although the Citizenship school was not alone in its work, other useful adult education existed, none had the success the Citizenship Schools because others were missing the “radical affirmation of students’ dignity.” The schools were so successful that in its prime, that Citizenship Schools spread across the country and it was eventually taken over by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference due to its immense success.

The Freedom Schools

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69 Levine. 407
70 Levine. 406
71 Levine. 413
In December 1963, Charlie Cobb submitted a proposal for the Freedom School under the basis of “students as a force for social change in Mississippi.”

The aim of the Freedom School curriculum will be to challenge the student’s curiosity about the world, introduce him to his particularly “Negro” cultural background, and teach him basic literacy skills in one integrated program.

Opened July 7, 1964, Freedom schools were created to supplement the poorly existing public educational system in Mississippi for young people. However, its goals were not limited to equitable educational attainment to white people, it was to educate the students about the oppressive and harmful stratifying forces that surrounded the students and in response, the Freedom School students “demanded an education that put them squarely in the front lines of the CRM.” Inspired by their learning, students were asking to become freedom fighters and had a “dual commitment to education and full participation in the movement.”

After the proposal was submitted, Lois Chaffe a CORE member organized The National Council of Churches to write the curricula because “nothing would be more harmful to the states, to the nation, and the students themselves, than students who simply go into an area ‘to do good’ without the authorization and program supervision of groups in that area.” The conference invited many notable educators such as Septima Clark from the Citizenship schools, Myles Horton, and Ella Baker. Subjects such as citizenship, American government, African American

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72 Hale, *The Freedom Schools*. 73  
73 Cobb, “Prospectus for Summer Freedom School Program in Mississippi.”  
74 Hale, *The Freedom Schools*. 129  
75 Hale. 147  
76 Hale. 92
history, civil rights philosophy and critical were embedded in the curriculum and tailored to the local community history.

Again, the Freedom Schools used the same revolutionary pedagogy that has been continued from the Highlander School. This entails student centered pedagogy in which students were encouraged to be curious and ask questions, and an equal relationship between student and teachers learned from the students as much as they learned from them, unorthodox spaces, this knowledge was used immediately, young people demonstrated their knowledge.

The students at the school were young people who were mostly early teens, but it was open to all levels of education K-12. The school was open during a very divisive, traumatic time in the early 1960s during the civil rights movement, in which violence and white supremacy ruled many communities. “interplay between locally specific political networks and a growing national movement shaped the political socialization of young people. … one common trait surfaces, the Freedom school students were politicized before entering the schools during the summer of 1964. These spaces gave students the tools to process their experiences. The audience is unique because it targeted overlooked students who were too young to vote and to attend college. Yet their very life experience from living in the Civil Rights Era and participating and watching these protests, sit-ins, boycotts happen around them is also a type of education in and of itself.

As the Freedom Schools began to find teachers to volunteer, it was unique from other alternative spaces of education as it involved recruiting white Northern, liberal teachers. Teachers were recruited from college campuses by SNCC from colleges like Harvard, Yale,

77 Hale. 65
Stanford, Princeton, UC Berkeley, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, Oberlin College, and Queens College\textsuperscript{78}. As these spaces have very specific and radical pedagogies, teachers had to learn how to adjust to the radical learning styles of the school. This involved getting rid of traditional assessments and treating their students as equals and allowing themselves to be evaluated and held accountable by them. This was important as teachers learned as much as students did, it challenged what they thought education was. Teachers were taught to learn their privileges and naivety, and to learn their communities. Essentially, teachers had to be taught to see the students as equals. This is especially important as these teachers were white and had to do extra work to reconcile with their experiences.

The curriculum was to be able to be taught by teachers with no experience and with some space for autonomy for each classroom. Because of the twofold goal of educating the students and preparing them to be activists and mobilizers for the Freedom Summer campaign, there is a tension between what the true goal of the summer was. However, this was solved through having students at the forefront of curriculum design and course selection. Students decided what they wanted to learn and what courses they wanted to take and when. By considering curriculum design, students were also thinking about the way they are educated. When students began to question their regular schooling experience, they began to wonder about their own experiences. Liz Fusco: “[students] began to become articulate about what was wrong, and the way things should be instead: why don’t they do this at our school? Was the first question asked, and then there began to be answers, which led to further questions\textsuperscript{79}.” Not only were they learning from

\textsuperscript{78} Hale. 80
\textsuperscript{79} Hale. 154
the teachers, but they were also learning to think critically about their own educational experience.

A typical school day in the Freedom Schools had all the students pedagogically sat in a circle to increase face time and discussion. The day began with Freedom Songs then would switch to formal studies within traditional academic curriculum with math, science, history, English, and other traditional subjects. The academic work is grounded in the politics and culture of the surrounding civil rights movement and are based on African American history and culture and emancipatory education. However, the day varied greatly from teacher to teacher. The curriculum is meant to be an outline for basic classes, but the students were able to cultivate specific curriculum with specific teachers.

In tandem with their regular learning, students also attended essentially a civic education course. This involved students being a part of the ongoing protests outside of the freedom schools while being able to academically analyze different structures of power in American society. Example of debates included asking the students to compare their school to the white schools to pull out threads on inequality and educational theory. Likewise, the students were continuously asked about what freedom means to them. Verbalizing this radicalized them and validated them. Critiquing their living condition created a space for them to come to an understanding of the social climate. Students understand that what they are going through is unjust, they need the space to recognize it. Teachers also encouraged students to learn skills that could help students learn how to be a part of the ongoing Freedom Summer. The program “explicitly taught the content and skills needed to effect political and social change among an

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80 Hale. 119
elementary, middle, and high school population for political change. This included skills such as canvassing, public speaking, and other interpersonal skills. Students were given both the education and information and the skills to join the Civil Rights Movement.

The Freedom School was successful and was important in the way it cultivated a space of learning for both teacher and student. Not only were students learning a lot from this radical learning style, but teachers also had to learn how to correctly teach their students. In addition, Freedom School also included an interracial commitment. Teachers were white and it was a challenge in which Black students had to trust White people when in their daily lives, when they were taught to avoid them. It was a good way for students to further honest dialogue and it had positive effects on both teacher and student.

One of the schools’ biggest success was that students were able to see their situation as amendable. They “learned that [they] could still make it.” Unafraid, the importance of the Freedom school was in the youth as a force for a movement, “new generation of activists who were directly educated in the ethos and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement.” The Freedom Summer students saw how racial discrimination could be challenged and they were committed to join their elders in the cause.

**Black Panther Party Liberation Schools: The Oakland Community School**

The Freedom Summer ended in 1964 and albeit successful, after the assassination of civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., many became disillusioned with progressive tactics and goals of Civil Rights Movement. Those who broke apart from the movement, formed

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81 Hale. 122  
82 Hale. 147  
83 Hale. 147
the Black Panther party formed in 1966 in Oakland. The Black Panther Party (BPP) rejected the idea of assimilation within the greater white culture. Instead, it was a group of Black radicals who believed in self-preservation and return of Black community control. A part of this control included taking over the schooling system. Point 5 of the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Platform states:

We Want Education For Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role In The Present-Day Society. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else."

The Black Panther Liberation schools combined black nationalism, community control, and pedagogically progressive educational ideas. The BPP recognized the harms that the local public education system had on their students; therefore, they took matters into their own hands. “The school challenged the public-school system’s perceptions of what it meant to be Black and poor.” The school was created to be “to build a model school, provide a real education to Black kids.” Following the thread of African Emancipatory education, these students were both educated well and encouraged to be authentic and curious. This resulted in their increased self-esteem and confidence because of the staff and faculty members who were invested not only in individual learning but for the betterment of their community.

One of the successful tactics of the school was the focus of the educators in the greater community; they worked both inside and outside the school system to reach the community. One

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84 “Black Panther’s Ten-Point Program.”
85 Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.” 138
86 Ealey, “Black Panthers’ Oakland Community School.”
87 Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.” 146
of the most famous community programs was the free breakfast program in which the Black Panther Party was able to provide free breakfast to over 1200 students per day. They focused on the whole child rather than a student. Before considering pedagogy, physical needs are an important distinction between a student who can study and cannot. Through this program, the BPP showed that “the root cause of this problem” of educational disparity “is not mental incapability or cultural deprivation but HUNGER.” Another important tenet is that there is additional financial assistance that goes straight to the students. The programs provided three meals a day, buses to the school, books and supplies, transportation to medical and dental services. In the 1979 OCS Handbook, its “school philosophy is to show children how and not what to think.” Essentially, if we use the theory of school as a site of social reproduction, if you teach principles of care and community you can find it reflected in your students.

This was one of the defining characteristics of the school, it was extremely community oriented. They would call their group, the “Big Family” to show interconnectedness. In their schools, they implemented restorative Justice through student Justice committees. The school embraced an “each one, teach one” ethos where both teacher and student collaborated with each other. Because they are community based, the students and teachers have more than an understanding of a good education, they have a mutual relationship of familial and community love and care.

88 Williamson. 146
89 Potorti, “Feeding the Revolution.” 94
90 Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.”
91 Williamson.
93 Petrella, “Resurrecting the Radical Pedagogy of the Black Panther Party.”
Community work in these schools is vital because students are in extremely precarious situations. They are in neighborhoods that face extreme poverty and violence due to economic impoverishment and from state control and over-policing. Therefore, the Black-centered and liberatory curricula built a community that gave students confidence, self-esteem and feeling of belonging and cultural pride.\footnote{Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.”}

A typical day at the Oakland Community School included exercise, breakfast, check-in, lunch, meditation, classes for the more advanced groups, rest, dinner and then a van service for kids who cannot walk home.\footnote{Ealey, “Black Panthers’ Oakland Community School.”} Unique to traditional schooling practices, each class usually had 10 students or less, and were grouped upon their ability, rather than age. In addition to classical curricula, the school introduced poetry writing, current events as well as martial arts, meditation, and yoga.\footnote{“Black Panther School a Legend in Its Time.”} In addition, they included a lot of diverse media in their classes such as talks, songs, films, field trips, exercise programs. A lot of field trips were useful like to the political trials of the Panther members including the Trial of the San Quentin 6 to learn about the inadequacies of the American judicial system.\footnote{Perlstein, \textit{Teach Freedom}. 89}

Like other threads of leftist education, “the curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the youth, to guide them in their search for revolutionary truths and principles.”\footnote{Williamson, “Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The BLACK PANTHER PARTY’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS.” 144} However, one of the most important distinction of the school is the introduction of class struggle in the greater Black liberatory movement. For example, instead of talking about Lincoln as someone who freed the slaves, they position the narrative as one wherein Lincoln did not free Black people. The teachers ask the students, do you see yourselves as free? As they still face the consequences of...
violence of racism, capitalism, and fascism, their thoughts become more complicated. They recognized the intersectionality of the students of their position as both poor and Black people\textsuperscript{99}.

The work of the Oakland Community School and the Liberation schools of the Black Panther Party is vital as their work has exemplified community solidarity in the manner that their schools operated as spaces of learning and of community. By focusing on the radical possibility of children, they prioritize “long-term revolutionary outcomes as opposed to immediate and temporary social welfare relief\textsuperscript{100},” as young students are both “beneficiaries” and agents who contribute to their function\textsuperscript{101}. The radical idea of the school is also very influential as the successes of the Free Breakfast Program led to the inclusion of breakfast programs in the public schooling system. In addition, evident in the early focus on mindfulness and meditation in young students over half a century ago, the BPP was ahead of many educational improvements. Although these innovations were all created to compensate for the failures of the public education system for Black students, it truly shows the creativity and thoughtfulness of Black educators. The Black Panther Party’s commitment to education shared a future void of racial and class disparity and one of Black community and welfare.

**Discussion**

**Similarities between historical leftist education and leftist online mobilization efforts**

In the lessons from the history of these Black alternative sites of education, there are fundamental similarities between the structures of both historical leftist political organizations as well as current leftist online mobilization efforts. From our understanding of examples such as

\footnote{Perlstein, *Teach Freedom*, 86}
\footnote{Garcha, “Children and Childhood in Black Panther Party Thought and Discourse.” 321}
\footnote{Garcha. 322}
the Highlander School, we can see how online leftist efforts and organizations have retained similar organizational functions but in certain cases expanded upon them further. Horton briefly talks about the necessity of appropriate use of technology. Although he does mention the valid fear of technology engulfing educational efforts, I believe that the use of technology and the internet has allowed for the current leftist political mobilization efforts online.

First, the structure of online mobilizing efforts is inspired by historical organizations of leftist political education systems. As seen in the current Black Lives Matter and other anti-police leftist organizations as well as in previous examples of leftist mobilization during the Arab Spring, leftist organizations are overwhelmingly non-hierarchical, democratic spaces. This is a continuous thread between all leftist organizations, these purposefully decentralized spaces allow for a diverse range of voices from all ages and backgrounds to discuss, become radicalized, learn, and mobilize. In addition, these spaces are created by those who need to be in community with others to make decisions to improve upon their or other’s conditions. This is like Horton’s educational system of “drawing out” rather than “pouring in” new information\textsuperscript{102}. Especially in an online space, this allows for any member to draw out from their own knowledge and either discuss their unfinished thoughts, workshop ideas for solutions, and collaborate on the ground either in person at a school alike Highlander or in a discussion post or thread online. Both provide spaces in which people can gather yet remain platforms in which people eventually must leave to mobilize in person to truly be successful.

To begin, like the use of alternate spaces of education, the internet is a tool for activists that can “mediate and explain the outside world.”\textsuperscript{103} However, it is not the tool, both schools and

\textsuperscript{102} Jacobs, \textit{The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change.}

\textsuperscript{103} Iskander, “Connecting the National and the Virtual: Can Facebook Activism Remain Relevant After Egypt’s January 25 Uprising?” 1234
the internet, that is revolutionary, it is the actor’s messages and manipulation of the tool. Social media was vital in the successes of the Arab Spring particularly due to its similar structure to the movements that utilized it. “Social media’s resemblance to the nature of movements echoing its diffusion was an asset to the cyber world.” Social media’s democratic platforms mirror the structure of movements to provide an effective way to mobilize others to join their ranks. First, although the Arab Spring had a loose structure and no clear leader, social media transformed this seemingly negative quality into an invitation for all to participate in discussions online. All willing participants could be involved without the fear of gatekeeping. Similarly, these sites of education allow for all students to join regardless of history or educational background, if one wanted to participate, they could easily join the ranks. This ease of access is an important part of the democratic structure of both sites of mobilization and political engagement.

In addition, both utilize a vast number of mixed media to contribute to organizational efforts. While leftist educational sites can utilize workshops, newspapers, art projects, theater, posters, and children’s educational efforts. Online efforts utilize similar tactics of reaching out via multimedia sources such as videos, skits, and other social media. Because of their decentralized organization, they can include a wide range of actors who specialize in different media and are able to incorporate their different voices in their organization.

Overall, both are examples of alternative forms of education that rejects certain aspects of traditional teaching. Mainly, in its democratic attitude in which students regardless of educational background, experience, age, and knowledge can learn from and contribute to. Although Horton speaks of a fear of technology encompassing the educational system, leftist

104 Alkhouja, “Social Media for Political Change.”
105 Alkhouja.
organizations have mastered the ability to utilize the wide-reaching internet to spread their message and “enroll” students in their educational centers\textsuperscript{106}. However, there is a fear of ease in mobilizing solely on the internet. When activism becomes reduced to clicks and easy shares, more and more are falling victim to the free-rider problem. Therefore, a leftist organization who mobilizes online must remain true to its predecessors. Although leftist political education systems are efficient platforms for discussion and camaraderie, to truly be successful, students will have to then mobilize in person to make an efficient difference.

Second, the purpose of the two educational systems is centered around crisis education and an education out of necessity. Although people have the agency to join these types of education and opt into the movement, they often do so out of a sudden need to make decisions to react to sudden infringement on their or their community’s livelihoods. The students, organizers, or members of these groups are often the decision makers as they are usually those who are impacted by these pressing issues. Likewise, these groups recognize a need for alternative spaces to utilize institutional solutions to mobilize such as the examples used above or to use non-institutional manners to address systemic issues.

**Leftist Sites of Education are More Than Schools**

Leftist political organizations have created communities of educational spaces albeit with non-traditional learning styles. By using multimedia sources, they can truly become a space that provides for people of all ages. Although Highlander School was directed for adults, other groups such as the Black Panthers provided radicalizing spaces for children in their communities. Likewise, online leftist movements range from more adult oriented spaces such as Twitter, or other discussion forums for local organizing groups to spaces for younger audiences such as

\textsuperscript{106}Rapper NoName has created a free book club that is available online at nonamebooks.com.
short videos on Tiktok or Instagram. They are simply organized spaces that bring thought leaders
together and although not physical, the internet is just a location. These spaces allow for people
to form new relationships which is vital in mobilization efforts\textsuperscript{107}. The structure of leftist political
education allows for the centering of human subjects and experience and as the producer of
knowledge and with the mobilization efforts of media campaigns facilitated by online
mobilization efforts, we can see how these organizations are able to reach a wider audience
without alienating subjects based on politics and prior formal educational knowledge.

By using both alternative sources of media as well as providing an alternative education,
these leftist groups can radicalize and reach the masses. These spaces allow for the mainstream
media to showcase their efforts and work while being able to continue to draw others into their
cause.

Conclusion

My research is vital for understanding the new modes of education that young people are
politically learning and engaging with others. In many states across the country, students are
failing to receive an adequate civic and political education to reconcile with the atrocities that
have occurred in this country. My goal is to complicate the idea that young students are helpless
due to their poor schooling, I believe that these students understand their school’s failings and in
turn, seek out further information. Likewise, I believe that while young students are being
inundated with more political information and content than ever before and at an earlier age due
to the accessibility of the internet, young students have made a significant change in their schools
from this boom of student mobilization. Although students may not be in the same physical
spaces of education as the examples given in my case study provides, I believe that online spaces

\textsuperscript{107} Glover, Parry, and Shinew, “Building Relationships, Accessing Resources.”
can contain the same liberating content necessary for the empowerment for the future of our students.
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