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“I Just Put My Head Down, But They Still Get on to Me”: Navigating Silence in an Alternative School in Alabama

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Abstract

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“I Just Put My Head Down, But They Still Get on to Me”: Navigating Silence in an Alternative School in Alabama

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In this paper, we position our work with alternative school students in Alabama as a Project in Humanization (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) to examine the transactional nature of silence at the school. Drawing on data generated over the course of one semester with students in an agriscience elective class, we construct alterna-narratives to examine the varying ways in which students navigated expectations around silence and voice, where silence was used as both a currency and a punishment that ranged from the false promise of re-entry at the main high school to further exclusion from the setting. We juxtapose these transactions to students’ desires for their lives to illustrate how dehumanizing silence and its uses in schools can be.

Keywords: Alternative schools | exclusionary discipline | student voice | silence

The school was often eerily quiet with sporadic sounds from teachers or administrators. I’d often ask myself, “Is there anyone even in this building?” as I walked from our classroom to the faculty lounge down the hall. I directed my eyes into classrooms as I passed by and noticed rooms filled with students. In these classrooms, students were sitting in silence, staring at laptops, or had their heads down. Silence in this setting represented students’ responses to calls for obedience and a potential way for re-entry at the main high school.

This excerpt from our field notes highlights our efforts to document and examine the ways that silencing policies and practices function in alternative education spaces by drawing on our experiences as scholar-teachers in an Alabama alternative school. In this paper, we first summarize the literature around students’ experiences in alternative school settings and examine the ways that student counternarratives operate to bolster our understanding of how school policies and procedures operate to silence their voices. Next, we situate the current study in the theoretical framework of transactional education to demonstrate how banking models of education and public school contexts are sites of oppression and privilege, specifically with regard to racialized school discipline. We connect literature on student voice to functions of silence in banking models of education to demonstrate how transactional education limits opportunities for student voice and perspective. Then, we mobilize the methodological framework of Projects in Humanization (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) as an approach to emphasize the need for relational, humanizing work with students of Color, drawing on alterna-narratives we construct from our work at an alternative school. We argue that silence worked as the currency within transactional relationships between adults and students in the school to further marginalize students. We conclude with implications for policy, and for educators and administrators working within alternative schools.

Alternative School Contexts

In our community in Alabama, alternative schools function as spaces where students are often sent for disciplinary infractions that have occurred at their home school or even outside of school settings. These alternative contexts are routinely presented as school systems' good faith efforts to keep 'at-risk' students from dropping out (ALSDE, 2018), positioning affected students as non-traditional learners. This rendering, however, obfuscates the ways that school discipline policies and practices operate along domains of race, gender, and ability to push students out of their classrooms and schools (Annamma, 2017; Ferguson, 2010; Morris, 2016), and in Alabama, without due process¹ and often intertwined with the juvenile justice system. These alternative schools in our Alabama communities are also reflective of broader trends in that a majority of students are students of Color (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2019; Vanderhaar et al., 2014); in our context, students are primarily African American and Latinx.

Indeed, alternative schools in the U.S. are increasingly used as a means by which students are punished for disciplinary incidents that happen at their home schools (Carver et al., 2010; Selman, 2019; for a review of definitions of alternative education, see Porowski et al., 2014). Students are sentenced to various lengths of time depending on local policies, which in Alabama are idiosyncratic, subjectively enforced, and not subject to due process. Complicating the use of alternative schools as a consequence is the robust research detailing the ways that student behaviors are subject to practitioner interpretation, such as defiance, disobedience, and disruption, and how often those behaviors are punished with exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and referrals for alternative school placements (Blake et al., 2011; Girvan et al., 2017; Kupchik, 2016; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Public Counsel, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). Decades of scholarship demonstrate that disciplinary practices are racialized and gendered wherein students of Color, including Latinx children, are disproportionately disciplined and assigned more harsh exclusionary consequences than their white peers (Anyon et al., 2018; Hannon et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2018; USGOA, 2018; Wallace et al., 2008), including being referred to alternative schools. Often characterized as "implicit bias" (Starck et al., 2020), school-based practitioners, are socialized to view students of Color via deficit perspectives (Valencia, 1997) and as troublemakers. For example, educators often view Black students, for example, as dangerous, violent, unruly, loud, 'ratchet,' and 'ghetto' (Blake et al., 2011; George, 2015; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) especially when juxtaposed with their white, female peers and teachers (Irby, 2014). Additionally, Latinx students and their families are profiled and surveilled in and around schools, illustrating the devastating intersection of (mis)perceptions about race, ethnicity, immigrant status, and criminality (Verma et al., 2017) and the relationship between surveillance and exclusionary discipline.

Alternative school settings, which house many students of Color for supposed disciplinary incidents (Vanderhaar et al., 2014), are often characterized by rigid rules and poor quality of instruction, and frequently thought of as a last chance for students or 'dumping ground' (Anderson-Alvarez & Beckham, 2018; Kelly, 1993). In prior research, students in alternative schools narrated experiences of exclusion and punishment where they were positioned as "second-class citizens"; in these spaces, students were both "dehumanized" and "adultified" (Kennedy et al., 2019). While not taken up explicitly, silence was present in these contexts the

¹ We note that SB 189, which would require a hearing for long-term suspensions (greater than 10 days) and expulsions, passed the Alabama State Senate this spring and is awaiting consideration by the State House (S.B. 189, Alabama State Legislature, 2020).

way that “educators and students both expressed a need for students to ‘fly below the radar,’ or stay invisible rather than stand out as someone who demanded attention” (p. 143). Avoiding attention for fear of further exclusion and discipline contributed to limited relational connections in the setting, such that students refrained from asking for help from school-based adults (Kennedy et al., 2019). Discipline procedures also silence students’ voices in their educational decisions (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009), perhaps especially when teachers employ ‘punishment as pedagogy’ (Selman, 2018). Namely, the intertwined roles of discipline and compliance create an environment in which students are unsure when they would get in trouble for small behaviors, with limited opportunities for students to respond to disciplinary decisions made by adults in these subjective instances (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Collectively, this research suggests that alternative contexts, though they are positioned as viable pathways for ‘non-traditional students’ (and may be at times; Flenbaugh et al., 2018), serve more to marginalize students from schools, especially when they are used as punishment.

Theoretical Framework: Transactional Education

To frame our understanding of silence, we draw first from Freire’s (1970) critiques of banking approaches to teaching and learning, wherein students are positioned as ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ or in which knowledge is ‘deposited.’ This positioning renders students’ lived experiences and cultural capital irrelevant and situates interactions between students and teachers as transactional, lacking human relation and characterized by stringent roles within education systems. A banking approach to education creates a narrowed boundary in which students can minimally communicate and operate within the school setting. Freire (1970) described how multiple oppressive practices uphold the banking model of education, including notions of discipline and silence within school settings. Teachers are positioned as the ones who discipline, while students are disciplined; teachers speak and students listen “meekly” (Freire, 1970). In an alternative school system, these two practices are deeply intertwined and insulate students’ pathway from the original disciplinary incident, through the referral and exclusion proceedings, and to the students’ placement at the alternative setting.

In our work with alternative school students, we have seen both formal and informal policies within the setting in which students are not only viewed as empty vessels or blank slates, but are also viewed as deficient by virtue of their disciplinary standing (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). That is, students are positioned as needing both knowledge and ‘correction’ — a deficit view rooted in white supremacy that positions students as problems, especially Black students (Dumas, 2016) and students of Color. Thus, we also draw from perspectives that frame disciplinary alternative education, while promoted as a promise for a ‘second chance,’ and a ‘choice’ for parents, students, and practitioners, instead as contexts that serve to uphold a racial capitalist order (Kelley, 2017), ensuring that already marginalized youth occupy alternative school spaces that further marginalize them. Time and enclosure work in these alternative contexts to “dispossess students” (Selman, 2019, p. 310) of freedoms.

We expand this argument to posit that silence also works in tandem with time and enclosure to relegate students to a transactional educational context that dehumanizes. Silence operates within these processes, creating discourses that rely on deficit thinking about students, behaviors, and families to justify their own exclusion, and giving students and families little recourse to advocate for transparency and due process in disciplinary proceedings and in alternative school referrals. Once in alternative schools, students face disciplinary practices that serve to silence

them. Silencing practices limit human connection between teachers and students, wherein students avoid interaction to protect themselves or are prohibited from interaction in the name of discipline. Alternative school settings thus use silence as a structure (i.e., Fine & Weis, 2003; Weis & Fine, 1993) to enforce and maintain compliance and a culture of control (Delpit, 1988) and to bolster a transactional model of education (Freire, 1970). The workings of silence are in stark juxtaposition to what we know about the importance of student voice, which we take up in the next section.

Student Voice

Our experiences with silence and students in an alternative school are particularly jarring given the burgeoning literature on student voice and student empowerment in K-12 contexts (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Mitra & Gross, 2011; Pearce & Wood, 2019). Student voice is often described as integral for youth to build collaborations with adults for school change (Mitra & Gross, 2011). Scholars have also asserted the need for “critical youth voice” in which students’ perspectives, shaped by systems of privilege and oppression both inside and outside of school, are valued and affirmed (Yonezawa et al., 2009). The opportunity for students to share their perspective is central to justice in schools; since systems of power shape all communication, students within alternative schools are not in a powerful position (Freire, 1996; Robinson & Taylor, 2007).

Student voice encompasses a range of verbal and non-verbal communication styles (Gonzalez et al. 2016; Robinson & Taylor, 2007), including the language, or absence of language, with which students choose to articulate their perspectives. Expectations for voice (and silence) vary across school settings, as do teachers’ deployment of silence as pedagogy (Ollin, 2008). Additionally, although students’ voices can be influenced by the educational context, students can also operate autonomously to push back on contexts (Pearce & Wood, 2019). This contrast suggests that while school structures can operate to both constrain and promote student voice, youth can consciously assert themselves in nuanced ways — one of which is through silence (Pearce & Wood, 2019). For example, in an examination of Native American student experiences, San Pedro (2015) described how students’ silence was both a form of communication and a cultural asset. This asset was not, however, valued within the setting; rather this silence was viewed negatively. That is, silence functions differently across diverse educational contexts; for example, in school settings where student voice is perhaps valued, practitioners position silence as a negative behavior and indicator of disengagement (San Pedro, 2015). Further, students may have different intended uses for silence within their schools and classrooms, including using silence as a way to claim agency and construct identity, thus asserting ways of knowing and being that challenge Western epistemologies (San Pedro, 2015).

In our work, we sought to explore the following research question: How do students navigate silence within an alternative school context? Examination of the manifestations of silence within school settings affords us the opportunity to understand the full spectrum of student voice in schools. To understand the role of silence, as well as our presence in eliciting student voice in a context where silence was expected, we take up *Projects in Humanization*.

Methodology

Projects in Humanization

We situate our work with students in an alternative context as a Project in Humanization: a mode of inquiry that is grounded in indigenous and humanizing research methods (hooks, 1990; Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). Projects in Humanization are relational in nature in that researchers must listen to the lived experiences of participants while considering that their stories possess power and can promote change (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017). In our work, we listened to students' stories, as well as shared our own with them, with the intention of promoting change regarding how schools constrain student voice through silence and discipline. We aimed to disrupt the transactional nature of teacher-student relationships that we observed in our school that were created by formal and informal school policies. We position our work and our classroom at the school as a humanizing project in that we wanted to create room for students to be themselves — that is, a space where complex young people whose lived experiences and interests were valued and whose voices mattered.

Context

This Project in Humanization occurred with students at an alternative school in Alabama in a semester-long elective agriscience classroom where we were the instructors of record. The course met daily throughout the school week and included a combination of discussion-oriented instruction and community garden activities. On the days when students went to a local community garden, they developed hands-on projects, listened to guest speakers from the community, and prepared for a student-led farmers' market at the end of the semester. The remaining three days per week were in-class sessions that utilized a seminar, discussion-oriented style of instruction. Towards the end of the semester, students built and maintained an additional garden at the school.

Participants

Enrollment at this alternative school largely depended upon events that occurred at the main high school or within the community. That is, students' enrollment was deeply intertwined with the community's juvenile justice system, such that students were removed from the main high school for behaviors that fell under 'zero tolerance' policies (e.g., drugs, weapons) and were mandated to attend the alternative school until court proceedings were complete. The enrollment of our class crept upward throughout the semester – initially beginning with five students and ending with 10 on the roster – as more students were deemed as in need of alternative education. Students had been sent to the alternative school for disciplinary incidents at area schools and for truancy, often considered a disciplinary event in Alabama that, ironically, is sometimes punished with exclusionary practices. Some students in our class were newly enrolled in the school, while others had been at the school for over a year. They represented a range of ages (15-18 years old) and academic years (freshman-senior). Here, we present data about students who shared experiences related to silencing policies and practices throughout our semester together. The students about whom we write here were enrolled in an agriscience course, and we focus on our experiences with eight students in particular (see Table 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

We position the class by how the data are derived, as humanizing work. Data are drawn from relational storytelling with students. Our situatedness as scholar-teachers in this context alongside our students afforded us opportunities to generate a multitude of data sources, most of which occurred during the normal class routine. Data sources include observations and field notes, classroom artifacts (e.g., student journals), informal conversations with students, end of semester interviews, focus groups, and teacher memory. Interviews and focus groups with students were sometimes audio-recorded and transcribed to aid in analysis. We also took notes and wrote reflectively after class sessions to document story sharing between and among students and us.

We analyzed data collaboratively to examine the ways silence operated, meeting after class to discuss class memories, our notes, and our students' work. We used the concept of silence as a structure (Fine & Weis, 2003) to think with and guide our review of data, focusing on instances where silence functioned as part of transactional (Freire, 1970) contexts and relationships. We constructed narratives about students' experiences where silence featured prominently, paying attention to the ways that silence functioned to help and harm relational interactions between and among students, us, and their other teachers and administrators to document the richness of their stories across data sources. We position the stories constructed here as *alterna-narratives*; that is, they function to amplify students' voices and to push back on dominant narratives about students of Color as deficient and in need of correction from the specific, liminal space of the alternative schooling trajectory to which students were relegated. Moreover, the alterna-narratives we construct are derived from students' storytelling of their experiences in and out of the alternative school setting and represent students' resilience in the context of exclusion (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) and students' humanity in the presence of transactional contexts and relationships. These vignettes are congruent with the aims of Projects in Humanization in that stories serve as the central unit of analysis.

Several components of our Project in Humanization enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of findings. The alterna-narratives in this paper are constructed from our storytelling with students over the course of one semester. Our time in the classroom during this semester allowed us to develop relationships with students and to more deeply understand the present alternative school context. Through these relationships, we were able to learn about who students were as individuals and listen to their experiences within alternative education. Further, through triangulation of multiple data sources in this paper, we bolster the richness of our descriptions about the alternative school context within which we worked with students.

Positionality and Assumptions

We approach this work from varying backgrounds and disciplines: Amy is a doctoral candidate in community psychology and former middle school teacher; and Hannah is an assistant professor in education and former high school teacher, with a background in curriculum, instruction, and justice-oriented education. We began work at the school as part of a grant-funded outreach project where we worked to engage students in critical conversations and participatory research about environmental and food justice. Hannah had taught classes at the school for several years prior; the semester we focus on in this paper was Amy's first at the school.

There were several assumptions that guided our work with students and in this development of this paper. First, we personally and professionally believe in humanizing work with young

people as a critical aspect of youth experiences in education. The first author has worked with youth as a middle school teacher, and now conducts research on the role of supportive adult relationships in the lives of young people. Similarly, the second author has worked as a high school teacher and conducts research on teacher preparation and social justice issues within education. Next, we operated from the assumption that as white scholar-teachers, one of our roles is to disrupt deficit views of students of Color and policies that function to silence students of Color in schools. These two assumptions provided the foundation to our belief that we could foster a space in our classroom that would counter the broader alternative school climate. That is, student voice and relationship would be central to classroom interactions.

Projects in Humanization (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017) are rooted in decolonizing and indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, and we are aware of the contested nature of situating our work in this way as white scholars. We also work to navigate the tensions inherent in our embodied identities as white women teacher-scholars working with students of Color, a tension that Hannah has grappled with elsewhere (Baggett, 2019). We acknowledge the complexities inherent in our decision to construct alterna-narratives of students' stories and to share them here, especially in the context of answerability (Patel, 2015). Namely, the benefits incurred from that sharing rest primarily, if not exclusively, with us as scholars. We often considered, and continue to consider, questions about who gets to tell whose stories, and for whom? With these complexities in mind, we write this work into existence in order to illuminate the ways that students were dehumanized in the name of discipline by way of silencing policies at the school and present these alterna-narratives to emphasize the need for humanizing relationships with students, and especially students of Color. We hope that these stories will serve to counter dominant narratives about alternative school students, and particularly students of Color, as 'bad kids' by displaying their intellect, curiosity, and engagement in the course of our class work together. Although we highlight their experiences with marginalization from school, we also emphasize students' desires (Tuck, 2009) to underscore their full humanity, rather than focusing on damage and deficits.

Alterna-Narratives

From our experiences working with students at an alternative school in Alabama, we argue that silence was demanded to maintain compliance, which then operated to enclose students' liberties, much as time does (Selman, 2019). We organize our findings about the transactional nature of the educational setting, including a description of how students navigated the silencing procedures within that setting. Students varied in how they utilized silence to navigate the alternative school settings, such as balancing the hidden curriculum of rules, refraining from sharing their full selves in inauthentic teacher-student interactions, refuting the call for silence, or adhering to the silencing directions.

Balancing the Hidden Curriculum of Rules at the School

Our classroom was empty as Amy was setting up the PowerPoint for our class that was soon to start when sounds from the other end of the hallway carried into the classroom. "Why would you ask for help from your teacher and then not take it?" Amy overheard an administrator questioning a young student. The student had been brought out of his classroom to be

reprimanded for not implementing the teacher's feedback on his math assignment. The student responded at first but then became withdrawn as he was disciplined for his 'misbehavior.'

Although the hallways were almost always silent when students were in them, we often heard reprimands like these from teachers and administrators alike. Administrators overlooked both wings of the school; their voices could be heard from far away providing directions like "No talking!" or other demands. As students navigated the hallways toward their other classrooms, cafeteria, and designated restroom time, they also navigated administrators' precarious rules and communication. Specifically, students sometimes engaged in small talk with the principal, seated next to his office in the hallway, as they stood in line with other students waiting for their turn in the restroom; other times that same small talk would incur a loud reprimand: "I TOLD you there is to be NO TALKING!" These instances represented how students navigated the school's unwritten curriculum of rules.

Similarly, at the end of each class period, a voice came over the walkie-talkie in each classroom to signal that students should transition to the next class. Students proceeded silently out the classroom door and down the hallway. They walked toward their next class in silence as they passed by their peers. This informal, unwritten school policy dictated that students could not talk within the hallway – a policy grounded in discipline and deficit views of what might happen if students were able to speak to one another, but not explicitly communicated. Many rules like these were part of the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1971) of the school. In our context, the rules could change based on the mood of the adult in charge. Aside from the occasional chatter that was almost always reprimanded, most students followed the directive and kept to themselves.

Silence among peers was not limited to the hallways, but also varied by classroom. For example, Daniel described his typical school day by stating the extent to which he talked in each class, following the varied expectations for talking within each classroom. He recounted: "I'm usually quiet in the first block. In second block [our class], I usually begin talking more. Some days - third block and fourth block - I just go to sleep. And if she has work, I just do it and go back to sleep." Daniel tried to maintain the delicate balance between silence and talking in the setting. That is, his movement through the day vacillated between sleeping and talking when allowed.

Daniel's classmates described similar experiences of navigating the school's wavering rules. For example, when asked what his experience being a student at the school was like, Jayden replied "It's been straight for real. I haven't really been doing nothing... I'm not misbehaving or nothing like that. I do my work. I mind my business." In a similar manner, Jessica described focusing on just getting through the day. She described how she moved through the typical day at school:

[In my day I] just listen to what teachers say. I just do it. And after that, after I do all my work, I just put my head down. I just wait for the day to go by. . . . but they still get on to me for putting my head down. I don't know what else to do though. It seems like it's something we should be able to do. Like what else am I supposed to do? Just sit up and stare off or something? I'd rather just take my time to go to sleep for a bit...

In these stories, students described how they maintained their end of the transaction by following the directions in the setting. Because silence functioned in a precarious manner, students navigated the uncertainty by keeping to themselves unless the rules for communication were stated otherwise. When students completed their homework or in-class assignment — their contribution within the exchange — they then resorted back to sleep and silence. Here students described a typical day at school as one that focused on existing and merely doing what they

were told, supporting prior research with alternative school students, in which students tried to ‘fly below the radar’ (Kennedy et al., 2019). In our school, students floated through the day, trying to balance the unclear, unwritten rules of talking and being quiet, as informal school policies suggested. As with talking, sleeping was sometimes punished, sometimes not. That is, there were no explicit rules about sleeping; some teachers permitted students to sleep, and some did not. And, even those expectations were inconsistent across class periods and school days; a teacher might, for example, let a student sleep one day, and then radio the administrators the next resulting in further discipline.

Moreover, students’ balancing within the unwritten curriculum of rules limited opportunities for students to actualize their own interests. For example, Jayden often opted to avoid interacting with others despite being an extroverted and talkative person, and Jessica often slept rather than sharing her interests in reading about science and anatomy. The transactional nature of silence provided little room for human relation beyond what was being asked of them. Students navigated silencing policies by balancing uncertain directions in order to hold up their end of the ‘deal’ in the transaction.

Recognition of Counterfeit Exchanges with School Adults

Hannah listed social issues on the SmartBoard in different colored dry-erase markers, ranging from gun violence to climate change. She had just returned from an academic conference where researchers theorized about pressing issues facing high schoolers and youth. She asked:

“How do these issues look to you all? Are you concerned about these issues?”

“Yeah, school discipline,” chirped Alexis with a smirk.

“Climate change?” questioned Brittany.

“Add ‘adults who don’t understand!’”

Jayden threw his hands up as he said this, and students nodded around the room. As he began to explain his interactions with school-based personnel both at his home high school and in our alternative context, he described how adults in schools could be inauthentic, especially when discipline was involved: “Administrators want to pretend like they know you, saying ‘Oh, you’re a good student’ as they’re getting you in trouble. But they don’t know you. They’ve never asked about you until you get in trouble.”

As Jayden described, the administrator’s positive remark had fallen flat in the absence of a relationship with the adult who was responsible for meting out consequences. In this example, silence functioned by removing opportunity for human connection and understanding regarding Jayden’s behavior. That is, the adult’s lip service to understanding him was insincere in the context of discipline without an established relationship and in the absence of any prior communication. This was particularly limiting for Jayden given his desires for social interactions and relationships with others. Jayden had arrived to our class mid-semester, and entered our classroom context with timidity. That shyness fell away quickly once he began to interact with his classmates. Jayden’s addition to the class shifted the existing classroom tone not only because there was one more person in a small class, but also because he was an outgoing student who seemed to make friends easily, and many of the girls in the class vied for his attention.

As the class continued to talk for a while about individual teachers with whom students had good and bad relationships, Jayden latched on to the idea of respect. He talked at length about his interactions with one “disrespectful” teacher at the alternative school: “Things he does and says. If you’re not capable of being a teacher, then this job isn’t for you...then you got to go. Just being

disrespectful. It's not even called for. You can't want respect, and then not even give it." As Jayden stated, students were expected to be respectful, but teachers were not. Together, these instances Jayden recognized the relationships as unbalanced and inauthentic, which in turn limited the extent to which he could be his full self with adults in school.

Brandon also described how he could tell when teachers were not authentically engaging with him, explaining, "I can tell when they're not listening because, like, their body language...they'll be like turned away from me and not asking me any questions about what I'm talking about and shit." In a similar manner, Mikayla underscored the lack of mutual understanding with teachers: "Teachers are supposed to motivate us and be there for us when things are hard. Our generation has lots of issues... we're for real for real depressed and anxious AF, but I don't even know these teachers and they don't know us!"

Students described how silence functioned within the setting to create counterfeit exchanges with school adults. Specifically, silencing policies created disproportionate expectations around respect and mutuality. In both accounts, Brandon and Mikayla highlighted how interactions between teachers and students in the setting often lacked mutual sharing and listening, limiting the extent to which adults support students and build relationships. In the midst of exchanges that lack mutuality and connection, students sometimes opted out of engaging with school adults. Brittany recounted after a particularly frustrating morning at the school that, "Teachers here be doin' too much. They need to chill. They always think they right, so I just don't even try to talk to them because they gonna yell whether or not I talk, so why bother." In this instance, Brittany described how even if you were following calls for silence in the setting, it was perhaps better to disengage because a student's voice would not influence the conversation.

These accounts signify how the transactional relationships between students and adults within the public to alternative school pipeline often lacked authentic connection. Specifically, silence functioned by removing opportunity for human connection, mutuality, and understanding, generally, but also in instances regarding disagreement or discipline. Moreover, students often opted out or disengaged from interactions with adults they identified as acting insincere. When respect is demanded of students in the transactional relationship, but not of teachers, however, the relationship is problematic. The underlying tension here is that students had few, if any, ways to respond when a teacher was disrespectful without facing further marginalization.

Further Indebted When Rejecting Silence

Steven and his father sat in the principal's small office at the front of the school.

"Steven, why haven't you been coming to school?"

Steven shrugs at the principal's question.

"Steven, answer Mr. Wolf's question," urged his father.

"Man, I don't fuckin' know. I hate it here."

"Young man, if you do not cease to use that kind of profanity in my office, you will no longer be invited to be at this school with us."

"I don't fuckin' care. I'd rather work than be in school anyway."

Steven's dad sighs.

"Alright, you've demonstrated that you aren't capable of abiding by our school rules. As long as you continue cursing, you will not be allowed at school."

Steven had been in class with us sporadically for about a month. He had been open about his dislike for school in general, and this school, specifically. He came to our class with a reputation for having “beaten up” a teacher at the high school. Given his mild-mannered demeanor and his level of engagement with our course material, we were skeptical about what had actually happened in the interaction that had resulted in his placement at the alternative school. The only ‘problem’ as far as we could tell, was that Steven often did not make it to school, and the administrators at school were not encouraging him to. He talked openly about his preference for working with his dad doing roofing and pressure washing jobs out in the county over being in school, that school had little to offer him, that teachers were openly hostile to him and did not care about whether he was there or not. We did not see Steven again that semester after the meeting with the principal and his father, perhaps highlighting how silencing policies operated to punish students when they expressed how their outside life impacted their school life.

Rejecting silence placed students further in debt in the setting due to subjective disciplinary policies. Subjective policies surrounding insubordination were a central way in which silence functioned in the school system’s policies. The subjective nature of rules surrounding what was ‘appropriate’ to say, to whom, and in what manner, bolstered the way silence functioned in the setting. Specifically, there were many ways in which students could communicate in ‘wrong’ ways that would result in further exclusion, yet the patterns of how the policies and setting would respond, or what was classified as ‘wrong’ were unclear. For instance, in Steven’s example, silence operated to constrain the interaction between he and the administrators; that is, Steven spoke up about his desire to work and feelings of disconnection to the school being related to his absences, but because they disagreed on the manner with which he expressed himself, he was further excluded.

Disagreements are characteristic of human interactions, however, in transactional relationships within this alternative school, the consequences disproportionately fell onto the student. When students rejected silence in response to perceived disrespect from teachers, they received various responses from adults in the setting. Using curse words was described as a common and rational response to perceived disrespect, but it was a pathway to further exclusion from the main high school and within the alternative setting. Daniel described how he saw students placed at the alternative school, saying: “Can’t you get sent over here for cussing at a teacher?” His classmate, Alexis, shared her understanding of the precarious discipline practices:

It depends upon if it were your first time getting in trouble, like your first big time getting in trouble for something, usually they give you a warning. Sometimes they don’t care for real, for real. Unless you get in an altercation, or something like that.

Their conversation on cursing highlighted the uncertainty of this type of student response. Though it might be argued that cursing and the use of profanity is an ‘objective’ offense, as defined by the extant literature on school discipline policy and practice, cursing was subjectively acknowledged and consequences only sometimes enforced. Put another way, profanity was sometimes ignored by adults and sometimes resulted in further exclusion of students. The exclusionary policies were set up in such a way that the consequence was subjective, and students were not always sure what consequences they would receive. Moreover, there was little room for restoration or understanding of students’ perspectives.

Over the course of the semester, at least two of the ten students received out-of-school suspensions for using a curse word when responding to teachers within the setting. For example, in an attempt to express that she perceived a teacher was being inauthentic and did not truly care about her, Brittany responded with a curse word. She was ultimately suspended from school for

two weeks, with limited, if any, attempt to understand her perspective within the disagreement. Brittany's suspension was particularly impactful as she cared deeply about graduating so she could begin college classes to pursue a medical career. This incident illuminated how students had limited avenues to respond to perceived disrespect, and in this case, teacher inauthenticity, within the setting.

In sum, when student's responses bumped up against the setting's emphasis on student silence, they risked further exclusion. These interactions highlight Freire's (1996) teacher-student banking approach to education, in which students must respond "meekly" to teachers. In our context, rejecting silence was risky because it was unclear how adults in the setting would respond, and students had to respond in appropriate ways or they risked being further excluded from the school settings. Moreover, there was little relational investment in supporting and understanding a student's perspective in such instances.

Illuminating the School's False Promises Through Adherence to Silence

There were three weeks of school left. The signal had just been given over the walkie-talkie for students to move to the second block. Hannah stood in the hallway next to our classroom, greeting students one-by-one as they walked in the door. Alexis walked up, pointing her toes to show off her new multi-colored Jordans.

"Nice!"

"My mom got them for me this weekend."

"I know you were glad to spend some time with her."

"Yep," she nodded as she walked into the classroom.

Next, Brittany walked up. "Can I go to the bathroom?"

"It's almost our turn. Go ahead and get your journal from the shelf and he'll call us down for a bathroom break in a few."

Brittany entered the class, took her journal, and began writing. Daniel walked to the door, eyes down, shoulders slumped.

"Good morning Daniel, what's up?"

A mumbled "Hey."

"I'm glad to see you this morning."

A quick glance up, brief smile, and Daniel shuffled into the classroom. Jessica, tiny for an 18-year-old, walked up to the door, wearing her usual black hoodie and black Jordans.

"Good morning, Jessica."

She kept her eyes on the ground and did not respond as she walked quickly through the doorway and into the classroom. Despite our classroom being discussion-based, Jessica was particularly quiet throughout the semester. When we greeted her at the door at the start of class, for example, she never responded. When we had group discussions, she rarely contributed. And when students worked in pairs and small groups, she would essentially remain silent unless one other student, Daniel, was in her group.

She eventually described her decision to be quiet and keep to herself in this way: "I would prefer to just be alone. Try not to get involved with anything again. That's part of the reason why I'm over [at the alternative school]: drama. Like, my sister and brother told me to stay to myself now. That's what I'm trying to do now." We never knew the disciplinary infraction that led to Jessica's placement at the school, but rumor amongst her classmates had it that her older sister,

still at the high school, was a “bad bitch” and that they had both “gotten in trouble together” inside and outside of school.

Other teachers in the school did not appear to understand why Jessica was at the school either. She described how her good grades and quiet behavior did not align with the being placed in the alternative setting or promises made by adults at the school:

All the teachers here say that they don’t know what I did to get over here...that I need to go back [to the main high school] though. I believe them, too. . . I don’t know. I am basically the quietest one here outta all my classes. I do all my work. I’ve got a whole 100 in English....

Jessica highlighted how she followed silencing policies and heard from teachers that she did not need to be at the alternative school. However, despite following the silencing policies and the teacher’s purported beliefs that she should be able to leave the alternative setting, Jessica pointed out how these promises were not carried out:

I would say the classes here aren’t really teaching you anything. They basically just give you the work and expect you to do it. All they tell us is that they are setting us up for failure. That’s why I’m not wanting to stay here. I feel like they could try and show that they’re actually trying to get us back over [to the main high school].

Jessica’s narrative indicates that, despite following academic and behavioral rules at the school, she saw no effort by adults to fulfill the promise of re-entry to the main high school. Her desire to leave the alternative setting was similar to the other students in the class, who wrote repeatedly, sometimes daily, that they just wanted to either “be back at the high school” or “graduate as soon as possible,” though some students in the class were only in 9th and 10th grade. Yet, no student had the opportunity to return to their home high school until the following year, and administrators at the alternative school indicated that those decisions were based on “a variety of factors, on a case-by-case basis.”

In this setting, silence functioned by creating a false promise of re-entry into the main high school. Namely, students were told if they follow the ‘rules’ they would be able to leave. However, when students navigated the setting by adhering to silencing policies, they illuminated the false nature of these promises. As illustrated in Jessica’s story, rewards were not given out in the ways that the school system purported they would. That is, there was no visible plan for Jessica to be transferred back to the main high school, despite following the rules to be silent and doing well academically. Jessica’s story highlights how students were supposed to follow silencing rules in the transaction, but when students followed those directions, the setting did not respond as promised. By relying on her family’s guidance to keep to herself, Jessica used silence as a means to ‘follow the rules’ while also honoring their wishes, highlighting the importance of students’ desires and cultural capital as they make decisions about how to navigate school contexts. Namely, approval from her family was important to Jessica, which she wrote about in her journal, emphasizing that “I want to make my family proud again. I’m sorry I disappointed them.” The combination of her decision to stick to herself, however, and the varying ways her silence was expected, but not rewarded, reflected how policies within this setting called for obedience as a means to obtain re-entry back in the main high school, yet never paid up. This type of response illuminated how the call for silence was an oppressive function, and not the school district’s effort to support “at-risk” students in this alternative context.

Towards a Fuller Humanity²

In this paper, we examined the ways in which silence functioned in an alternative school context. We used alterna-narratives to highlight how silence was used as a disciplinary and exclusionary tool within the setting and how students worked to navigate the structure of silence. This alternative school operated as an oppressive site to maintain the banking model of education (Freire, 1996), positioning adults and students to relate to one another in a transactional manner. Specifically, students had to hold up their end of the ‘deal’ in the school setting in which they had to be compliant, silent, and follow subjective directions. In contrast, adults were responsible for giving directions and depositing knowledge. These narrow transactional roles operated to silence students’ voices and there was little room for the mutuality of human understanding between adults and students. Moreover, the school system’s purported intention of an ‘alternative’ school suggested that if students held up their end of the transaction, they would get to stay in school, they would avoid more trouble, or may ‘earn’ their way back to the main school. Such promises were rarely fulfilled as the policies of discipline and silence continuously placed students “in debt” to the school setting. That is, no matter how students acted within the setting (e.g., following rules, silence), there was little they could do to earn their way out of the setting; they were still viewed through a deficit lens.

By focusing on silence, we have positioned students in this context as marginalized and victimized by oppressive mechanisms at the school. We also want to highlight their desires for themselves and their futures to emphasize that these students were also agentic and espoused nuanced goals for themselves and their families that were distinctly not rooted in silence (see Table 1). First, the students we worked with had clear ideas about the value of interpersonal relationships. They often spoke of looking forward to “linking up” with their friends and family members on the weekend, emphasizing the value of folks coming together to “share meals, stories, and times.” And, friendships formed among students in class began to take shape out of school as well, with Alexis and Brandon, for example, often meeting up in their neighborhood to “chill” after school. Some students, like Daniel, Brittany, and Jayden had jobs as hosts at restaurants or as cashiers at local grocery stores, underscoring how relational skills were integral to their work outside of school.

Next, interpersonal and communicative skills were integral to how they envisioned their future livelihoods. Alexis, for example, planned to take over her family’s mortuary business, an endeavor that would ultimately be successful (or not) depending on her ability to connect with bereaved families and support them in difficult times. Although she often talked about how she knew she could sometimes “have an attitude,” she knew that taking on her family business would demand that she interact with people in caring and empathetic ways. Similarly, Jayden talked pragmatically about a career in the military, but also noted that he really wanted to be a social media influencer. He had made a series of videos where he showed off and described the latest shoe trends, telling us that he knew he was “good with words” and that he wanted to “boost his profile as much as possible on YouTube and Instagram.”

We emphasize these students’ desires for their futures here to further juxtapose the damaging effects of silencing policies and practices. To restate, silencing policies emerge from banking models of education and create transactional exchanges that limit opportunities for relationships and actualization of student desires within the setting. Students navigated silencing

²“ALL human beings, and most markedly adolescents, need a nurturing environment and a place to belong in order to thrive” (Ayers, 2006, p. 237).

policies in a myriad of ways; however, the manners in which they operated in the setting were often similarly at the expense of being their full selves, which they were able to realize outside of their school context. Moreover, the transactional relationships that were maintained by the setting's policies were particularly problematic given the breadth of research that establishes the fundamental role of relational connection, student voice, and agency in schools (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Mitra & Gross, 2011). Supportive relationships are characteristic of empathy, listening, and understanding of the broader systems that influence students' lives. These relationships allow youth to learn and make mistakes and without the threat of removal from the school and continual exclusion. Access to humanizing relationships in schools, however, is shaped by systems of privilege and oppression in school settings (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). The lived experiences and voices of students of Color, for example, are often devalued in school settings; further, students of Color are more harshly punished when they make the same 'mistakes' as their white counterparts and are even punished when they exhibit no misbehavior at all. African American students and parents face particular forms of silence in the context of school discipline (Bell, 2020), where stories remain unvoiced, and when voiced, unheard by school-based practitioners in power.

Implications

This work adds to the growing literature on student voice and silence (Gonzalez et al., 2017), and silence as it operates in alternative education (Anderson-Zavala, 2019); in particular we presented accounts of the way students' voices were silenced. Such accounts of how silence acts as a barrier in schools are needed to disrupt existing deficit-oriented notions of students, and especially students of Color. Our aim in presenting these accounts is to highlight students' resilience and desires in the midst of silencing experiences – perspectives that are limited within the conversation on student voice in the education literature. In our school context, student voice was literally 'against the rules' and the expectation of silence was made part of their punishment, yet students were implicitly required to be a certain type of silent: attentive, heads-up, and only speaking when spoken to. Such formal and informal silencing policies are harmful to students and create dehumanizing, transactional exchanges that limit opportunities for relationships within the setting. Further, when juxtaposed to their lives outside of school, we come to understand just how punitive and counterintuitive that silence can be.

We see implications for education policies and practices along two key domains. First, although the transactional interactions and manifestations of silence presented in this paper are not unlike other alternative school contexts, the lack of due process in the school system further marginalizes students, and especially students of Color in ways that are perhaps unique to this school context. That is, students and families were provided with no avenue to hold the school system accountable to their promises. Thus, school policymakers must examine student access to due process surrounding formal and informal policies. For example, students navigated unclear rules that are unstable and silencing because they have received false promises. School policymakers need to make clear timelines for return to the mainstream school, so that students are not positioned in an undetermined space. Alternative schools must be held accountable to upholding the timelines set forth through policy.

Next, policymakers must reexamine the aims and procedures that guide the inception and promotion of alternative education settings. In our Alabama context, alternative schools do not often do what they are purported to do; that is, they do not "reform" or support "at-risk students."

Instead, they function to uphold the racial and economic status quo (Selman, 2019) as they mark students of Color as troublemakers and can push them out (Morris, 2016) of school altogether. Indeed, two of the students in our class did not return to either the alternative school or their home high school during the fall semester following our class. Policymakers and practitioners should therefore consider implementing humanizing, restorative, and relational practices to support students, rather than exclusionary policies that include alternative education. In this reimagining of practice, school-based personnel should be particularly attentive to the ways that silence, and expectations of it, is racialized. For example, stereotypes about Black students as ‘loud’ and ‘unruly,’ juxtaposed with stereotypes about white students and ‘model minority’ students, shape the ways that practitioners expect silence, interpret student behavior and voice, and mete out consequences. Practitioners should ask: Whose voices do we expect to hear in schools? Whose voices do we punish when they are made to be heard? How are those expectations bound up with perceptions about race and culture?

Alternative education settings, as all educational settings, have the potential to provide rich opportunities for humanizing relationships between and among students and teachers and spaces of a pedagogy of relationality (Anderson-Alvarez, 2019); however, educators and policymakers must attend to how informal and formal policies that place students in alternative education further enclose them in marginalized positions, and must trouble the processes by which students become ‘non-traditional learners’ by virtue of school discipline. Educators must view students as young people with complex lives inside and outside of school settings and whose lives are shaped by systems of privilege and oppression (Robinson & Taylor, 2007), allowing for student voice to tell those experiences. Moreover, educators must authentically and critically listen to students’ perspectives and storytelling (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014). When educators approach their relationships with students in such a manner, we work towards developing our fuller humanity as we find humanity with others.

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Table 1

Student Profiles

	Age	Racial/Ethnic Status	Interests	Desires
Alexis	17	African American	Hanging out with friends	Stay out of fights; attend mortuary school to continue family business
Brittany	16	African American	Learning; finding online support for alopecia; working after school	Make her way back to her home high school; get her car working; make some money; attend school for nursing/medical professionals
Daniel	14	Latinx	Poetry; music; reading; fantasy shows on Netflix; technology and computers	Find a good therapist; be a father; stop feeling “so different from everyone all the time”; study computer science at a four-year college
Brandon	17	African American	Hanging out with friends; watching Netflix; playing video games	Attend college; study engineering; start his own life and family; give back to the community; social media influencer
Jessica	18	Latinx	Poetry; reading about science and anatomy	Make her way back to her home high school; keep her grades up; stay to herself; prove to her family that she’s not a “screw up”; attend school for medical professionals; travel
Jayden	17	African American	Wrestling; sports; relationships	Graduation; enlisting in the military; become a social media influencer
Mikayla	16	African American	Spending time with her mother (who worked the overnight shift); “linking up” with friends and family on the weekend	Graduating; moving away from our town; working; making her own money
Steven	17	White	Roofing with his father	Working; making money; hanging out with friends; staying away from the “methheads” that lived in his area of the county

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect student identity; Age is from the start of the semester.