

**“Deconstructing ‘Dropout’**

**An American Studies Honors Thesis  
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Dedicated to Diploma Plus, its incredible students  
and resilient staff.

## **Acknowledgements**

Even as a young sophomore, I ventured out into this work knowing that it would be bigger than a project, bigger than a senior honors thesis, bigger than myself. My love for education and passion to be an educator would not allow this project to be just for me much less created on my own. The work I have produced is a result of my lived experiences and personal wars with our unjust school system, but my lived experiences are entirely shaped by the multiple communities that have impacted me in various ways. It is these communities and the individual people that make them up that I thank for playing a role, whether direct or indirect, in the making of this project.

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## Abstract

Even after the “end” of segregated schooling with the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, one of the biggest issues in U.S. education is the marginalization and failure of students of Color. Through both a film<sup>1</sup> and a complementary analytical paper, this thesis examines Diploma Plus (DP), a predominantly Black and Latino alternative schooling program at Charlestown High School (CHS) in Boston, and how it empowers its students of Color. Through reading about (and actually seeing and hearing) the voices and lived experiences of the students at Diploma Plus and the educators who teach them, we can see that students of Color do not simply *choose* to drop out of school, and that schools as institutions, if and when they challenge traditional forms of White-centered schooling, can make education a liberating rather than a marginalizing experience for students of Color. In a White supremacist society<sup>2</sup> that already labels students of Color as defiant, uncultured, and unteachable, the purpose of this thesis is to challenge these images that relegate students of Color to the margins. In this way, it also deconstructs the dominant narrative that further labels the students of Color that leave school as ‘failures’ and at sole fault for their decision to leave. Lastly, it raises larger questions about what the purpose of education should be and whether schools, as they are currently structured, can be sites where a student of Color can be truly educated.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this film and how to access it, please email me at [genesisgarciaa07@gmail.com](mailto:genesisgarciaa07@gmail.com).

<sup>2</sup> A society that historically, socially, and institutionally advantages and privileges Whites at the expense and disadvantage of people of Color.

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## Author's Note

When starting this research project, how I conceptualized issues of race and racial inequality in schools differed entirely from the way I do now. Having attended a predominantly White, upper-middle class high school as the only Latina in my grade and one of the few students on financial aid, I experienced constant microaggressions from my teachers and my peers, such as being stereotyped by their false understandings of what it meant to be Latino/a, low-income, and a child of immigrant parents. Because my school failed to accommodate—let alone acknowledge—my reality as a low-income student of Color, I was conditioned to frame the struggles of all students of Color through a lens of personal deficiency. I was led to believe that if they were not “successful,” it was because *they* went to the “bad” schools in town, and as a result, were not getting the capital they needed to achieve at the level of their wealthier, White counter-parts. Thus I was the exception; I was lucky enough to attend a school like Wheeler.

So when I began my research project, my outlook was grounded in how to give more students of Color a schooling experience like mine. The “solution” to racial inequality in my mind was not to make schools more accommodating to the experiences of students of Color necessarily, but rather to give students of Color like myself the access to the capital that rich, White folks had. Thus, my project actually started as a photography exhibit my freshman year that tried to convey school inequality by displaying physical differences between various schools. Through this collection of photos, I aimed to draw attention to how unfair it was to have some schools look like the private high school I went to, and others like the run-down public elementary and middle schools I managed to escape from. But as I transitioned into my second year at my university, I began to take courses that covered issues of race, which introduced me to institutional racism along with other structural forms of oppression. Guided by my own personal

investment in addressing the racial inequality that I saw in the schools of my own life and community, I began to understand that the reasons why we students of Color were not “succeeding” in school was not because of a particular flaw we individually had, or that there was something wrong with the way our family raised us, or what our communities valued. Rather, it was because schools were not designed with students of Color in mind; they were grounded in a history of White Supremacy that systematically disadvantaged students of Color like myself. Thus, I no longer believed that my identity as a low-income Latina was a set of obstacles that I just had to “deal with”—I no longer felt the need to rid me of myself in order to be successful.

In learning how schools were structured, I started to look at schooling and education as two separate things. Whereas the institution of the school was embedded within a system of White supremacy<sup>3</sup>, education emerged as a form of resistance in which I could participate. It enabled me, as a student of Color, to reflect on my personal experiences and help me realize that I did not *have* to deal with the racism I experienced in school by distorting or throwing away who I was. I learned that schools could be challenged and held accountable for the inhospitable environment that they created for poor students of Color. It was from this point on that my project, as it transitioned from photography to film, and from multiple schools to one particular program, no longer tried to look at how to keep schools how they were, or even reform the “bad” ones into “better” ones. Instead, it aimed to question the structure of the school as a whole and how it was truly responsive to the learner and her community, and entirely re-conceptualize the purpose of education.

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<sup>3</sup> I use “racism” and White supremacy interchangeably in this piece, as, in this country (and around the world), the race that our society advantages is White.

## Introduction

Teachers should take like a test about how much they really care because some teachers just don't care. And then there are some teachers that be like 'Come on. You can do better than this. I know you.' I want teachers like that. That's the teachers you have in DP.

- *Keisha Fertil, Student, 18*

Seeing that people were actually stopping and listening even if it was for a quick second...it meant like, yo, people actually care to hear what we gotta say. And then we had to move...and it was just like—it's crazy. This stuff is really happening. It's really close. It's closer than we really think.

- *Rene Laguerre, Student, 18*

*Reflecting on the police brutality protest DP organized.*

In other schools...sometimes you feel like teachers don't understand you—you feel like you don't understand the work...you just feel like almost everything about school is irrelevant...It sucks because school is put in this corrupt system but you need to go to school in this corrupt system to get further in this corrupt system...and that what comes into me liking DP. Because they kind of give you your own little privileges, you get to speak back how you want to...They kind of go aside the real corruption of other schools.

- *Christa Pereira, Student, 17*

Over the two years I spent observing, interviewing, and video-recording students at the Diploma Plus (DP) program at Charlestown High School in Boston, MA, students like Christa, Keisha, and Rene never ceased to amaze me with their knowledge of themselves as students in relation to the flawed education system of which they are a part. These students, along with their DP classmates, are all students of Color, all from poor or low-income backgrounds, and have all been labeled “at-risk” of failing within the larger Charlestown High School, or have officially left other schools within the Boston Public School system. With the negative connotations associated with labels such as “at-risk” or “dropout,” in addition to the widespread stereotyping

commonly made about poor, students of Color, I knew that the voices of the students at Diploma Plus were rarely heard in the larger discourse of school inequity in this country. But if anyone knew what was or was not working about schools, would it not be the students who had been failed by them? How did these students end up at Diploma Plus? What was different about their previous schooling experiences? Why were they once “at-risk” or why did they “drop out”? Why did they give school another chance? According to Thai Small, the assistant director of Diploma Plus, “For many years, they’ve been mistreated, thrown through the system, class to class, grade to grade, school to school, and once they get here it’s like (*sigh*), finally people that understand me, people that really care...people who *want* to help me, get out of something negative, to go towards something more positive” (personal communication, September 16, 2014).

I wrote this thesis in order to recognize and validate the personal schooling experiences of students like Christa, Keisha, and Rene. From their quotes above, it is evident that these students have voices—and very powerful ones—that say significantly critical things about the difficult school system they navigate everyday. Thus, this thesis is not just about giving these students a voice. At its very core, this thesis is meant to be a conduit for the voices, stories, and lived experiences of students of Color who were once at-risk of failing or who have officially left school. It is meant to be a platform where the experiences of these students of Color can be legitimized as the valid sources of knowledge that they are, and so that we can actually learn from them and dismantle the unequal education system that we so largely depend on today.

### *Why it Matters*

When considering why the experiences of students of Color who have left school or were once at-risk of leaving are important, I would offer one of many reasons. Since the 1960s, the

graduation rate for White students has surpassed that of Blacks and Latinos by roughly 10-20% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Though between 1990 and 2012 the overall “dropout” rate decreased from 12% to 7%, Black and Latino students still disproportionately make up the “dropout” population (U.S Department of Education, 2013). What accounts for this persistent inequality across race that spans decades? Most importantly, what embedded meaning is in the word “dropout” when it refers to a population of students that is disproportionately youth of Color? What kind of culture do schools invalidate and, on the flipside, what culture do they implicitly value if the same students are being relegated to the margins and set up to fail? When we ask these questions, we begin to implicate institutions and the systems and ideologies that maintain them; we begin to hold schools accountable for actually pushing students out.

This thesis is a two-part project—a documentary and an analytical paper—which aims to deconstruct the dominant narrative surrounding high school “dropouts.” My film encompasses an alternative schooling program, Diploma Plus (DP), at Charlestown High School (CHS) that helps “over-aged and under-credited” students to graduate. Meanwhile, my paper examines the lived experiences of the students and staff of DP in order to contextualize and critique the “dropout” narrative within a larger framework of U.S. education. In our society and current schooling system, it is believed that students just *choose* to drop out of school, dropping out due to lack of interest, motivation, or competence. This dominant narrative is then used to further blame the individual for their lack of success. My paper, however, resists this narrative by challenging the unquestioned structure of the school and framing schools as institutions that are responsible for actually pushing students out, particularly through racist schooling practices. My film, then, is a

counter-narrative as it documents the counter-stories<sup>4</sup> of the students and staff at DP. Simultaneously, it also presents DP as an example of an institution where, if and when it challenges traditional forms of White-centered schooling, students of Color can have an empowering rather than a marginalizing schooling experience. Looking at Diploma Plus as a case study, then, raises a larger question about what the purpose of education should be, and whether schools, in their traditional form, can accommodate the education needed to teach students of Color.

Though I understand class and gender to also be very influential to student experiences, they are beyond the scope of this project. My focus on race is deliberate, as I think there is already a lot of discussion around gender and class, as well as a tendency to avoid race in discussions despite it being the center of most inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 50). As Ladson-Billings and Tate reference the work of Andrew Hacker in their piece “Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education,” “Although both class and gender can and do intersect race...examination of class and gender, taken alone or together, do not account for the extraordinary high rates of school dropout, suspension, expulsion, and failure among African-American and Latino males” (1995, p. 51). In line with Ladson-Billings and Tate’s work, this thesis does not try to undermine the influence class and gender have on student experiences but rather, suggest that “‘race matters,’ and as Smith insists, ‘blackness matters in more detailed ways’ (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). In other words, my work aims to contribute to this larger conversation about the importance of race in understanding issues of inequality, and that, at the end of the day, race cannot be separated from class and gender.

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<sup>4</sup> A counter-story, as defined by Solórzano & Yosso in “Critical Race Methodology” (2002) is “a method of telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32).

This thesis is made up of 3 main chapters. The first Chapter, *Theory* discusses how I use Critical Race Theory and the work of Critical Race scholars in education (*Literature Review*) as the main theoretical framework to examine why students of Color might be disproportionately dropping out of school. It also provides a critique of the narrative that has been constructed about high school “dropouts.” Chapter 2, *Methodology*, explains why I decided to create a documentary, the thought processes behind its creation, and insight on the process itself. Lastly, the third chapter, *DP’s Ideology and Praxis*, I get to the crux of my thesis by explaining what Diploma Plus is and how both the program and my film, which encapsulates this program, challenge the dominant narrative surrounding “dropouts”. My last chapter, *Conclusion*, links the different sections of my thesis to reiterate why this topic matters. Here, I also include a section on the limitations of my work. At the end of my thesis, I include a reference list to make up for my limited scope, as well as some appendices of interview questions I asked students and teachers and other resources to add to the understanding of my work.

#### Limitations:

As with any case study, it is important to note that my work is not all encompassing. Although many students of Color drop out of school as a result of their marginalizing schooling experiences, the invisibility of Asian/Asian-Americans, not only in the dominant narrative surrounding high school dropouts, but also in the counter-narrative I attempt to create, is one of the limitations of my work. During my time at Diploma Plus, there were two Asian/Asian American-presenting students enrolled. However, both my film and written component only focus on Black and Latino students as Diploma Plus geared their curriculum and overall pedagogy toward this population.

Centering only Black and Latino students is a limitation not only of this thesis, but of Diploma Plus as well; while the critical race work that I commend DP for doing tends to the needs of Black and Latino students very well, the Asian/Asian-American experience both within and beyond the program is not recognized in any way. Instead, their experiences seemed to either be grouped under the label “students of Color” or not considered at all as Asian/Asian-Americans are not often thought of as people of Color. From what I could interpret, Diploma Plus seemed to overlook their Asian/Asian-American students because they made up a very small percentage of DP’s overall student body. However, their small number is no excuse for this neglect, as being small in number does not belittle or change the extent to which Asian/Asian-Americans experience racism in schools and in society. This reality then raises the questions: in what ways is Diploma Plus actually a harmful place for Asian/Asian-American students? In what ways does the program contribute to anti-Asian/Asian-American racism and violence?

Though the answer to this question is beyond the scope of my thesis, I am aware and must acknowledge that leaving out Asian/Asian-American voices from my work contributes to the Black/White racial binary in this country that continually silences the lived experiences of Asian and Asian-American students and negates them as racialized beings that experience racism in schools, let alone, at all (Lee, 2009). In not including the experiences of Asian/Asian-American “dropouts”—though they do exist (Lew, 2003)—this thesis may also perpetuate stereotypes of Asian/Asian-Americans as “model minorities” that do not drop out at all. Though there are commonalities across racial experiences under the umbrella of “oppressed people,” every racial group experiences different kinds of racisms. Thus, in pointing out these limitations, I attempt to show that my work does have a limited scope. Most importantly, however, it is also

to highlight the dividing nature of White Supremacy, and how, as people of Color, we are pitted against one another in order to perpetuate and maintain racist structures.

Language:

Language is important, as it holds power through its ability to create, solidify, and maintain meaning among people. For this reason, I have been deliberate about how I use language in my thesis to talk about the people that are implicated.

The structure of my thesis is designed to center and bring to the foreground the insightful counter-narratives of students who have left school or were once at risk of leaving school. My use of the descriptors “students who have left school or were once at risk of leaving school,” in addition to the word “dropout” in quotations, is a purposeful decision. It is not only to avoid associating these students with the negative connotations surrounding the word “dropout,” but also to highlight how this label is socially constructed and assigned. In this way, I attempt to take the blame off of students for leaving school and begin holding the institution accountable that is playing a role in pushing them out.

I also use these descriptors, and if using the term “dropout,” put it in quotes, because students define themselves differently depending on their own personal experiences. For example, Vanelly Santos, one of the first students I met at Diploma Plus, did stop going to school, but does not call himself a “dropout” because he eventually came back (personal communication, November 8, 2013). Whereas schools can sometimes label students like Vanelly as “dropouts,” both informally and officially on paper, once again, students may not ascribe this label to themselves, and it is their voice and self-representation that I try to highlight in my thesis.

### *Role as Researcher: Identity Implications and a Critique of my Own Work*

In producing my thesis, I have made it a priority to ensure that my work is not just a collection of papers that grant me my undergraduate diploma. Though I will inevitably benefit from the work that I produce, my main goal is to create something that is also useful to the students and teachers at Diploma Plus. I acknowledge my privilege as a college student entering this space and using that privilege to freely conduct “research.” In understanding that research originated as a colonialist and oppressive tool of knowledge production, I aim to challenge the notions of research as being neutral, objective, and unbiased (Smith, 1999). I fully acknowledge that my body, in the racial, socioeconomic, and gendered form that it takes, entirely affects my research, why I chose to do it, how I carry it out, how I interpret it, and ultimately what I produce and for whom.

First, I want to acknowledge that my personal experience is different from that of the students at Diploma Plus; while I attended a majority White, upper-class high school, Charlestown High School, where Diploma Plus is located, has a predominantly poor, Black and Latino student population. Moreover, I understand that my experience is entirely different in the fact that I am phenotypically light-skinned, and, depending on the context, can pass as White. I believe that my ability to “succeed” at Wheeler is entirely influenced by this fact. However, having followed the vast literature put out by Critical Race scholars regarding the perversion of White supremacy in schooling and in society in general, I have learned that White people do not have to be present in order for institutions to center and value Whiteness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28)

Secondly, I want to point out the ease with which I was able to enter the DP community (though not to be equated with being accepted into this community). A simple email with the

director of the Diploma Plus (who was a good friend of the professor of the education course I was taking at the time I began my research) explaining my project allowed me to begin visiting this space. At first, I was looked at with understandable suspicion as I entered classrooms with my legal pad to take notes. The students probably thought: “Who was this small person and why was she taking notes? What interest did she have in us?”

I make a distinction between “entering” the DP community and being “accepted” into it because I was not immediately accepted, and this was something I was aware of and openly respected. What reason did they have to open their community to me? What business did I have being there? What was I trying to study? It is for this reason that, and as I will describe in more detail in the methodology section of this thesis, I chose to visit Diploma Plus and repeatedly introduce myself and my project first before diving into interviews and my ultimately, filming the program. My priority was gaining their trust; I wanted DP students and teachers to feel comfortable with me and eventually, trust me. This is important not only because my research would be more authentic, but also because I understood that these were not “subjects,” as they are referred to in traditional research. They were people. My aim was not to exploit this community, but to humanize them, to work with them, and to support their mission of preparing their students both socially and academically for the outside world.

I am aware that having been involved with Diploma Plus for roughly two years has undoubtedly affected my research, but in my opinion, for the better. I do not mean to claim that this amount of time is enough to really get to know a community or be accepted as part of it, but both Diploma Plus teachers and students have expressed that they appreciate the time I have spent with them and feel that I am a part of their community. However, being accepted into the DP community also had everything to do with my personal aspirations to become an educator.

Though I almost always had my video camera in hand, I also made myself available to teachers and students to help tutor, supervise, or participate in a class activity. Regardless of how much time I spent at Diploma Plus, it was my genuine dedication to the community, which was established over time that allowed for this level of trust and acceptance to form.

Ultimately, I understand that my voice will inevitably be weaved throughout my film; as videographer, producer, director, and editor of my documentary, I have final say in determining what my film comes to be. However, I deliberately chose film as one of the media with which to present my thesis to honor the actual voices of the students and teachers of Diploma Plus as closely as possible. I acknowledge that this community is perpetually silenced because of their race and socioeconomic class. Particularly for the students, I understand that they are even further silenced because of their age and the connotations associated with their schooling status. Because this is a population whose wants and needs are rarely considered let alone recognized, I tried to film students and staff only to the extent that they were comfortable with having the camera around. If they did not want me to film an event, or if a student did not want to be filmed, I shut my camera off or turned it in the opposite direction. In order to maximize the voice and comfort of the DP community throughout the entire filmmaking process, I also held focus groups to hear feedback on a rough cut of my film before it was screened publicly. This way, both students and staff had an opportunity to critique the film or make suggestions, which also further positions them as producers in the making of my thesis.

Lastly, in order to reiterate the importance of understanding research as biased and to challenge readers' assumptions about researchers being objective, neutral entities, I want to share that through my personal interactions at Diploma Plus, I have seen simple factors such as my height or my way of dress to fundamentally affect my research. Though I did not think much of

these interactions at the time, looking back at them now, I believe my dress (along with my height and small age difference) helped create a basis for connection and thus, a closer and potentially more meaningful relationship with Diploma Plus students. In addition to my more obvious identifiers such as my race, gender, and class, it has been in these subtle and seemingly insignificant ways that I have also built rapport with students, my clothing marking me as being “like one of them.” When first visiting DP (and especially as I began filming) my main goal was to have DP welcome me into their community, and if and when they did, to welcome the “real” me, or the persona I feel I consistently present myself to be. But I never realized that even just my height, or my comfortable, student-like way of dressing might have actually helped facilitate that process.

Additionally—and most importantly—I do think my identity as a low-income Latina, along with my own personal experience with schooling, also allowed me to relate to the students at Diploma Plus on more intimate levels. I understood (and personally used) a lot of the students’ references to music, their use of certain words and phrases, and the social cues and body language they used to relate to each other. Growing up, I also attended many public schools that resembled Charlestown, not only in physical appearance, but also in the demographic of students that attended them. However, it is also important to note that though I am Latina, I am optically White, and this, along with my status as a college student, also impacted my relationship with students. Though the students never said anything explicit about my these parts of my identity, some of them did seem surprised to know that I was Latina (as not all of them could tell), and many of them referred to me as “Miss” when I first started visiting the program. It was only over time that my *Latinidad* was fully acknowledged and celebrated by the students, and that they no longer called me “Miss”—a label of authority—and started calling me by my first name.

Thus, the multiple facets of my identity are what both allowed me to connect with Diploma Plus students and posed as limitations I had to work through and negotiate. Had my identifiers been any different, these connections may have never been made and my research would have resulted in something entirely different. In traditional research, these are factors that commonly go unrecognized. However, they need to be acknowledged, discussed, and problematized in order to understand how any research came to be.

History of Student “Dropouts” and Alternative Schooling Programs/Educational Movements:  
*Who are Student “Dropouts” and who are Alternative Schools for?*

Diploma Plus, an alternative schooling program serving predominantly Black and Latino “at-risk” students and “dropouts,” did not emerge in a vacuum. There has been a history of people, communities, and movements dedicated to developing alternative ways of educating people of Color, not only to replace the substandard education that has been made available to them, but also to use education as a tool for liberation in response to a history of racist and unequal schooling in this country.

Alongside the various acts against racism in the 1960s, alternative schools also began to emerge amidst the furor of the Civil Rights Movement that were specifically meant to serve African-American children (Lange & Sletten, 2002, p.3). Mainly based in the South, *Freedom Schools* were the first manifestations of a community-controlled education or the “the belief that Black people had to make decisions about and take charge of the things controlling their own lives (Cobb, 2008, p. 69). Centering the specific struggles of African-Americans in the United States, *Freedom Schools* and the Black communities that created them challenged traditional schooling that was deliberately unfitting and intrinsically marginalizing to Black children. They taught them how to think critically about social structures such as racism, to analyze how they

were implicated in them, and most importantly, empowered them to believe that they had the power to challenge and change them.

In teaching Black children to use education as an emancipatory tool, *Freedom Schools* take after larger educational movements like Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed. This movement challenged what Freire called the “banking model” of traditional schooling by acknowledging oppressed students not as empty receptacles to pour knowledge into, but as creators of their own knowledge. By prioritizing dialogue between students and teachers, students gain a critical awareness of their surroundings to the point of transformation, where students become conscious of their ability to change the world (Freire, 1970, p. 73).

In this way, Diploma Plus falls in line with these historical efforts. In its contemporary frame, DP is addressing the current manifestation of the consequences of having a history of White Supremacy and racial segregation in this country—of having a public education system in the United States that was never intended for people of Color. It is addressing a schooling system that ever since the 1960s, has created a disproportionate population of Black and Latino “dropouts” by undeserving and failing students of Color (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). DP is addressing this issue by providing a liberatory education to students of Color that make them socially aware and train them to be social actors that can begin to take control of their own destiny.

### Charlestown High School and the Diploma Plus Program as an Alternative School

Charlestown High School (CHS) is 1 of 24 public high schools in Boston, located in Charlestown, Massachusetts. The city is most historically known as a site of major anti-busing protests and demonstrations during Boston’s desegregation and the passing of the Racial Imbalance Act in the summer of 1965 (Lukas, 1985, p. 131). Despite being located in a

predominantly White, upper- and middle-class neighborhood, Charlestown High School is 92% students of Color with 90% of those students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. Buses still bring students over from Boston's predominantly low-income and Black neighborhoods such as Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan.

Reflecting this demographic is the Diploma Plus program (DP) at Charlestown High, one of the five small learning communities within CHS. An alternative schooling program whose mission is “to graduate students who can compete in academically and professionally rigorous settings beyond high school, regardless of their prior academic performance,” Diploma Plus was spearheaded in 2009 by two CHS teachers, Adina Schecter and Kati Delahanty, as an attempt to address excessive student failure within the school (“What is DP?,” 2015).

Diploma Plus has always been a public program. To start, however, Diploma Plus at CHS was originally one of the thirty chapters of the national Diploma Plus program, using funding from the Gates foundation to receive the national organization's services. After researching various alternative schooling programs, Adina Schecter and Kati Delahanty had chosen to simulate the structure of Diploma Plus because of its competency-based education, and asked to have Diploma Plus implemented at CHS. Over time, however, the national organization ran out of funds and began charging its programs a fee to remain connected. It was around this time that the current director, Sung-Joon “Sunny” Pai, became head of the program, and decided against paying it. Besides the structure of the program, he felt that they had never benefitted much out of the partnership (S. Pai, personal communication, March 11, 2015).

Now, DP receives funding from Boston Public Schools (BPS) through Charlestown High. The program has run every year since its inception, bringing students in from the larger Charlestown High School—referred to as “upstairs”—as well as from other public schools in the

city. Diploma Plus still uses the national organization's competency-based learning, or flexible grading that allows for demonstration of mastery regardless of time (S. Pai, personal communication, June 25, 2014). However, DP has also included Restorative Justice and a social justice curriculum within its overall educational framework. In this thesis, I discuss how these three components of Diploma Plus, along with the diversity and overall sense of cultural competency among the teachers and staff, work to empower its students.

## Chapter 1: Theory

Because I am arguing that both my use of film and the Diploma Plus program itself challenge the dominant narrative surrounding “dropouts,” I will be using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the analytical framework for this thesis. In this chapter, I will outline the tenets of CRT as applied to education and then use CRT to briefly explain dominant narratives and why it is important to challenge the one surrounding “dropouts.” I will then explain why I use some of the language I do in my work, as well as define some important terms in order to challenge their standard meanings and provide more context for my work.

### Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education:

Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework is vital to understanding and challenging how race and racism functions within education systems. Whereas CRT arose in the 1970s in response to the normalization of racism after the Civil Rights Movement, the work of major critical race scholars particularly in the field of education, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Bryan Brayboy, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara Yosso, did not draw attention until the late 1990s. Drawing from Daniel Solórzano’s work (1997) in “Images and Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping and Teacher Education,” Tara Yosso identifies the five tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education as follows: (1) acknowledging that race and racism are endemic to society and thus are fundamental to understanding how society functions in the United States; (2) challenging White privilege and the idea that schools are colorblind and objective spaces of equal opportunity that value students solely on the basis of merit; (3) using education as liberatory project to respond to and eliminate racial, class, and gender oppression while empowering People of Color and other oppressed groups; (4) using methods such as storytelling and family histories to recognize the “experiential knowledge” and lived experiences of People

of Color as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination,” and (5) drawing on multiple disciplines such as ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, law, psychology, film, theatre and other fields to analyze race and racism (2005, p. 74). Most importantly, as Yosso argues, “CRT in education refutes dominant ideology and White privilege while validating and centering the experiences of People of Color” (2005, p. 74).

*Using CRT to Challenge The “Dropout” Narrative:*

In our current society, the dominant narrative has ascribed negative connotations to students who do not complete high school. Words like “quitter” or “failure” along with other slacker and delinquent-like images pop into our heads when we hear the term “dropout.” Where many people believe that the school is a fair vehicle for social mobility, these connotations all put the blame on the individual. But this dominant narrative that is constructed and dispersed about “dropouts” fails to acknowledge the ways in which schools influence a student's decision to leave school and, in fact, contribute to what makes the playing field unequal to begin with. As Reproduction theorists argue, schools are institutions that actually reproduce social stratification, perpetuating a social caste system (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Similarly, as referred to in Ann Ferguson’s *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Radical Schooling Theory posits that schools perpetuate social stratification by valuing the practices and beliefs of dominant culture, which then inherently marginalizes any culture or student outside of it (2001, p. 50). Thus, though schools are commonly believed to be the avenue through which students can gain an equal footing in society, there are existing obstacles put in place by schools that can set up certain students—namely, students of Color—to fail.

In a society that not only believes every individual can “pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps,” but also that school is the “great equalizer” that can help one achieve that, it is no wonder that students who “drop out” of school are looked at with such disdain; they are at fault for not using schools to better themselves. However, the reason why we understand schools the way we do—as meritocratic vessels for social mobility regardless of who you are and where you come from—is because this is the narrative told by the dominant group (Whites). According to Solórzano & Yosso, dominant narratives “generate from a legacy of racial privilege...which [makes] racial privilege seem ‘natural’” (2002, p. 28). Thus, framing schools as meritocratic and equal for everyone allows Whites to continue to benefit from the current unequal structure of schooling without examining the oppression that is occurring or acknowledging how they benefit at the expense of people of Color. This dominant narrative is then perpetuated in order to “construct reality in ways to maintain their privilege” and unjustifiably blame students of Color for supposedly lacking the biological or cultural traits to succeed in schools despite the fact that schools have been designed to benefit Whites since their inception (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 30; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). This ideology is then internalized by people of Color, which then reproduces the narrative and keeps the dominant group in power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57).

According to CRT scholars in education, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso, the dominant narrative, or what they call “a majoritarian story,” presents itself as “neutral and objective yet implicitly make[s] assumptions according to negative stereotypes about people of color,” (2002, p. 29). For this reason, it is important to disrupt the dominant narrative surrounding high school dropouts as it “distorts and silences the experiences of people of Color,” blaming students of Color for their choice to leave school and normalizing the disproportionate rate at which they are

dropping out (Solórzano & Yosso 2002, p, 29). Most importantly, as students who have been silenced because they are people of Color, and further silenced because they are blamed for their own failure, their perspective is necessary to fully understand how our educational system functions and to take steps towards social justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58). Because challenging this dominant narrative requires the perspective of the oppressed group, it is also inherently a method of healing for people of Color. As Ladson-Billings puts it, “the story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed and subjugated and allows one to stop inflicting mental violence on oneself”—a violence, which in many cases, manifests itself in students of Color’s internalizing their failure as a result of their race (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 57). By not only focusing on the way Diploma Plus as a program centers student voice but also centering student voice in my film itself, I simultaneously document and perform CRT by challenging the dominant narrative through both the content of my thesis and the methodology through which it was created.

### *Defining Success:*

In challenging the “dropout” narrative, one that labels students as failures or quitters, I am also inherently challenging the dominant ideology surrounding student success. While dominant ideology measures student achievement based off of their successful transition into higher education or the job market, using Critical Race Theory as a frame, I define “success” by level of student engagement and student empowerment. For students of Color in a White supremacist education system, success is more than just graduating from college or getting a job. This is because these systems of oppression do not disappear even upon entering college or the workforce. Rather, success means learning about the systems of oppression that influence their everyday lives and in turn, learning how to combat them. Thus, for me, engagement refers to

how much these students are interested in what they are learning through a social justice-like CRT pedagogy. I therefore define empowerment as the level to which students feel aware of social structures and feel moved to and capable of challenging those structures.

### Literature Review:

Everything from the obstacles that students of Color face in higher education to the disproportionate amount of students of Color failing out of school, a lot of literature currently exists that addresses how race affects students' schooling experiences. In this thesis, I draw mainly from *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (2001) by Ann Arnett Ferguson, Hondo, Gardiner's and Sapien's *Latino Dropouts in Rural America* (2008), and George Sefa Dei's *Reconstructing 'Dropout': A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement from School* (1997). I have chosen to base my work off of these books because each one examines how institutions perpetuate oppressive White cultural norms. In doing so, they also challenge the dominant narrative that "dropouts" are simply "bad" students that choose to leave school. My thesis parallels the work of these scholars as it continues to challenge this "dropout" narrative. However, it differs from them in its focus on how Diploma Plus functions differently than traditional White-centered schools.

In *Bad Boys*, Ferguson argues that racist disciplinary practices imposed by schools are part of a hidden curriculum that isolates Black youth and labels them as criminals. This operates through the presupposed understanding of "proper" behavior, which is defined by the dominant culture and then recreated by the school. Thus, while students who fit the White middle-class definition of "smart" and "behaved" are acknowledged and rewarded, Black students endure a "symbolic violence," or the painful, damaging, moral wounds inflicted by the wielding of

words, symbols, standards,” because their race (and class) are intrinsically discounted and punished by the structure of dominance that the school imposes. As a result of this unjust treatment, Ferguson poses, many Black boys then actively disengage from functions of the school, participating in a process that she cites as “active not-learning,” or the conscious choice to disregard school functions to curtail the marginalizing experience of school altogether (Ferguson, 2001, p. 99).

The disengagement of students of Color as a result of White-centered schooling practices is also evident in Caroline Hondo, Mary E. Gardiner, and Yolanda Sapien’s *Latino Dropouts in Rural America* and George Sefa Dei’s *Reconstructing ‘Dropout’: A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students’ Disengagement from School*. In both, the authors discuss the prominence of racist schooling practices in schools. These practices manifest themselves primarily in (1) educators’ low expectations of Black and Latino students; (2) the institution’s refusal to adapt to or even acknowledge the language, culture, and identity that Black and Latino students bring to school; (3) the disproportionate placement of Black and Latinos in lower academic tracks; and (4) the lack of connection between students and teachers. These practices, they argue, are what caused the Black and Latino youth in their studies to feel they did not belong, or that their schools did not care about them (Dei, 1997, p.52, p.49; Hondo, 2004, p.101). This awareness of racism (and classism) within school culture led to their alienation, causing them to disengage and, eventually, drop out of school.

In framing schools as institutions that uphold a dominant White, middle-class culture and thus, enact racist schooling practices that marginalize students of Color, each book challenges the individualism surrounding student achievement or failure. They reveal the reality that these students—who are mainly students of Color—do not simply choose to quit school on their own

accord, but rather, are actually being pushed out by the schools they attend. Most importantly, each book argues that, because of this marginalization, a student of Color's disengagement or choice to leave school is actually an act of resistance against an institution that is actively oppressing them (Dei, 1997, p. 97; Ferguson, 2001, p. 99; Hondo, Carolyn, & Gardiner, 2008, p. 93). As Dei writes in *Reconstructing 'Dropout,'* for "dropouts," leaving school is not perceived here as a failure to succeed, but rather as a choice to abandon a socially oppressive experience" (Dei, 1997, p. 97).

In order to understand the full extent of how this marginalization manifests, however, it is important to look beyond the largely quantifiable data that turns these students into statistics. That is why all three of these books emphasize the significance of focusing on the actual voices and lived experiences of students; it is their side of the story that is needed to fully critique how the institution of the school functions (Dei, 1997, p. 33; Ferguson, 2001, p. 11; Hondo, Carolyn, & Gardiner, 2008, p. x).

This thesis builds on this work as it aims to expand on the argument that "dropouts" are not solely responsible for their decision to leave school. However, my work differs because, though I do refer to the marginalization students of Color experience in school, I mainly focus on a case study of an institution whose pedagogy and practices actually work to empower its students of Color. Like this body of literature, I also focus on student voice and emphasize the importance of it in critiquing the institution of the school. As students of Color *and* students who have been failed by the school system, DP students are in "The position of Outsider [which] becomes the vantage point for the production of a powerful critique of the social order and can foster a self-representation that contests the order as it stands," (Ferguson, 2001, p. 210). However, this thesis goes even further than that as part of my methodology actually video-

records student voice and presents it in the form of a film. The opportunity to actually *see* students of Color speak up about their schooling experiences, I believe, further acknowledges the voices and lived realities of students of Color as legitimate sources of knowledge. These knowledges can then be used to challenge the dominant narrative that has been used to further marginalize and discount them as the throwaway peoples of our school system.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

According to Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the current structure that informs research and research methodology is inevitably embedded in European imperialism and colonialism (Smith, 1999, p. 1). In understanding the potential for research to do harm to oppressed peoples, and in knowing the very goal of my thesis is to empower and center the voices and lived experiences of people of Color, it is essential and necessary that the way I carried out my research and continue to do so now in this paper also actively challenges the exploitative and violent nature of research and research methodology. Thus, in the same way that my film conveys how Diploma Plus is challenging the structure of education that is failing students of Color, the methods I have used to create my film also attempts to challenge how the standard structure of research is marginalizing to people of Color. For this reason, I have done my best to decolonize my methodology by implicating myself and prioritizing the wants of the DP community in the processes of creating my film and writing my thesis.

### **Methods:**

This study was based on interviews and filmed observation. Though interviews are commonly used in studies of this kind, my use of filmed observation and a film as the means to present part of my work departs from the handwritten observation and written presentation methods of traditional research. Having video-recorded footage allows me to observe and re-observe and interpret and re-interpret events that actually occurred, while the visual nature of a film allows for interpretation of what I observed beyond my own. Most importantly, as opposed to me speaking on behalf of the members of Diploma Plus, having this thesis presented partly as a film attempts to have the subjects of my documentary literally speak for themselves.

Through interviews and interactions with students, in addition to three focus groups—two out of three of which students were for students—my project as a whole also deliberately draws on student voice to inform how I carry out my film and what is and is not included in my film. While traditional research methods depend solely on the researcher and the researcher’s interpretation only, these methods—my film and emphasis on student voice—attempts to provide a more accurate insight into the lives and schooling experiences of students who have left school or were once at risk of leaving by including and prioritizing their input and comfort at different points throughout this knowledge production process.

### Decolonizing my Research

When I applied for a summer research grant to begin my research at Diploma Plus, my main question going in was “how do racist schooling practices play a part in the ‘dropout crisis’ that disproportionately affects students of Color?” However, in understanding that DP had originally formed as an initiative to address consistent student failure within Charlestown High School, I realized after interviewing students and staff and engaging with the community for some time that as opposed to showing that racist schooling practices push students out of school, the question that would be more useful to the DP community is: to what extent are its practices effective in keeping their students engaged and in school?

### *Using Grounded Theory To Inform my Research Question:*

During my time at Diploma Plus, I conducted 9 interviews, 2 audio recorded and 7 video recorded. In my interviews, I asked questions about race, such as, “How do you think factors such as race, class, and gender influence schooling and education?” and “How does it feel like

having a faculty/staff here at Diploma Plus that is predominantly people of Color?” However, in an attempt to challenge the projection of my own analysis on the interviewees, my main questions centered on the students and staff’s own interpretations of their schooling experiences, both as students and teachers. I asked questions such as “Please describe your schooling experience” and “How did you end up at Diploma Plus?” It was in these answers related to the students and staff’s personal interactions with school that issues of race organically started to emerge. For example, take my interview with Christa Pereira, the main student that I focus on in my film. I asked her to describe her schooling experience in Charlestown (referred to as “upstairs”) in comparison to her experience at DP:

GG: How would you describe your schooling experiences upstairs and then maybe transitioning into Diploma Plus?

CP: Down here in DP, its more family like. You get to express yourself how you want to without being judged. And the learning environment is definitely different. Upstairs you learn like basics as you would, you know, math. And—I—I can speak how I really feel right?

GG: Yeah.

CP: Okay, so I feel like upstairs they just teach, like, things that are really irrelevant to the world that we’re living in. And DP is definitely more precise, and more into about what they teach involving our system and racism and stuff like that. We get more deeper and intellectual about things down here.

As opposed to traditional social science research that seeks out data to prove already presupposed theories, the use of the data I gathered through interviews and video recorded footage to inform my research question was an example of grounded theory, or “the discovery of theory from data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Through interviews like the one I had with Christa, I realized that the focus of my thesis would not necessarily be on how the students felt marginalized by traditional schooling systems, as I had originally expected. Instead, it would be about the reverse—about how Diploma Plus as an alternative schooling program made its

students feel legitimized and empowered. Thus, along with using film to honor the actual voices of Color, applying aspects of grounded theory to my methodology is a way in which I attempt to center the input of students of Color.

*Importance of my Role as Researcher and Recognizing Power Dynamics:*

Though the main purpose of my project was to film Diploma Plus, I first started by visiting without my camera and taking notes, in order to become familiar with the program and its members. I observed academic classrooms, elective courses, and other program-wide activities such as Circle (designated time for program-wide discussions and decision making) and Justice League (DP's student-led disciplinary decision group). My decision to observe and familiarize myself with the program was to (1) Respect my position as a complete stranger to this program (2) Challenge the assumption that my college student identity proved my research was "well-intentioned" and (3) Establish a level of comfort between the community, the camera, and I. It was only after establishing this sense of comfort, I felt, that the students and staff would feel at ease about being their true selves in front of the camera and disassociate it from the idea of being watched or judged. The significance of establishing this relationship prior to filming was immediately revealed to me once I started filming. As I filmed classrooms lessons or transitions between academic blocks, there were incidences when the students would curse on camera or do something they considered inappropriate and would immediately turn to me and say "cut that out" or "don't include that." Thus, though I began visiting Diploma Plus towards the end of my sophomore year, I did not start conducting on-camera interviews until almost half a year later (October 31, 2013). Additionally, I did not start filming daily classroom and program activities until about a month after that. By taking the time to establish a level of trust, I was humanizing

DP students and staff by taking their feelings and level of comfort into consideration. By not immediately filming or conducting interviews, I was challenging the exploitative nature of research that would have regarded the members of the Diploma Plus community as merely “subjects” to be used for the benefit of my own research.

When I finally began to film, I always made sure to ask for the student and staff’s permission, especially during more personal activities such as Circle. I shot over 28 hours of footage of classroom time, Circle, other program activities, along with more focused footage of two students, Keisha Fertil and Rene Laguerre, over the summer in their communities and at home<sup>5</sup>. Though I initially began taking observation notes, I later depended on classroom footage to remind me of the days’ progress. I started visiting 1-3 times a week roughly between 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM from June 2013 until December 2014, with a break between July and September of 2013 (as school was not in session for the summer) and another break between January and May of 2014 while I studied abroad for a semester. Throughout the summer of 2014 I stayed in contact with Rene and Keisha and followed them on their summer endeavors. When the school year started, I began visiting again from September 2014 to December 2014.

### Using Film:

When first thinking about how I wanted to present Diploma Plus, I eventually settled on filming a documentary because of what I understood to be the invisibility of this particular student population. High school “dropouts” are the throwaways of our education system. Once they have left the system, they are no longer accounted for. This is evident just in the label given

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<sup>5</sup> When first filming my documentary, I had initially planned on having the stories of two students, Keisha and Rene, to be the focus of it. I decided to film these two students over the summer at work, in their home, and transporting to and from places. This changed, however, as I decided to use my film to paint a more holistic portrait of DP and its members.

to them; according to the Merriam-Webster Thesaurus, the word “dropout” is related to terms such as “quitter,” “failure,” and words that are as demeaning as “good-for-nothing,” “lay-about,” “loafer,” and “deadbeat” (2015). And with the population being disproportionately poor and Black and Latino, they are further made invisible for being members of the lowest rungs of our society. Thus, I began to look at my documentary not just as a vehicle for transmitting information, but also as an attempt to provide a platform where high school “dropouts” can represent themselves.

Although student interviews quoted in papers can also be representations of their own words, I strongly believe there is a shift in power dynamics when one actually sees disadvantaged groups, particularly Black and Brown people, physically speaking and representing themselves. This is because, whereas the dominant narrative about high school “dropouts” and students of Color as a whole is defined by those in power, my documentary is an attempt to actively and visually frame marginalized students as producers of their own knowledge, knowledge that is legitimized through the telling of their stories and lived experiences so they can add their own reality to the story being constructed about them. Though as a social actor in this process I am aware of my own voice within the work I have produced (in the end, I am deciding what goes in my film, who is included, what events are emphasized, etc.), I believe using video-recorded footage of Diploma Plus students and their teachers is the most deliberate way for me to have them challenge the narrative that has been constructed about them as they use their own stories to define who they are for themselves. Thus, I am trying to center counter-storytelling by providing access to verbatim dialogue and using it to inform my work. This differs from having only my interpretation of that dialogue stand by itself.

Lastly, in addition to being a visual representation of the students at Diploma Plus, my film is also an attempt to tell a story. Storytelling, as Richard Delgado argues in his piece “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” has the power to “shatter complacency and challenge the status quo,” especially if it is told from the perspective of the oppressed (1989, p. 2414). According to Delgado, stories or counter-stories are incredibly powerful in official discourse because “their graphic quality can stir imagination in ways which more conventional discourse cannot” (1989, p. 2415). If, as Delgado argues, the act of telling a story is enough to help us imagine a world that is different than the oppressive one we live in, then my film, in actually *showing* an alternate system that currently exists, can give us more than just hope to cling on to.

At its core, my use of film in this thesis is an attempt to be a tool for DP; to paint a portrait of the program in a way that highlights its success while using a camera to have DP speak for itself. It is important to note that though I am presenting myself as a conduit for the voices of DP community, this is not the same as *giving* them voice; the students and staff of the Diploma Plus most certainly have a voice: I am just providing an outlet of representation to a community that may not normally have one.

#### *Importance of Student Voice in my Film:*

It is important that student voices (and the voices of their teachers of Color) are foregrounded in this film, because, as Critical Race Theory argues, there is a need to have the lived experiences of people of Color validated as actual knowledge in order to decenter Whiteness and, thus, combat racism (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Whereas current knowledge about them is produced through the dominant (White) narrative, validating students of Color as knowledge producers decenters Whiteness by deliberately centering the knowledge produced by

bodies of Color. Thus, my film aims to provide a platform through which “dropouts” and at-risk students of Color can voice their experiences in the face of the narrative of meritocracy—that students fail or succeed solely on the basis of their individual merit—that is propagated by schools and our education system. As students who have been failed by our schooling system, DP students are the focus of my film because they are best positioned to understand what is or is not working about school. In highlighting their own critiques on schooling in the film, their agency is being acknowledged as they get to define their educational journey for themselves, on their own terms.

Additionally, I further attempt to legitimize the voices and lived experiences of students of Color by asking them to take part in the production process of my film. In holding a focus group with both DP students and staff prior to creating a final product, I am deliberately making space for them to voice their opinions and concerns about the film, making it partly a collaborative effort between the participants in the film and me. This is also an example of grounded theory, as I am using collected data—their feedback on the film—to help inform what will appear in the final product.

*Reflection on my Methods:*

From the interactions mentioned above, in addition to many others I had before I began filming, it seemed to me that dedicating a significant portion of my research time to first getting to know Diploma Plus increased the level of comfort for students once I did start filming. This shows in my film and other video-recorded footage I have of interviews and everyday stock footage where the students were open to sharing personal information with me, being honest

with me (as we see in my interview with Christa above), and allowing me to film them at home and so close to their physical bodies (which is also seen in my documentary).

Having acknowledged my position as a researcher, a college student, and a low-income Latina, and the power dynamics inherent in my identity allowed me to even consider familiarizing myself with the community first before diving into standard research work. Though I sensed that the students were at-first a bit skeptical of what I was doing at Diploma Plus, the faculty and staff voiced this more openly. Thus, they were very appreciative, while still being critical of me, when they read my letter of purpose/intent as it gave them a clearer sense of my reasons for doing research at Diploma Plus to begin with.

Lastly, and as will be discussed more in depth in the Conclusion of this thesis, having the data I gathered inform of my thesis (instead of the other way around) along with having part of my work presented in the form of a film allowed both the students and the staff to feel accurately represented. The film itself also proved to be a powerful means of presenting my work as on many levels it was more accessible to the students, and as hoped, generated a real sense of empowerment for them and their teachers by actually seeing themselves represented on screen.

Overall, using these methods allowed for my research to be—as best as I could make it—less exploitative and actually intended *for* the Diploma Plus community. Just as this thesis—both written and filmed pieces—aim to challenge the dominant narrative that labels students of Color who were once at risk of leaving or who have already left school as failures, the methods I use to carry it out aim to challenge the traditional understanding of research as objective by deliberately including the members of the community in the knowledge production process.

### **Chapter 3: DP's Ideology and Praxis**

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Diploma Plus did not emerge in a vacuum; alternative schooling methods and systems, particularly for students of Color, have existed for as long as the fight against racism and unequal education has been at play. In this history of attempting to educate and thus liberate students of Color, one of the milestone pedagogical frameworks that alternative schools have used as a model has been Paulo Freire's "problem-posing" teaching methodology, which uses dialogue-centered—as opposed to one-way lecture-dependent—teaching strategies to acknowledge students as knowledge producers and warrant their ideas and opinions as valuable (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002, p. 70). This focus on the lived experiences of students of Color, in addition to an education that challenges traditional teaching paradigms through racism-centered curriculum that examines discrimination and possible solutions to address it, is also applying CRT to Education (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002, p. 68). Many of the practices and procedures that DP employs, along with the overall environment DP fosters, are in line with both of these ideological and theoretical approaches. In this chapter, I describe what that environment and the practices and that DP employs look like, and I argue that Diploma Plus challenges the "dropout" narrative by empowering its students through the validation of their lived experiences. For comprehension, I have divided the different components of Diploma Plus into three different themes/sections, though there is most definitely overlap between them.

## 1. Structure and Community: Challenging Dominant Ideologies

### *Competency-Based Grading:*

Being an “alternative” schooling program, what DP is most known for is its competency-based grading. According to Sunny Pai, the director of Diploma Plus, competency-based grading gives students the opportunity to show mastery of a skill and get full credit for it, regardless of how long it takes them to do so (personal communication, June 25, 2014). This challenges the dominant ideology that is propagated by schools by not only complicating the idea of “objective” standards put forth by schools, but also by rejecting the dominant idea that if a student does not complete an assignment on-time—a deadline imposed by the school—that that student is an underachiever, not smart, and unable to complete the work. While in traditional grading systems, as one DP student, John Wright describes, “if you fail the term, the term is over, you can’t go back to that term you have an F for the term...[At DP] you have to complete the work—it makes you learn. You can’t just not know something and get away with it” (personal communication, November 19, 2012). Using competency-based grading, DP believes that their students, regardless of their racial location or prior academic performance, can achieve because they have the capacity to do so.

This is particularly important to understanding the “failure” of students of Color, as schools perpetuate a dominant ideology of objectivity that assumes all teachers, administrators, schools perceive and treat students equally. However, this ideology ignores and actually deliberately denies that race plays a role in teacher/school-student relations and our everyday interactions. This is evident in the ways Black students are singled out for punishment more than their White counterparts (Ferguson, 2001), why Latino students are not expected to succeed

(Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien, 2008), and why all Asian/Asian-Americans are stereotyped to do extremely well in school despite the existence of Asian/Asian-American “dropouts” (Lee, 2009; Lew, 2003). In believing in this narrative of objectivity, teachers and schools work under the assumption that all students are equally able to succeed if they work hard enough, without understanding that both interpersonal (such as believing and perpetuating racial stereotypes) and institutional racism (including culturally insensitive practices such as lacking bilingual teachers or policing language through the imposition of a “standard English” (Ferguson, 2001) actually put obstacles in the way of learning for students of Color.

Along with difficult conditions within school, many students of Color, particularly in public school, are also poor or low-income, which only expands the range of outside factors that influence their performance in school. These include anything from commuting far distances, having to take care of sick family members, to working while in school (S. Pai, personal communication, October 31, 2013; S. Pai, personal communication, June 25, 2014). Having to endure such conditions, there are a myriad of reasons why students of Color are not completing work in a timely manner. Because DP faculty and staff are aware of such structural obstacles, they understand that it might take students longer to write a paper. Thus, DP challenges so-called objective standards placed by traditional schools by understanding that students are coming from different places in their learning journey. They know that each of these outside factors influences the way they engage with material, what they decide to dedicate more time to, what comes easier to them and what does not.

*Critically Conscious Teachers:*

In applying CRT to their community, it is crucial that the teachers at Diploma Plus are critically conscious. According to Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, a critically conscious teacher “(a) holds a critique of social structures in urban schools and (b) is willing to engage in social action to affect change,” (2002, p. 81). In an interview with the assistant director of DP, Thai Small, she explains how the teachers at DP are critically conscious through their cultural competency:

So we have the Black woman, who’s the assistant director who has been where the kids have been and...I’m very relatable because I was them—I was the student...Then you have [a director] who is Asian but very much culturally competent...So you have two people that are leading this ship that are very competent in what they do and genuinely care. It’s not a paycheck, it’s not data, it’s not about numbers...it’s genuinely about the students...The science teacher...a White man, but...he gets where these kids came from, where they’re going, where they need to go. And of course we have our math teacher, who is a Black man. And the kids are real lucky because when they’re in his room, not only are they learning math, but they’re learning how to be self-aware and how to get through the world...he knows that, they’re starting behind this world—all the systems, court systems, school systems everything is a system—is built to be *against* them. And he teaches them how to maneuver through that. (personal communication, September 16, 2014)

I would argue that this critical consciousness exists largely in part because of DP’s diverse faculty and staff; five out of the seven faculty and staff members are people of Color. As TribalCrit theorist, Bryan Brayboy, explains in “Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory” (2005), there is a need for more teachers of Color in school, especially when teaching students of Color. Quoting a Native American teacher, Brayboy writes, “we need teachers who look like us, talk like us, and think like us. To know what it means to be [tribal name] is an important part of this,” (p. 426). In other words, students can begin to resist oppressive structures that try to either invalidate or completely deny their experiences if they can relate to and see themselves reflected in the people who teach them.

Having teachers of historically underrepresented groups is also important because teacher perception of students is influenced by each teacher's individual identity and their understanding of their lived experiences through that specific raced, gendered, and classed lens (Ferguson, 2005, p. 89; Macleod, 1987, p. 101; Solórzano, 1997, p. 10). Sunny Pai, the director of Diploma Plus, agrees with this sentiment:

I think our staff has a better mix of diversity...most structures are not designed in schools to serve kids who are either, who are Black, Brown, and poor...And I think we are constantly checking through lenses of race and class and socioeconomics, sexual orientation, what have you... But I think...if you are teaching in a school with a particular population like here and you're not thinking about those things...then what are you doing...teachers have to reflect on those various issues if they are going to serve students well. (personal communication, October 31, 2013)

The positive effect that having not only critically conscious teachers, but also teachers of Color is evident among the students. Out of the 5 students I interviewed, 3 of them agreed that having teachers of Color was a good thing:

I feel like it has a positive effect because if they look like me and they have the same skin tone as me, then that can be me and I can help somebody else that's just like me when I was younger...And then, if they happen to look like you, even better. Because it's just like, you give them a sense of hope. (K. Fertil, personal communication, November 22, 2013).

Thus, while White teachers—which currently make up 90% of the public school teaching demographic—may not be able to recognize how their biases contribute to discriminatory schooling practices, at Diploma Plus, more than half of the faculty and staff can assist their students more effectively and assess them more accurately. This is not only because DP teachers are aware of how their social location affects their teaching, but also because, as teachers of Color, they too have felt the effects of institutional racism. Thus, most of them can relate and be empathetic to student experiences through the marginalized identities they share, which also challenges the narrative that propagates the so-called neutrality of teachers.

## 2. Restorative Justice and Circle: Centering Student Voice

### *Restorative-Justice and the Justice League:*

At Diploma Plus, students are allowed to choose between 3 electives: “It’s Bigger than Hip-Hop” (or for the previous year that I visited DP, it was “Social Justice and Power” taught by the same elective teacher, Ernesto “Eroc” Arroyo), gym, or “Justice League.” Justice League—which takes after the larger movement of Restorative Justice (Koehler, 2014)—is where students get to decide their own consequences and suggest courses of action for one another when they have done what Justice League instructor, Janet Connors, calls “harm to oneself or the community,” (personal communication, December 12, 2013). For example, if a student is constantly coming in late to school, he/she is allowed to think of strategies to help alleviate this issue as opposed to receiving traditional punishment such as a detention or suspension. That is because Restorative Justice is “a movement based on healing and connecting, and as such, shifts our way of thinking from dominating and punishing...to respecting all people, listening to them, and seeking solutions to conflict that satisfy everyone’s needs” (Koehler, 2014). This is unlike the disciplinary procedures of traditional schools. As Christa describes:

There is no Justice League upstairs so if you get into an altercation with a teacher you’re suspended. Bye, see you later. The only hearing you get is with your parents and your parents most of the time take the teachers side...you got more hopes of...staying in DP if you have your youth here to elaborate and advocate for you...Upstairs and in regular schools teachers just got teacher side and students get no say. But here in DP students actually...get roles to run things on their own. (personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Restorative Justice and the Justice League are in line with Freirean ideology as well as CRT in education as it allows for students’ knowledge about themselves and how they learn best

to be validated through institutional decisions of punishment (or in this case, self and community restoration). In valuing student experiences by allowing such things as student suggestions for changes to disciplinary practices, Diploma Plus also applies Tara Yosso's theory of "community cultural wealth"<sup>6</sup>. Unlike the deficit model that schools follow, which consider communities of Color to *lack* cultural capital, community cultural wealth recognizes the knowledge, skills, and abilities that communities of Color do have and use to resist oppression (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). Thus, DP acknowledges their students' knowledge, opinions, and skills as valuable, and furthermore, empowers them by allowing student voice to influence institutional procedures.

Additionally, the very nature of practicing Restorative Justice also challenges unfair disciplinary approaches, as discussed in *Bad Boys* (Ferguson, 2001) and other scholarship, that unjustly target students of Color. Rather than imposing taken-for-granted rules of "appropriate" behavior and, by extension, normalized punishments that can discriminate on the basis of race or class, the Justice League at Diploma Plus allows for variation in disciplinary practices that is more fitting to its specific student population. In this way, it also is in line with CRT as the Justice League steers clear of traditional disciplinary procedures that make false claims of race-neutrality and objectivity.

#### *Circle:*

Circle is one of the main program-wide activities that take place at Diploma Plus every week<sup>7</sup>. For each Circle, there is a new topic of discussion; whether it is about current events happening outside the classroom or, deliberating internal issues within the program, Circle is the

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<sup>6</sup> This concept is very related but beyond the scope of my thesis. Please see reference list for articles on community cultural wealth.

<sup>7</sup> Circle alternates between big circle and small circle every week; small circle is when the larger DP student body is divided up into smaller advising groups. However, the structure and purpose of small circle, despite its smaller size, is still the same.

opportunity where power dynamics are challenged, the relationship between student and teacher becomes parallel and student voices are considered equals. In the second school year since I had started visiting Diploma Plus began, Sunny Pai, the director of DP, introduced the program's first Circle of the school year. He explained that Circle, modeled after Native American tradition, was an opportunity for the students and staff to come together to discuss and make decisions as a community. Most importantly, he explained the way circle was structured and why:

In a circle, every voice is equal...the reason why we all sit is because we are on the same level. Whether I'm the director of the program doesn't matter or not when we're sitting in Circle. We are all members of this community together...Because as this talking piece goes around, you can say what you want. So the trust is...that you actually use that opportunity to speak something into the Circle that helps create the community, helps strengthen the community. That's your job when you participate in a Circle like this. (S. Pai, personal communication, September 23, 2014)

All of the Circles I observed and video-recorded followed this structure, and, in fact, many of the topics for Circle were decided by students and led by students. To hold a weekly community session like Sunny describes above, DP solidifies the legitimization of student voice into the environment and overall purpose of DP as a program. Students are expected to be present for Circle every week, just as teachers are, and many of the students voice how much they enjoy and look forward to Circle every week. In this space, they are able to express how they really feel, including bringing issues to their teachers' attention (C. Pereira, personal communication, December 18, 2014). This is important because, by centering the experiences of these students who are people of Color, Diploma Plus is inherently decentering Whiteness, which in turn refutes dominant ideology, and White privilege (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). When the students at Diploma Plus have been silenced, not only for being students of Color, but also for being labeled as a "dropout" or "at-risk," Circle is an opportunity to empower the students by making space for and valuing their voices and input.

### 3. Curriculum and Activism: Centering Race and Emancipatory Education

#### *Acknowledging Race*

Because race and racism are endemic and fundamental to understanding how society functions in the United States, foregrounding issues of race is crucial in order to make it visible, to accept it as an issue, and thus, working towards eradicating it (Yosso, 2005, p. 71). One of the fundamental and straightforward ways that DP centers race and racism is by acknowledging the raced identities of both its students and staff. This is invariably important because schools are more likely to impose a hidden curriculum of White, middle-class culture when its teachers and staff do not acknowledge the power dynamics of race. This can lead to teachers engaging in colorblind discourses that refuse to recognize race and thus, the “invisibility of whiteness, of race as a position of power and privilege,” within the school (Ferguson, 2000, p. 202). The denial of this group privilege puts full responsibility of punishment and failure on the behavior of the students without recognizing how the school and its teachers can be biased in their interpretation of student behavior and/or are implicated in creating circumstances that influence that behavior. This demonstrates how even “well-intentioned individuals actually and actively reproduce systems of oppression through institutional practices and symbolic forms of violence,” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 73).

At Diploma Plus, students as well as teachers are very aware of the racial composition of the program and frequently take the time to discuss issues of race within school and within larger society. Take, for example, the discussion that took place during one of DP’s Circles after the MSNBC article was released that labeled the students “at-risk” of “getting in trouble with the law” (Leitsinger, 2013). According to Ferguson, “at-risk” is actually a coded racial narrative that:

...Is central to a discourse about the contemporary crisis in urban schools in America that explains children's failure as largely the consequence of their attitudes and behaviors as well as those of their families...The category has been invested with enormous power to identify, explain, and predict futures. (2001, p. 91)

In understanding the negative and racialized connotations associated with this term, DP teachers dedicated an entire day to addressing the language of the article, as well as trying to get students to understand the greater implications this kind of representation has for them in a larger societal context. One student explained after reading the article, “[the reporter] makes it sound like we don’t do any academic work, she makes it sound like we are all ‘gang-bangers’” (personal communication, October 18, 2013). Another student said, “She only spent like an hour here. It would’ve been better if she was here for like a month or something to know what we’re about” (personal communication, October 18, 2013). Like Ferguson describes, this process was to help them understand that for Black and Brown bodies like their own, these events “have repercussions in the world outside the chain-link fence of the school,” (2000, p. 87). In other words, and as is supposed to be used in CRT in education, Diploma Plus used this incident to teach students how race and racism are key to understanding the ways US society functions, (Yosso, 2005, p. 73).

*Curriculum: “We’re not just here to educate them...most importantly it’s about being self-aware and how they can change the world” (T. Small, personal communication, September 16, 2014).*

Above is a quote from my interview with Thai regarding DP’s curriculum, which I argue, is the epitome of DP’s ideology and praxis—the merging of theory and practice. Thai, along with the entire faculty and staff of the program are aware of their larger mission to make their students self-aware and incorporate it most explicitly in their curriculum. The way they go about doing so

is through providing a relevant curriculum. For example, Keisha Fertil, now a junior at Diploma Plus, describes what they are learning in Mr. Thomas' history class:

In history class we are learning about police brutality...why it happens, how it happens. Is it the police as an individual's fault, or is it, like, society's fault...has it always been corrupted...people say racism doesn't exist...but if you sit back and look at the cases that we examine, that's not really the case...I feel like the topics that we talk about are not your average textbook topics and stuff...We talk about issues that matter, issues that, you know, are important to us...if it's important to us, and we know what's going on and it's closer to home, then of course we're going to be more engaged in what we're talking about, what we're learning. (personal communication, October 10, 2014)

Injustice enacted by police is in fact a relevant issue to DP students when incarcerated peoples are overwhelmingly Black and Latino and the majority of Black and Latino inmates are youth (Rios, 2006, p. 41). As Keisha describes above, this issue "is closer to home," which allows her and her peers to be more engaged with the curriculum.

For Mr. Thomas, "relevance is the most important thing. See, I teach history...Kids don't care about George Washington...you gotta make things relevant to their lives," (personal communication. November 14, 2013). Though a White male, Mr. Thomas is described by his colleagues as "culturally competent," meaning he understands the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between him and his students (T. Small, personal communication, October 16, 2014). Therefore, as opposed to Eurocentric curriculums taught in schools across the country, relevant curriculum for Mr. Thomas manifests itself in courses that center the experiences of people of Color as Diploma Plus is a predominantly Black and Latino program. Focusing on issues like racism and colonialism (to name two of the themes he focused on in the past two academic school years), Mr. Thomas makes his classes relevant to his students by centering issues the directly affect their lives. Most importantly, his assignments aim to raise his students' consciousness around these different forms of oppression and encourage them to become social

actors, "to treat the wall less like a wall and more like a membrane...to take what they learn here beyond the classroom," (O. Thomas, personal communication, November 12, 2014). This is why he and the students organized and created their own play titled "It's Bigger Than Ferguson." Named after the shooting of an unarmed Black teenager, Mike Brown, in the summer of 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri by a White police officer, the play was a compilation of transcriptions from interviews students conducted asking community members (family members, teachers, police officers, and the like) their opinions about police brutality. The students worked for over two weeks memorizing their specific monologues and performed it before their classmates and other school community members in early March of 2015 (personal communication, March 11, 2015). In making the curriculum relevant to the students' lives, Diploma Plus centers the experiences of people of Color and the struggles they face. As Yosso describes, in learning about racist systems and using the lived experiences of students of Color to deconstruct them, "victims of racism can often find their voice. Those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone...They become empowered participants...listening to how the arguments against them are made and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves" (2005, p. 74-75).

Though it may seem more common to have a history class diverge from traditional curriculum, Mr. Frederick does this even in his math class. As Thai describes in the aforementioned quote, Mr. Frederick does not just teach math—he teaches the students how to navigate a socially oppressive world. During a math class that I observed in June of 2014, Keon, a freshman at the time, entered the room going in about how the Illuminati is a secret group made up of major celebrities like the rapper, Jay-Z, that gain power and fame through worshipping the devil. Mr. Frederick, in strong opposition to Keon, took his statement as an opportunity to teach the class about the history of the Illuminati and how it made it to the "hood"

(H. Frederick, personal communication, June 3, 2014). He began with defining the origins of the word “illuminate,” then explained who the original illuminati were, and finally, explained that conspiracy theories emerged in the “hood” in the 70s and 80s to try to explain why things happen to “us” (poor people of Color). Deconstructing different ideas such as the military industrial complex—which he describes as “the players who profit from war”—and recapping the U.S. involvement in Haiti because of the United Fruit Company, he finally explained that though there is some truth to a secret group of people controlling are society, that it would not be made up of famous people of Color like Keon suggested, but rather extremely wealthy White men who maintain their power through their invisibility (H. Frederick, personal communication, June 3, 2014). When Mr. Frederick listed a few of the men that do control much of the world’s economy, such as the Koch Brothers and Rupert Murdoch, the students were not aware who they were or that they existed.

This is one of the many ways that Mr. Frederick uses his classroom to teach his students not only about things that are important to them, but also how to transform that information into something that is useful and that challenge dominant narrative. This is also why Mr. Frederick, despite being the math teacher, was the one to organize a public demonstration to protest police harassment that centered on the written stories of DP students' personal experiences with the police (H. Frederick, personal communication, September 12, 2014).

#### *Activism:*

During my time at Charlestown High, Diploma Plus had many teach-ins throughout the school year both for DP and for the larger CHS and BPS community. The teach-ins ranged from commemorating Nelson Mandela to an all-day workshop on Ferguson and “extrajudicial killings,” as Mr. Frederick referred to them. During the Ferguson teach-in, the students were

asked to watch multiple news stories regarding the deaths of Black men by police, as well as news stories commenting on the backlash that erupted in Ferguson post-murder. The students were allowed to give their opinions and ask questions regarding both kinds of news stories.

It was this teach-in that led up to the demonstration that Mr. Frederick organized for the students. At the end of the teach-in, when announcing the protest, Mr. Frederick explains:

We are going to march. The march for you is what we call an ‘authentic assessment.’... This is going to measure how well you write, how well you speak, how well you comport yourself in public and is going to prepare you for the bigger fights—the badder fights—when you leave us. But we have to train you in some of these things—the march is a part of the training...The format this is going to take is a testimonial. We are going to be the flyest, baddest, most progressive, most revolutionary, most rebellious thing going in BPS because if 60 to 75 of y’all show up with something like this to say in some public place, people are going to notice, I guarantee. Alright? So get prepared. (personal communication, September 8, 2014)

The DP “march” took place on September 12, 2014, only four days after the teach-in on Ferguson. The demonstration consisted of what Mr. Frederick called “testimonials” of about 20 students, each of them telling a story about their own personal experiences with police brutality and police harassment. Every piece ended with a question that challenged the certain details of their experiences, highlighting the discrimination that people of Color specifically face. For example, Christa tells a story of her friend whom the police unjustifiably harassed while waiting for the subway. She ends her story with the question, “What if he wasn’t a dark-skinned young man?” Similarly, another student, David White, told a dolorous story that detailed the blatant racism and physical abuse his brother faced by a pair of cops who falsely accused him of robbing an elderly woman. In his story, he explains that, as people began to congregate around the commotion, the woman who was the victim of the robbery approached the cops and pleaded to them that the robber was not David’s brother. David’s story ends with the question, “What if that woman had not spoken up?”

As is one of the major tenets of CRT in education, the centrality of student voice in this demonstration “recognizes that the experiential knowledge of People of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about subordination,” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). In this case, the students were using their own stories to process and challenge the ways they and their community are oppressed. Additionally, DP students participating in a demonstration like this is exemplary of emancipatory education: an education that transforms its students’ point of awareness, which in turn results in action and change (Jones & Gayles, 2008, p. 105).

*Daily Quotes:*

Throughout my time at Diploma Plus, a tradition that the program formulated with time was writing a quote of the day on the whiteboard of the DP common room. This quote was intended to inspire the students in a way that spoke to their lives as students of Color. From my observations, a person of Color said every written quote. Of the quotes I took video-recorded footage, one of them was from Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I rise”: “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise/I rise/I rise.” This quote, along with the many other quotes by Gandhi, Tupac Shakur, and more, centered race and racism as they speak to the struggles of oppressed people. Having a quote written everyday that was said by a person of Color inherently centers race within the daily practices of Diploma Plus and the environment that DP strives to create.

The quote by rapper, Mos Def, “Basic survival requires super heroics,” was another quote that had been written on the board by Mr. Frederick on the first day of classes for the 2014-2015 school year. It was in the context of deconstructing cases of police brutality and in preparing for

their police brutality protest. He explained to the students that the quote meant that, if you are part of an oppressed group, in order to make it and thrive, you need to be excellent:

So that when combated with these things that inevitably, we face, you not only have a good sense of what's wrong with a particular case, what's unfair about it, the history of said injustice, and then some idea of how you can move forward and push back against it, resist it, and make sure that future generations may not have to endure the same thing that you have. But at the moment that you become mediocre, you are a perfect victim...It's not your particular job to change the world by yourself, it is your job to be very well informed of what's going and make yourself an agent instead of a victim. Things are going to happen to you regardless. The question always is how are you going to respond and what are you doing on a day-to-day basis to try and ensure that they will not happen again. (H. Frederick, personal communication, September 8, 2014)

The purpose of sharing this quote, according to Mr. Frederick, was in order for the students “ to have a keen self-esteem, in order for you guys to make it on a day-to-day basis...in order for you guys to feel some sense of humanity in the face of all of these isms” (personal communication, September 8, 2014). Once again, at the forefront of this quote, and in turn, one of the traditional practices of Diploma Plus are issues of race and racism. Most importantly, by first centering these issues, DP as a community is then able to think of ways to then combat racism, as Mr. Frederick says here.

Though a daily quote might seem insignificant to the larger purpose of an alternative schooling program, I wanted to include this section because these quotes, in addition to the other signs and murals around the walls of the actual building, create a physical environment where dominant ideologies are being challenged around them. It means that every part, even the program's white boards and the physical walls that the program is held within, attempts to not only challenge racism, but also frame people of Color as heroes, leaders, and producers of knowledge.

*Conclusion:*

Using CRT in Education and Freirean ideology helps student success by challenging dominant ideologies, validating students of Color by focusing on their voice, and empowering students by training them to be social actors that can create change. In this chapter, I discuss how DP's approaches and strategies do just that. Through the multiple facets that make up its community, Diploma Plus acknowledges the lived experiences of students and uses them to inform the overall function of the program. The emphasis on student experience is important because a genuine appreciation of the stories of students who have left school or were once at risk of leaving is needed in order to fully understand the complexity of the "dropout" issue. Reiterating Ladson-Billings & Tate in "Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education," the perspective of these students is necessary to fully understand how our educational system functions and how to make steps towards social justice (1995, p. 95). As students of Color, Diploma Plus students' lives are undoubtedly shaped by structural racism along with other large societal factors that make up our society; this impacts their experiences both within and beyond the walls of a classroom. Thus, if one takes the time to recognize *how* racism affects students' lives, this challenges the dominant "dropout" narrative. It does so by moving beyond the individual decision to leave school, and implicating what influenced them to leave. It also, as I focus in this chapter, begins to look at what would engage them enough to make them stay.

The film I created in tandem with this analytical paper captures the different components of the Diploma Plus program in action. Through scenes of classroom footage, student and teacher interviews, the police brutality protest the students participated in, and more the viewer gets an inside look on DP, how it operates, and why it is successful in empowering its students. Most importantly, the viewer is able to actually *see* and hear the moving stories of the students

and the dedication of the teachers, told and defined by the students and teachers themselves. Including a documentary as part of this thesis is to allow for this otherwise inaccessible form of representation and connection between viewer and film to exist.

However, it is important to note that this was not an easy process. I was only able to catch the essence of the DP community on camera by first building a foundation of trust. Though I established a decent level of comfort by the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year (by that point, students remembered my name and excitedly greeted me when I entered a room) this was complicated by the aforementioned incident with a White *MSNBC* reporter who visited in early October (a day that I was not present). She came in to write an article on the Restorative Justice practices that DP uses, and in the article she wrote: “At Charlestown High School, where many students come from high-crime neighborhoods, an innovative program employs a surprising method to help keep teens in school and out of trouble with the law: Encouraging them to talk to each other” (Leitsinger, 2013). Titled “Goodbye Zero Tolerance: Program Aims to Cut 'School-to-Prison Pipeline',” the article was intended to highlight how Restorative Justice practices like DP uses is better at keeping students in school and thus, “out of trouble” than the zero-tolerance policies that other schools have.

However, descriptors such as “from high-crime neighborhoods” or “troubled,” as Leitsinger uses, are ones constantly being used when describing poor youth of Color. In their consistent use, they have become coded-racial narratives that essentialize all poor students of Color as a homogenous group, which “reinforces pernicious stereotypes and poignantly set them up for racist vitriol,” as Mr. Frederick, DP’s math teacher, wrote in a response letter to NBC News (personal communication, October 18, 2013)<sup>8</sup>. As such, the article stirred up much opposition within the DP community to the point where they dedicated an entire day to

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<sup>8</sup> See *Appendix A* for a copy of this letter.

deconstructing the language and intent in the reporter's article. In one of the smaller focus groups I observed discussing the article, one student noted, "she makes it seem like we're all gangbangers" (personal communication, October 18, 2013). And when reflecting on what the writer could have done better, many students, like Deandre Michel, voiced that she should have spent more time with the community and gotten to know them first as opposed to coming in for just a couple of hours with "her own agenda":

I disagree with what her approach was on DP 'cause I felt like—a program so complex, you can't really give like 'this is what it is' in one day. You need to really do research and spend time and get to know—I feel like she already had her—what she was going to say already in place...But like, realistically, no. It's not what she said at all. It made us all look worse than what we really are (personal communication, November 14, 2013).

Witnessing the discomfort this reporter caused the DP community reminded me of the ways that standard research is exploitative (Smith, 1999). As a White woman and a news reporter—someone who is deemed a "trusted" knowledge producer—her interactions with Diploma Plus—a community of Color that knowledge was being produced about—is entirely embedded in asymmetric power dynamics. By not acknowledging and making transparent these dynamics, her views represented by her words resulted in re-inscribing dominant narratives and stereotypical images of students of Color. Her article was not about the students but about her work as an MSNBC reporter. She benefited from the knowledge she produced; the people of Color she was writing about did not. It is this kind of research and narrative that is destructive to students of Color that I tried to combat.

Around this time, I was visiting Diploma Plus more regularly, and this incident only reiterated my need to be transparent with DP about my work. I wrote a letter of intent/purpose to the DP staff so they knew where I was coming from; that the way the reporter framed DP students was exactly what I was trying to challenge in my documentary (stereotypes and coded

racial narratives about high school “dropouts”/“at-risk” students of Color in “urban” schools)<sup>9</sup>. In an interview, Keisha told me that, unlike the MSNBC reporter, I was actually trying to get to know DP by spending more time there: “You’ve been around more than she has...you know us, you wouldn’t want to misrepresent us” (K. Fertil, personal communication, November 22, 2013). After hearing Keisha tell me this, I needed to make sure that what I did with my thesis made her comment true.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Appendix B: Letter of Intent*

## Conclusion

About two weeks after completing a rough-cut of my film, I held three different focus groups to give me feedback. The first group was with the Diploma Plus staff, which had specifically asked to see it before the students saw it. Sunny explained that it was because the staff was “extra careful,” and, despite it being a year and half since the MSNBC reporter had unwarrantedly written such a misrepresentative article about their students, I could only understand their hesitation (personal communication, March 19, 2015).

After they watched the film, Thai began the feedback discussion in the most pleasantly unexpected way: “Thank you...I’ve been working at DP...for almost four years...and it’s the best video I’ve ever seen done on our community,” (personal communication, March 27, 2015). After all the work I put into the film in trying to make that possible, it proved that all the initial planning and behind the scenes work I did to include the voices of this community had not been in vain. They then proceeded to give me two important pieces of feedback: (1) they appreciated and thought it was very powerful that the Black staff was foregrounded in the film. According to Sunny, other types of informational videos made about DP in the past mainly centered on him as the director of the program, which as a result, dismissed the work of the Black staff that continually goes unseen; (2) they thought student interviews were very strong and were pleased to hear student voices throughout the film. Sunny said, “As a slice of our program it felt like us...the high level of thinking and critique the students were doing accurately identified folks roles. That was not always the case in representations of us” (personal communication, March 27, 2015). On the other hand, their main critiques revolved around the fact that DP often gets a bad reputation for not being rigorous enough. They thought I did a good job of capturing the social and emotional strengths of the program, but hoped that future versions of my film could

include students doing more academic work and, overall, more footage of classroom lessons. In order to begin incorporating this suggestion, I actually include one of Sunny's quotes explaining that this is a bad reputation alternative schooling programs get in the most recent version of my film. As I move forward with editing my film, however, I plan to continue to make changes that more holistically include this valuable critique. These changes include incorporating more footage of classroom debates in Mr. Thomas' class (about police brutality and other topics such as the colonization of Africa), the students tutoring each other in math class, and overall, extending the film to include more footage of both of the school years that I spent visiting Diploma Plus.

Yet, despite how important it was to have the staff validate my work in such a way, my real validation came from one of my student focus groups in which Rene, Keisha, and Christa—the three main students in my film—were present. While they watched the film, I could immediately sense the exhilaration; students were constantly laughing, cheering, and complimenting each other as they saw one other on screen. Christa was the main focus of my film; she in many ways represented DP students, the spirit of DP, and the spirit of the students beyond DP who are just like her. So when Christa said to me, "I didn't know my words were so strong. Like, when I listened to myself, I'm like damn, that's a real message right there," I felt I truly accomplished the goal I set out to do (personal communication, April 1, 2015). My film was meant to be a conduit for the voices of the students at DP; to have them channel their agency, to define themselves for who they are, to feel empowered in their self-representation, and to have that self-representation be a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative being constructed about their lived experiences. Christa's genuine response was the epitome of recognition for the preparation and work that went into this thesis.

However, this work is not done. It is unfinished, not only because I want to continue working on my documentary to fully incorporate the feedback DP students and staff have given me, but also because this is one of many communities of Color whose stories have yet to be heard. There is a constant reinscription of a dominant narrative that blames people of Color, students of Color, their families, and their communities for their own oppression, a narrative that continues to uphold false beliefs in meritocracy when this country was never made to benefit people of Color. Its institutions, since their inception, continue to degrade and underserve people of Color, which include even the supposed sanctuary of the school. Whether it is through looking at test scores, academic tracking, or “dropout” rates, the marginalization of students of Color and the inequity they face in school is starkly evident. However, it will continue to go unquestioned and continue to be normalized unless the voices of the oppressed—students of Color—are at the forefront of the conversation.

Because of their age, sometimes we forget that students are already holders of legitimate knowledge, and it is for this reason that more work needs to focus on their voices and their stories. As I began this work, I initially focused on how our schooling system oppresses students of Color, and only thought to use DP to add to this understanding. But after hearing students describe what DP has done for them, their appreciation for their small learning community, how their lives have been transformed, they revealed to me the powerful work that is already being done to combat oppression, to make safe havens for students of Color in a perilous White supremacist world. Most importantly, by listening to students, I was reminded of the ways in which they are already so aware of the systems working against them. Students of Color are already knowledgeable in methods of survival, because every day that they are in school is an act of resistance.

In this same vein, we must also begin to question the purpose of education. If the same students are being pushed out of the system, the issue is not about faulty people, but rather about a faulty system. To what end are students of Color being educated? Who is their education for? In a school system that is embedded in White supremacy, education can only do one of two things: perpetuate racism or challenge it. Thus, for students of Color, a population that is disenfranchised by our society, “Any educational program...that neglects the centrality of social change omits an essential element of the educational process” (Perlstein, 2008, p. 94). Diploma Plus is an example of taking this fact into consideration. For DP, the purpose of education extends way beyond preparing their students for college or the job market (both of which are also not exempt from the effects of racism). If our society is oppressive, then education for people of Color means empowering them, and for the oppressors, it means learning about the ways in which they oppress. As Paulo Freire suggests, education should be liberating and transformative to the point of change. If schools are not contributing to change, then students are not being educated. Most importantly, students of Color should not have to wait until college before they are equipped with the tools to challenge the system that oppresses them. We need to start empowering students of Color earlier on, as many of them do not get the opportunity to even make it that far.

As a prerequisite to doing research on this topic, future researchers must also address the dynamics embedded in the research process in order to empower, rather than exploit, the students of Color that are involved. Alternative media, such as film, photography, or oral storytelling, should also be considered as a method of presentation of this kind of work in order to increase the accessibility of such work. This challenges the researcher to produce knowledge that is not just for him or her, but for the community; knowledge that extends beyond the self and certainly

beyond the archives of a university filing cabinet; work that reaches the masses—not just those in the elitist academy—to produce a decolonized form of knowledge that can be learned and passed along so that change and steps towards social justice can actually be made.

## Appendix A: Response Letter to NBC News

This image is a copy of Mr. Frederick's response letter to NBC News regarding the article written about Diploma Plus.

**Charlestown High School**  
Diploma Plus Small Learning Community

240 Medford Street • Charlestown, MA 02129  
phone: 617.635.9914 • fax: 617.635.9928




Mr. William Thomas, Headmaster  
Mr. Sung-Joon Pai, Diploma Plus Director

Dear NBC News,

My name is Hayden Frederick-Clarke. I am the founding Math teacher at Charlestown High School's Diploma Plus program. I am writing this missive to you to voice my pained disappointment and seething indignation about your staff writer's wanton mischaracterization of our small learning community, our methods and, most importantly, our students in her piece "Goodbye Zero Tolerance: Program aims to cut 'school-to-prison pipeline'". At best, Ms. Leitsinger's reporting is an example of shoddy journalism - the kind one expects when a supposedly impartial observer doesn't do sufficient investigation and fills in the blanks of her knowledge with assumptions and prejudices. At worst, her work is an example of the subtle racism that we prepare our beloved students for (ironically using the very circle discussions mentioned in the article.)

An important point of fact: Diploma Plus did not initiate "Circles", as we refer to them, "to help keep teens out of trouble with the law" as she suggests. Our Justice League is not a faux United Nations brokering deals between warring factions that otherwise could not find peaceful resolutions. Nor did we or have we aimed to create "a tight-knit community in order to prevent and resolve conflict." In fact, potential conflicts and discipline issues were not our preoccupation when we began Circles in 2009. Instead the staff saw the tool as a means to build community, foster a culture of support and camaraderie and have candid discussions about robust topics that we couldn't address through traditional curricula. We found these elements critical to our program's identity precisely because we knew urban high schools usually sorely lack them.

This revision of our purpose coupled with Ms. Leitsinger's indirect description of our students as "troubled", delinquent and likely to be expelled but for our leniency not only insults the majority of our pupils, who happen to be none of the above, but also reinforces pernicious stereotypes and poignantly sets them up for racist vitriol. I fully accept that no author is responsible for the vile comments her readers proffer, but she is responsible for asymmetrical, acontextual characterizations that quietly smear young people. If you care to highlight Ryan Gunter's past indiscretions, also care to mention that he is now a veritable Renaissance man - a well sought-after student leader, a member of the basketball team, a fan of Pablo Picasso and an avid reader that is versed in classic works from heavyweights like Plato, Engels and DuBois. Or, in the macrocosm, if you care to examine the "school-to-prison pipeline" from the vantage point that students arrive within it because of their own mistakes, also care to mention that the pipeline is fueled primarily by teachers' biases and fears about African-American students and a gross nationwide lack of cultural proficiency for an increasingly diverse student body.

The politics of representation and the media will definitely be the fodder of our next circle... and suspensions, arrests, expulsions and potential student conflicts will be the farthest thing from our minds.

Proudly signed,  
Hayden Frederick-Clarke, The Critical Math Teacher in the Corner

End of civil rights movement, after MLK assassination

↑

1968 olympics (John Carlos, Tommy Smith)

↑

Rise of the Black power movement  
(first public demonstration of black power)

Blatant / without shame / being careless or reckless about something

indignation: righteous anger responding to some injustice

unbiased / objective

dangerous for a long time, long-term danger

ALON FIRE FIREY HATED esp. in language

hope we will continue to "chew on"

(black-glass)

## **Appendix B: Letter of Intent**

This is the letter I wrote to the Charlestown High School head of school and to Diploma Plus staff in order to explain my position and purpose/show my transparency with my project.

### **Letter of Intent**

The common cultural perception of dropouts has overwhelmingly negative connotations. For example, according to the thesaurus, “synonyms” for a dropout are “quitter; idler, layabout, loafer, deadbeat, delinquent, burnout.” But the social reality is the dropout population is one that is overwhelmingly silenced and commonly misunderstood. Though there are “predictors” attempting to explain why most students drop out, they are still just predictions, and no one knows the full extent of that experience. I believe that attempting to be a faithful recorder of everyday lives of the students and faculty of Diploma Plus provides them with the best space to speak and tell us who they are for themselves. In this manner, my goal is to be the conduit for them to tell their own stories as openly and fully as possible. I am not trying to draw conclusions of my own. Rather, my aim is to let the audience make its own inferences and draw its own conclusions.

To this end, I am not trying to marshal information, attitudes, or opinions in order to test a hypothesis. I am intentionally moving away from forming any hypothesis or making generalizations in favor of allowing a story to emerge from the footage I will shoot. I plan to work with 1-2 students, interviewing them and video recording daily activities. I will be using university sanctioned release forms for all individuals who may appear in my film. In no case will I photograph or record any individual without their full knowledge and consent. I will also have students involved as a focus group when the film is in rough-cut. At this point, I would be asking for their opinion of the film to further encourage their power as collaborators in their own representation. In addition everyone is invited to view the finished cut, which will be screened in early May of 2015.

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions for Students**

This question sheet I devised for the interviews I had with students. For the most part, I asked every question presented below. However, the conversations that emerged in every interview varied from student to student. Thus, these questions served as more of a guideline than a script.

### **Student Interviews**

#### Background:

1. So tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? How old are you? Where are you from?
2. Tell me about your own educational experience. What are some of the experiences that have significantly impacted your educational and teaching career?
3. Is there anything else you want to say about your personal experience?

#### At Diploma Plus:

4. How did you get to DP?
5. In your own words, how would you define what Diploma Plus is?
6. I heard there is an application process to get into DP. What is the application process like? Why did you apply?
7. How did you feel when you got accepted into DP? What was it like walking in on the very first day?
8. How is DP different than your previous high school, other high schools in general, and/or Charlestown high school? What are the similarities and differences?
9. What do or don't you like about Diploma Plus? The teachers? The classes?

#### Theoretical:

10. Why do you think students drop out of school?
11. What do you think should be done to keep students in school?
12. What do you think is the purpose of school? How does this relate to your decision to apply to DP?
13. In your view, how do such factors as race/ethnicity, gender, and class influence schooling and education?
14. If there were one thing you could change about schools what would it be? What about for DP? What works and how would you make DP better?
15. What are your plans for the rest of your time at DP? For after you leave? What will be the same? What will be different? How do you think your experiences and education here will influence either of these plans?
16. Is there anything you would like to add?
17. Do you have any questions for me?

## **Appendix D: Interview Questions for Faculty/Staff**

This question sheet I devised for the interviews I had with Teachers. As with the student interviews, I asked almost every question presented below. However, the conversations that emerged in every interview varied from teacher to teacher. Thus, these questions served as more of a guideline than a script.

### **Teacher Interviews**

#### Background:

1. So tell me a little about yourself. What is your name? How old are you? Where are you from?
2. Tell me about your schooling experience growing up. Did you like school? Why or why not?
3. Is there anything else you want to say about your schooling experience thus far?

#### At Diploma Plus:

4. How did you get here?
5. In your own words, how would you define what Diploma Plus is?
6. What is a typical day like at DP for you?
7. What is your curriculum like? How did you decide it and why?
8. In your opinion, what makes DP different than other high schools? Than Charlestown?
9. How would you describe the students here?

#### Theoretical:

10. How do you view dropping out of school and why do you think students drop out?
11. What specifically do you think should be done to keep students in school?
12. How would you describe your philosophy of teaching?
13. What do you think is the purpose of school? How does this relate to the purpose of DP?  
What are your views of the current school system?
14. In your view, how do such factors as race/ethnicity, gender, and class influence schooling and education?
  1. What is your view regarding the importance of having teachers of Color in schools?
15. What do you think are the special contributions that DP students bring to the classroom?
16. What do or don't you like about DP? What works and what could be improved?
17. Are you happy with your current job? Why or why not?
18. Is there anything you would like to add?
19. Do you have any questions for me?

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