



**YOUTH
ACTION
LAB**



A Dedication

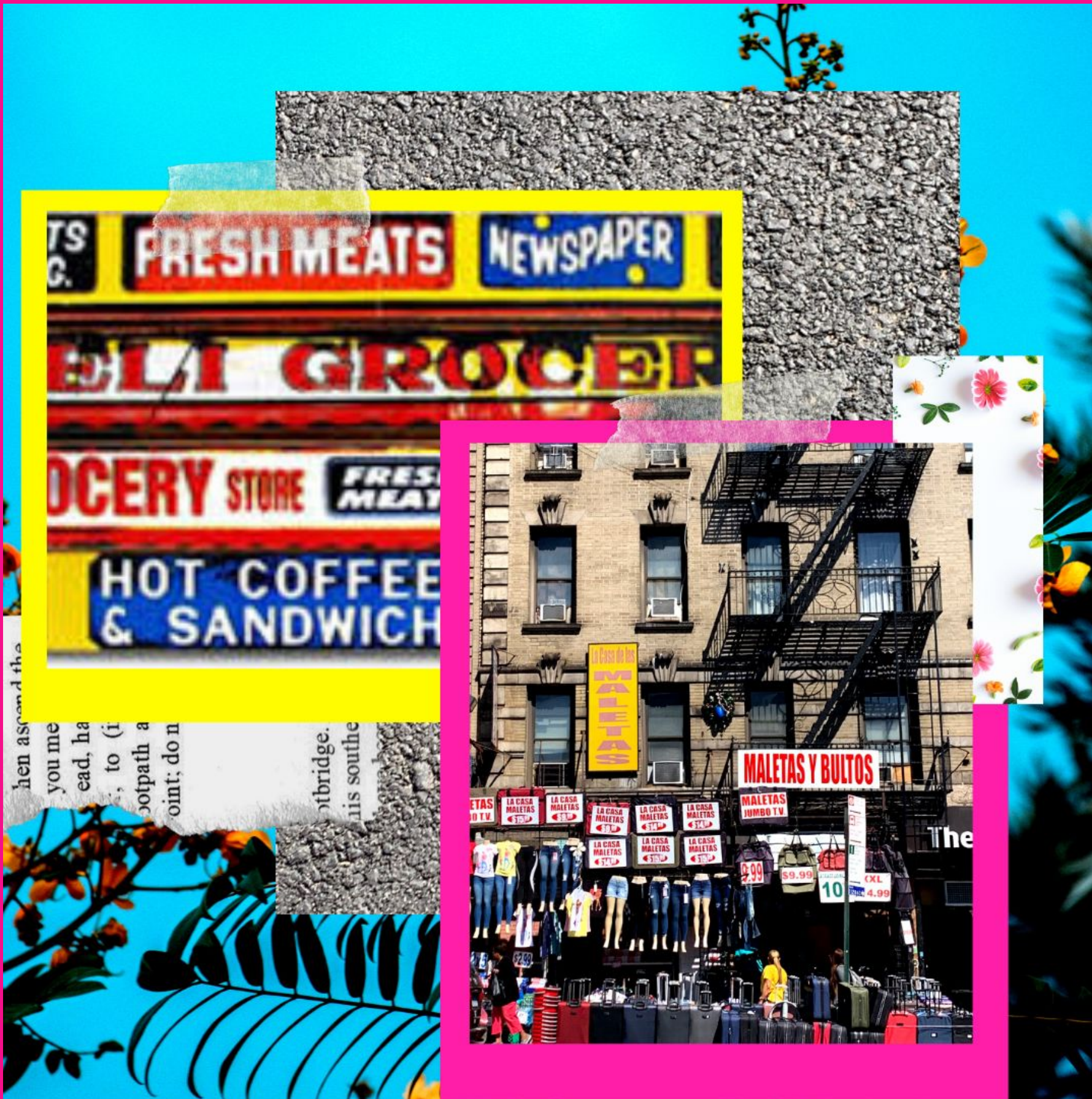
- My people are worthy of scholarship.
- My people are worthy of love.
- My people deserve ethical research.
- My people want to be seen.
- My people are not waiting.
- My people are worthy of telling their own stories.
- My people will teach me.
- My people will hold me in both accountability and care.
- My people are already free.

MFA Design for Social Innovation Thesis
School of Visual Arts
New York City
May 2020

Designed by Lorena Estrella
Advised by Jeffrey Franklin

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Positionality


As a first generation Dominican-American woman, I know firsthand how confusing and difficult it can be to feel a part of a community because you don't know where exactly you belong; this was especially true for me as a young person. The expression "Ni de aquí, ni de allá" is a shared feeling of "in-betweenness" among many first generation and immigrant folks who have to navigate two or more cultures, geographical homes, families and many ways of knowing and being that can be in conflict with mainstream white America. *I feel you.*

I come into this thesis project with educational and class privilege. As someone whose been granted access to institutions of higher education, I hope to use my privilege to push back against the very systems I have had access to in order to make more room for myself and for those who are often left out.


This project is personal and political for me. As a newcomer into the design space, I have come to realize that my people have always designed ways to be and survive beyond white imaginaries. **This gives me hope.**

My vision for the future is that young Black and Brown folks are able to walk into any room fully themselves without having to shapeshift into the ways of whiteness that ask us to leave parts of ourselves "at home". We have the power to code-switch, shift and be invisible while also existing in hypervisibility. It's both magic and exhausting. My wish is for less of that, and more freedom and commitment to dismantling institutions and social conditioning that tells us we are less than. **May we be at home everywhere we are and want to be.**





“Youth Action Lab helps kids learn a lot about their race and their ethnicity, because when I first started I didn't really know my race or ethnicity. I didn't even know what ethnicity was, and those two things are very important if you don't know those two things you don't even know yourself.”



Intro



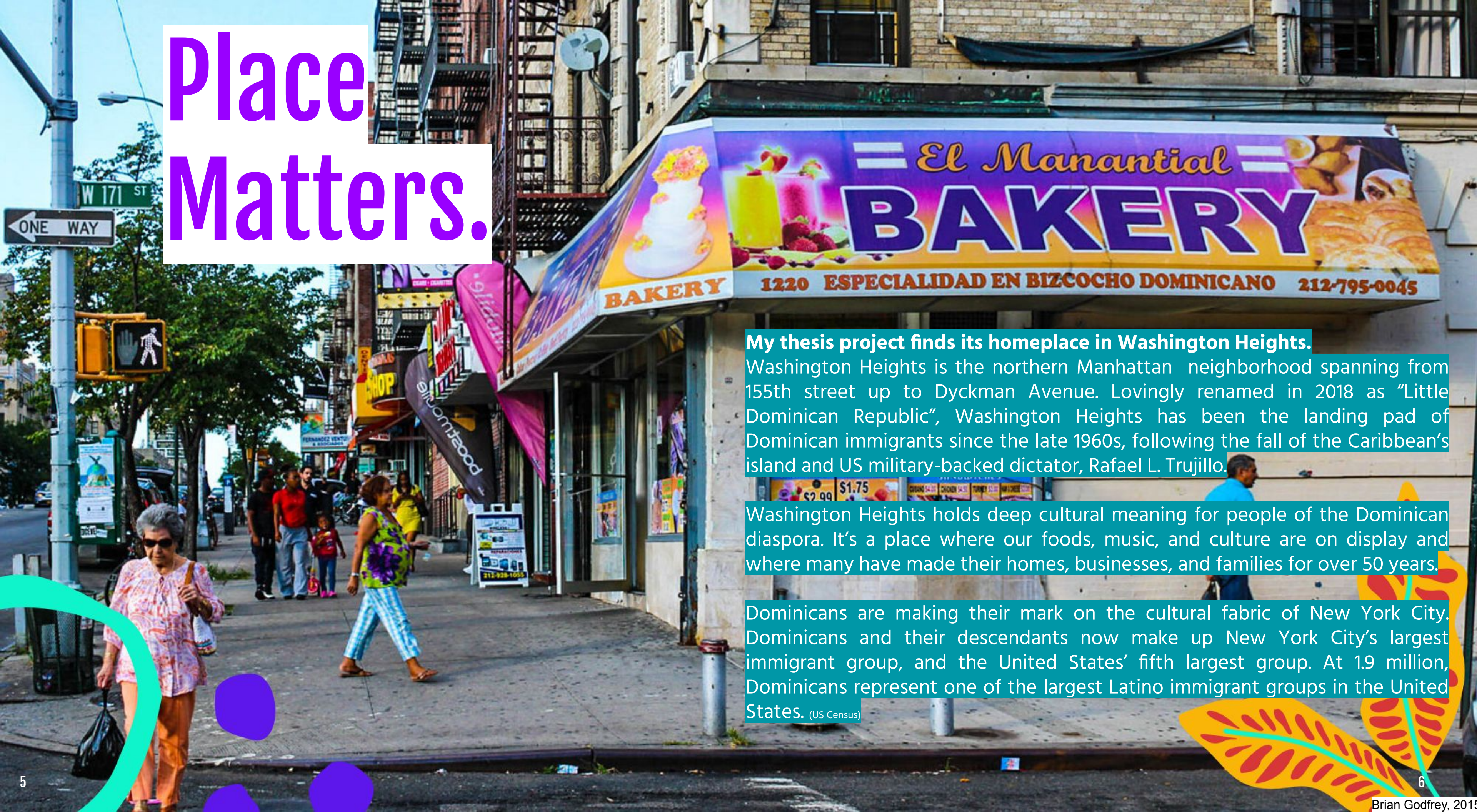
This thesis project aims to tackle a social issue that is entangled in living systems of racism built to dehumanize, displace/erase, and disempower Black, Indigenous and People of Color every day. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, our bodies and labor are deemed both essential and disposal.

I define **racism** in this project as an intentionally designed system that provides or denies access, safety resources and power based on race categories, and produces and reproduces race-based inequities.

(Center for Racial Justice in Education)

This project was personal and healing in many ways and it was about connecting with my community, other Dominican folks, about who we are, who we want to be, and how we can decolonize our understanding of race and identity because we have a lot of work to do. I am still figuring this out for myself, and I am grateful for all the folks who joined and supported me this year.

Place Matters.



My thesis project finds its homeplace in Washington Heights.

Washington Heights is the northern Manhattan neighborhood spanning from 155th street up to Dyckman Avenue. Lovingly renamed in 2018 as “Little Dominican Republic”, Washington Heights has been the landing pad of Dominican immigrants since the late 1960s, following the fall of the Caribbean’s island and US military-backed dictator, Rafael L. Trujillo.

Washington Heights holds deep cultural meaning for people of the Dominican diaspora. It’s a place where our foods, music, and culture are on display and where many have made their homes, businesses, and families for over 50 years.

Dominicans are making their mark on the cultural fabric of New York City. Dominicans and their descendants now make up New York City’s largest immigrant group, and the United States’ fifth largest group. At 1.9 million, Dominicans represent one of the largest Latino immigrant groups in the United States. (US Census)

School Matters.

Schools play a big role in the socialization of children. Schools are where we learn about culture and values. Schools replicate in both subtle and overt ways relationships to power and privilege. Therefore, schools are an important site for understanding how a society values knowledge and people. And, for my project, *whose children matter?*

The New York City public school system is the largest school district in the country. Serving over one million students, New York City students are majority students of color (over 80%) and low-income (74% experiencing poverty). (NYC DOE) Despite being one of the most diverse places in the world, NYC schools, however, remain the largest racially and economically segregated school system in the nation. And while 83 percent of New York City students are students of color, only 39 percent of teachers are of color. (Education Trust-New York)

NYC.

1.1m

students

25m

budget

The landscape

41% latinx
26% black.
16% asian.
15% white.
3% multi.

74% students experiencing poverty

13% english language learners

20% students w/ disabilities

The educational system is doing exactly what is was designed to do.

Racism is baked into the fabric of the current public school system with a long history of racially segregated schools, inequities in funding and resources based on zip codes (tied to a legacy of housing discrimination and *redlining*), eurocentric curriculum, and a majority white teaching force.

What we see today are the manifestations of an educational system that was not designed to serve children of color. This system ***harms all children***, not just students of color, and robs all students of color of knowing their self-worth, and history. **We need to do better.**



**Students of Color
Deserve Better.**



Community Partner

My thesis partner school was Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS), a PreK - 12 public school in Washington Heights. Here I found an amazing middle school teacher who was passionate about bringing both culturally relevant and sustaining materials and conversations into the classroom, and open to engaging in a potentially messy design process with me.

We both shared a passion for bringing identity and conversations on racism to the forefront in the classroom. As Dominicanas ourselves, we wanted to have specific conversations around race & identity with Dominican youth to begin untangling ideas around nationality, ethnicity and anti-blackness.

It is also important to note that WHEELS serves a majority Latinx (largely Dominican-identified) and low-income student body. This intersection of ethnicity and class is something I had to consider when designing with the school community. While WHEELS is unique in its offerings and community, in many ways it represents and implies the larger trends in the public school system in relationship to staffing and student demographics. Therefore, in my design process I wanted to make sure my intervention spoke specifically to this school community while also allowing for replicability.

“There’s no such thing as neutral education. Education either functions as an instrument to bring about conformity or freedom.”

Paulo Freire

864 Students
91% Latinx
81% Free/Reduced Lunch

Process Snapshot



Secondary Research

Academic literature on the topic

30+

Articles reviewed on racial identity, adolescents, ethnic studies

5

Books reviewed on educational justice

Primary Research

End user and subject matter expert interviews

20

Middle Schoolers responded to a survey

15

Classroom Observation hours

10

High School Youth participated in Focus Group

8

Interviews w/ Educators

Other Knowledge Sharing

8

Sessions for iTAG (inquiry to action teacher group) on Ethnic Studies

Framing the Problem

Dr. Bettina Love points out in her book, *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, "Racism literally murders your spirit. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance - all things children need to be educated."

The research indicates that **feeling safe, seen and valued** in your school community and curriculum leads to positive social and academic success. For many students of color who experience racism inside and outside of their school buildings, there is a lot at stake for their well-being.

When students of color not see themselves represented in their school and in their learning, they are more likely to experience lower self-esteem, internalize negative stereotypes, and ultimately become disconnected from their education.

Mental Health & Self-Esteem.

Racial discrimination through everyday micro-indignities leads to lower-self esteem and stress among adolescents of color. (Harrell, 2000) Having unhealthy racial identity beliefs can lead to lower performance in school and increased symptoms of depression. (Butler-Barnes, 2017)

Curriculum does not reflect lived experience of students.

The impact of not seeing yourself reflected or like you can relate to the curriculum can lead students to intellectually or physically drop out of their schools. The research shows that less than 10% of classroom time is devoted to Black history and even less time on other histories. (2015 NMAAHC Study) Despite mandates in NYC to teach Black history (Amistad), Black and non-white history remains limited.

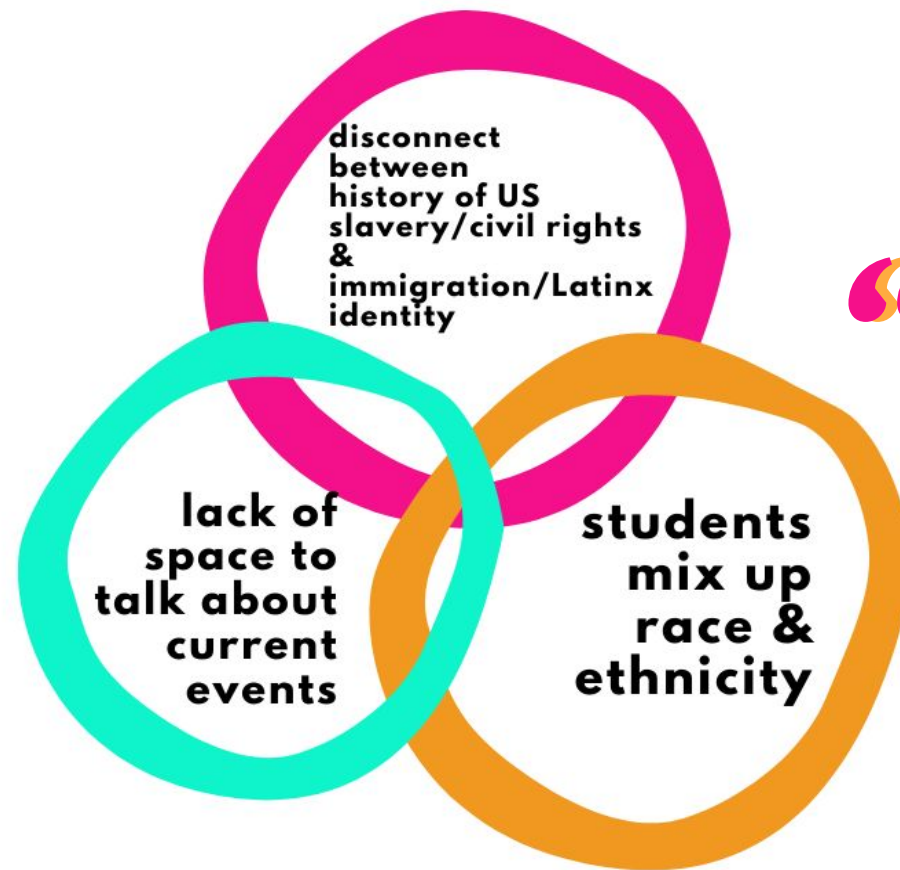
"I didn't realize how white this school was until I left, I was like, 'My whole childhood was a lie!' If I had that awareness, then it would have opened much more about my identity and where I fit in the world.

Alumni

Insights from Educators

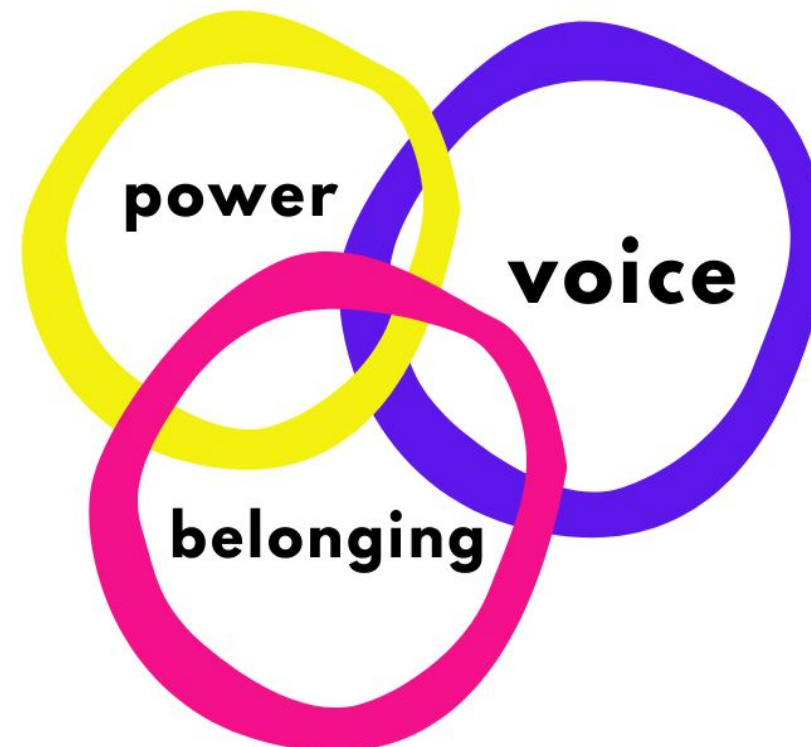
Talking to educators inside and outside of WHEELS, a few themes emerged about what was coming up for students around conversations on race & identity. Notably, there was **a lack of space** to talk about these important issues, **gaps in curriculum** meant that young people are missing key historical information, and an overall **desire for developing the agency and voice** of young people around themselves and the world around them.

mis/understandings of race



“ A lot of the students they mix ethnicity and race together; they can differentiate that but they also don't understand that our wave of immigration [Dominican] didn't happen until after the civil rights era. And so they don't associate themselves with any of the issues that have been there [US-based racism]. Yeah, that have been in what they perceive as the black community. And I wish we had a space to unpack these issues.

youth leadership



“ I'm a saying go out there. fight for what you believe in. And we fight for your rights because you deserve everything in anything. And you fit into any in every space, right?

Insights From Students

Young people are already navigating questions and experiences of race & identity on their own.

Young people who identify as Latinx are having experiences directly shaped by race and racism as early as middle school. They have the capacity to understand complex systems but are currently left on their own to make sense of it. Without the support of adults and an educational framework that supports their experiences, young people may internalize these racialized experiences as personal flaws or interiorities. For Dominican youth in particular, there are many narratives around colorism and anti-blackness that are shaped by larger social narratives around Dominicanidad.

Young people want to explore and talk about who they are. They want to connect with their culture and learn about where they come from.

The current curriculum and in-school programming do not capture the history of young people's backgrounds or culture. They are missing out on key historical information and by high school are left wanting more.

Young people don't know who to talk to or where to go.

Young people have complex feelings about language loss and not having many teachers that look like them. They want to talk more about these things, but do not an outlet. Schools have the opportunity to become spaces for healing and transformation.

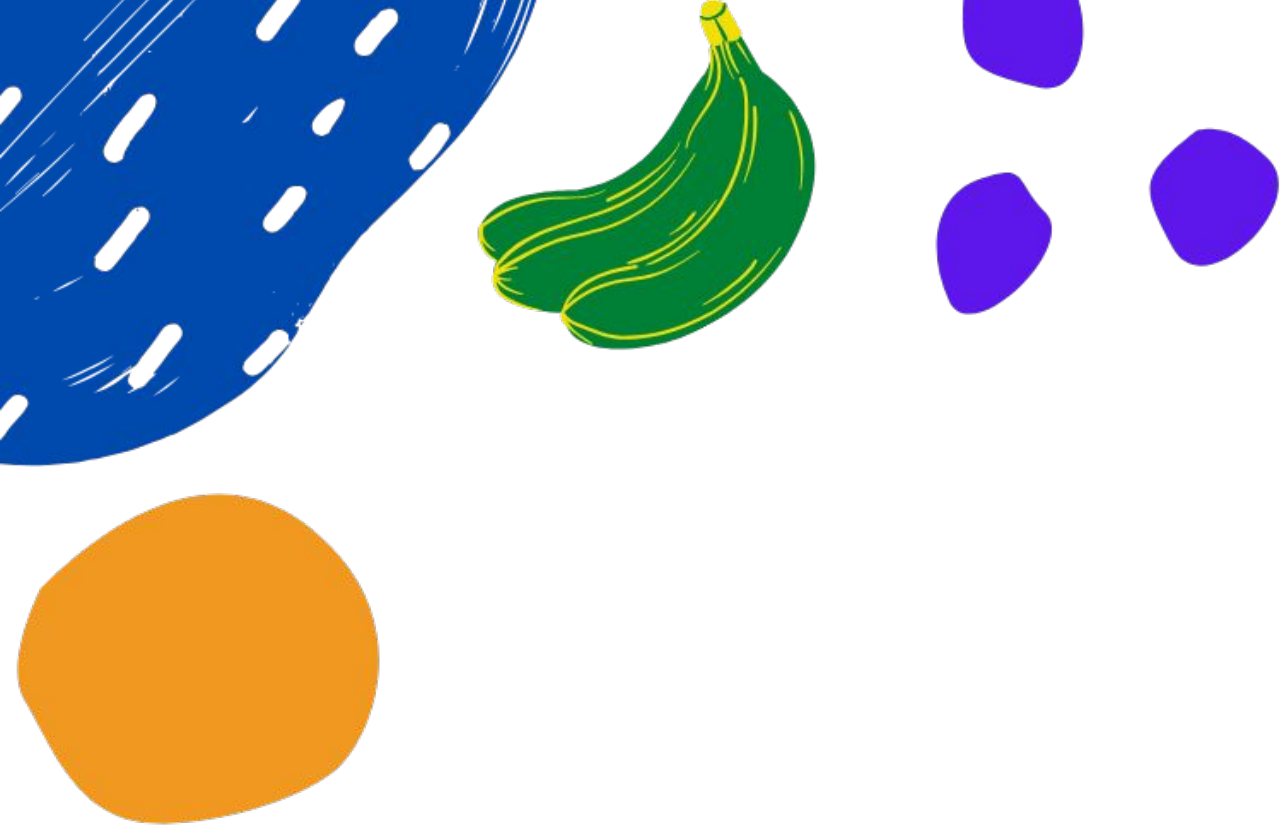
“ I first found out that I was actually black in seventh grade, I never was told ‘Hey you're black’. My parents never really told me ‘Oh, you're black’. They just said whatever “Tu ere Dominicano” and that's it.

“ I honestly didn't know about slavery in DR or other parts. We only learn about slavery here [US].

What does it mean to be Dominican? Just like giving us the opportunity to just find that out ourselves...

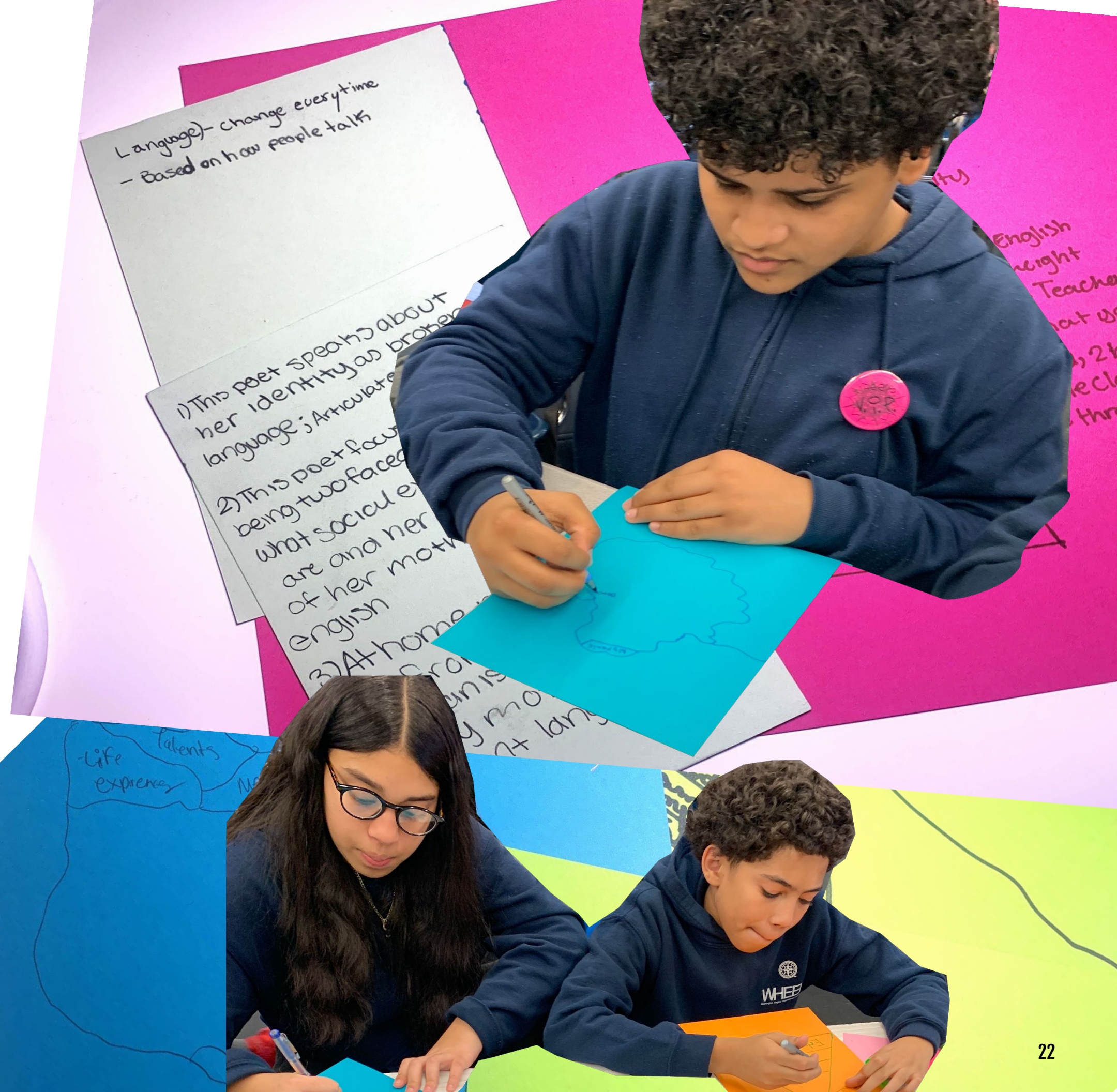
“ I wish I had somebody to talk about it with because my family doesn't talk about it.

By the time I got to high school, I was losing my Spanish. I was mad about that. Most of my teachers are white, and they don't get that. It's like ‘Who do I even talk to about this?’



HOW MIGHT WE

create a safe space for Latinx 8th graders to explore and cultivate a sense of agency and belonging in the their racial and cultural identities?



Young people deserve...

...safer spaces

...support of adults

...ways to explore and affirm who they are

...connect with their history and culture

...mentors and role models who look like them & reflect their experiences

“ I'm Dominican-American. By acknowledging it, doesn't diminish the other part. Just because I say I'm American, doesn't mean that I'm not Dominican. I can coexist in both.

12th grade student

Prototype

Talking to Students about Race.

My first prototype tested out an activity to getting young people talking about race in a relatable and open way. Using statements sourced from my primary research with educators and students, I designed an activity that had students respond to quotes. From this activity, I learned that talking about race and identity had to be personal and speak language that met young people where they were at without shame or judgement.



Design Criteria & Reflections

1/ Position Youth as Creators of Knowledge.

Giving young people the ability to make their own decisions and create something that was their own was central to the design intervention. Positioning youth as experts means that they could practice using their agency and voice and develop critical skills to advance their perceptions of self.

2/ Use personal experience.

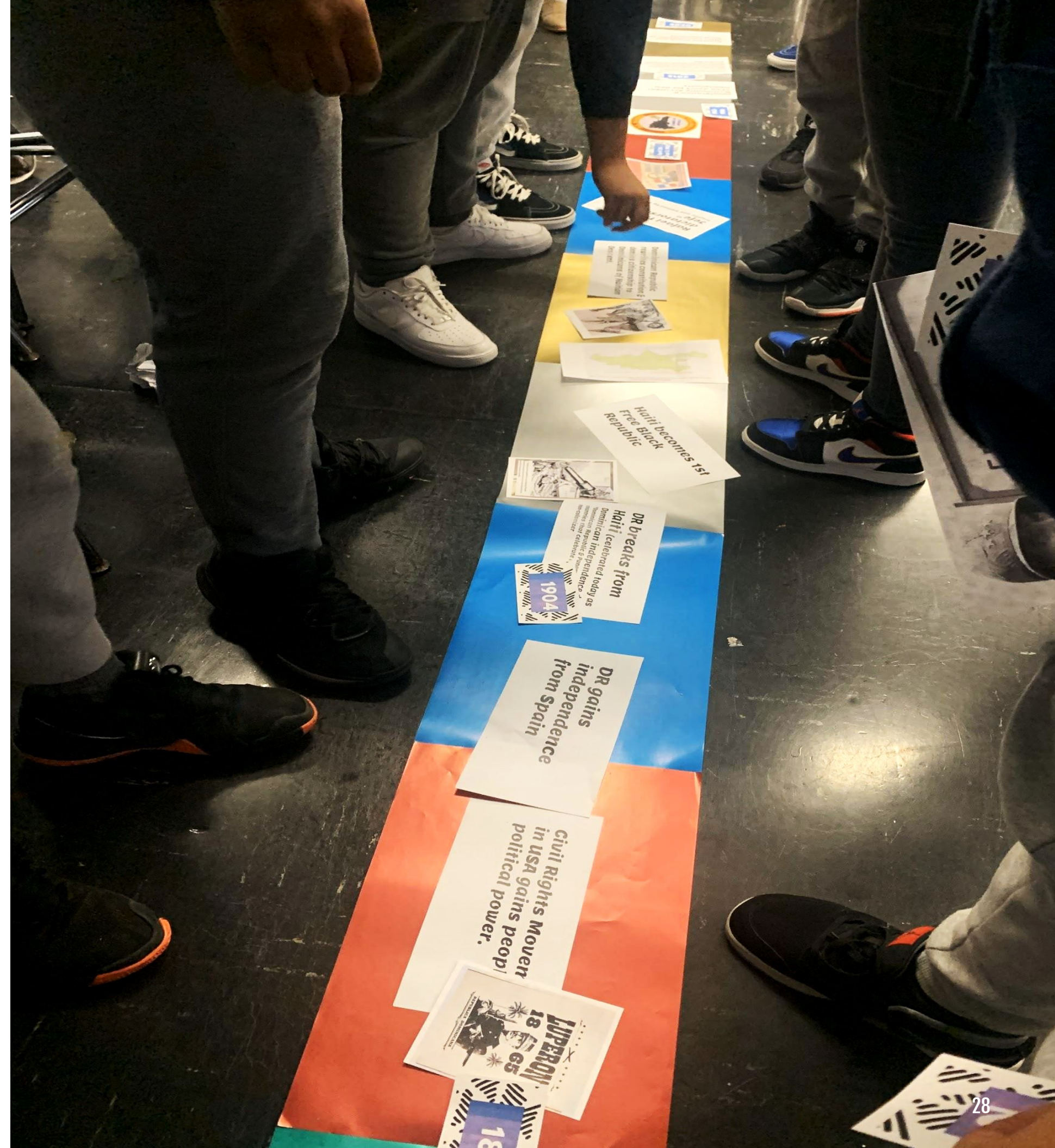
Talking about race/racism can be scary, difficult or uncomfortable. For middle school, this conversation needed to feel personal and real. Introducing media and storytelling was an accessible entry point into the conversation that was engaging and relatable.

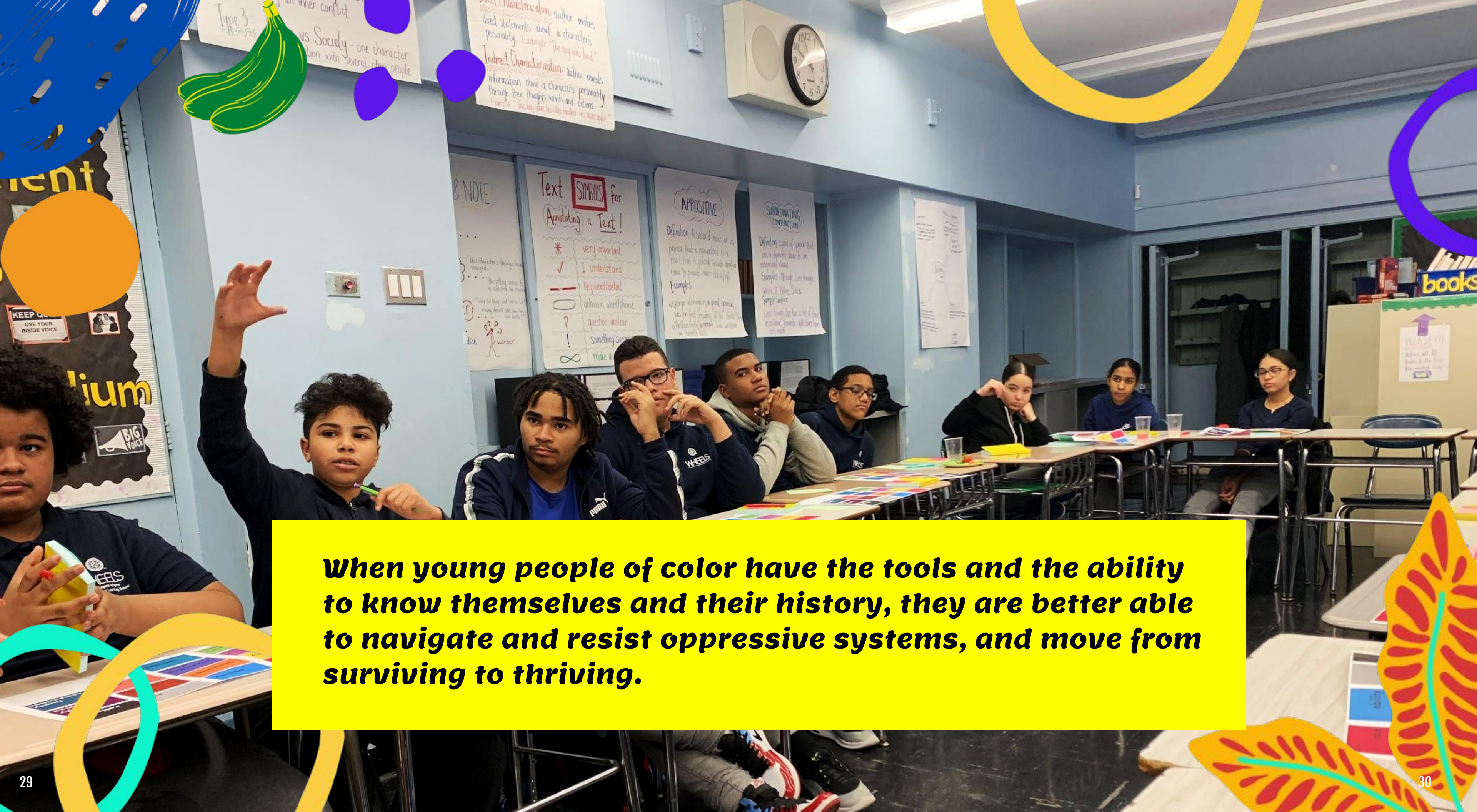
3/ Build community & trust.

It was important for young people to trust me and a newcomer, and each other in order to have open and honest conversation. We used ice-breakers, and small groups to get to know each other on a personal level. This practice of building community disrupts notions of power and adultism that are normed in schools. Students called me by first name and learned more about me before being asked to share about themselves.

4/ Provide Financial Support.

Based on a youth survey I created, I found that staying afterschool could be a challenge for some students. Ensuring that students receive a stipend for their participation provided both an incentive to joining the group, while removing a potential barrier. I was personally invested in making sure this was both a perk and an acknowledge of their time and efforts.





Type 3: vs Society - one character interaction with several other people

Direct Characterization: author makes direct statements about a character's personality. Example: "The boy was kind."
Indirect Characterization: author reveals information about a character's personality through their thoughts, words, and actions. Example: "The boy gave his little brother his own apple."

Text SYMBOLS for Annotating a Text!
* very important
✓ I understand
— Key word/detail
○ unknown word/phrase
? question unclear
! something surprising
∞ make a connection

APPOSITIVE
Definition: A second noun or noun phrase that is equivalent to a noun that is placed beside another noun to provide more detail.
Examples: My neighbor, a great general, was the first president of the United States. The last week, a woman was awarded the Nobel Prize.

SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTION
Definition: a word of speech that joins a dependent clause to an independent clause.
Examples: Although I was hungry, while I drove, since. Sample sentence: Even though I've had a lot of food, as a laborer, I've never had any rest.

When young people of color have the tools and the ability to know themselves and their history, they are better able to navigate and resist oppressive systems, and move from surviving to thriving.

YOUTH ACTION LAB

Youth Action Lab is an afterschool educational program for middle schoolers that uses storytelling and creative expression to explore questions on race & identity.

Piloted as a seven week afterschool club, Youth Action Lab develops the critical consciousness, racial literacy, and leadership skills of youth of color so that they can be activated in their educational

“We get to speak our minds freely and there is little to no judgment.”

YOUTH ACTION LAB



8 weeks // \$50 Stipend //
Contact: M. Sepulveda

INTEREST MEETING:
WED. FEB. 5th
RM 304 //
3:05-3:20P

IN LAK'ECH
Tú eres mi otro yo.
Si te hago daño a ti,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
Si te amo y respeto,
Me amo y respeto yo.

IN LAK'ECH
You are my other me.
If I do harm to you,
I do harm to myself.
If I love and respect you,
I love and respect myself.

YOUTH ACTION LAB

YOUTH ACTION LAB

Poem by *Luís Valdez* inspired by Mayan philosophy. Used in Ethnic Studies Classrooms.

GOALS

**YOUTH
ACTION
LAB**

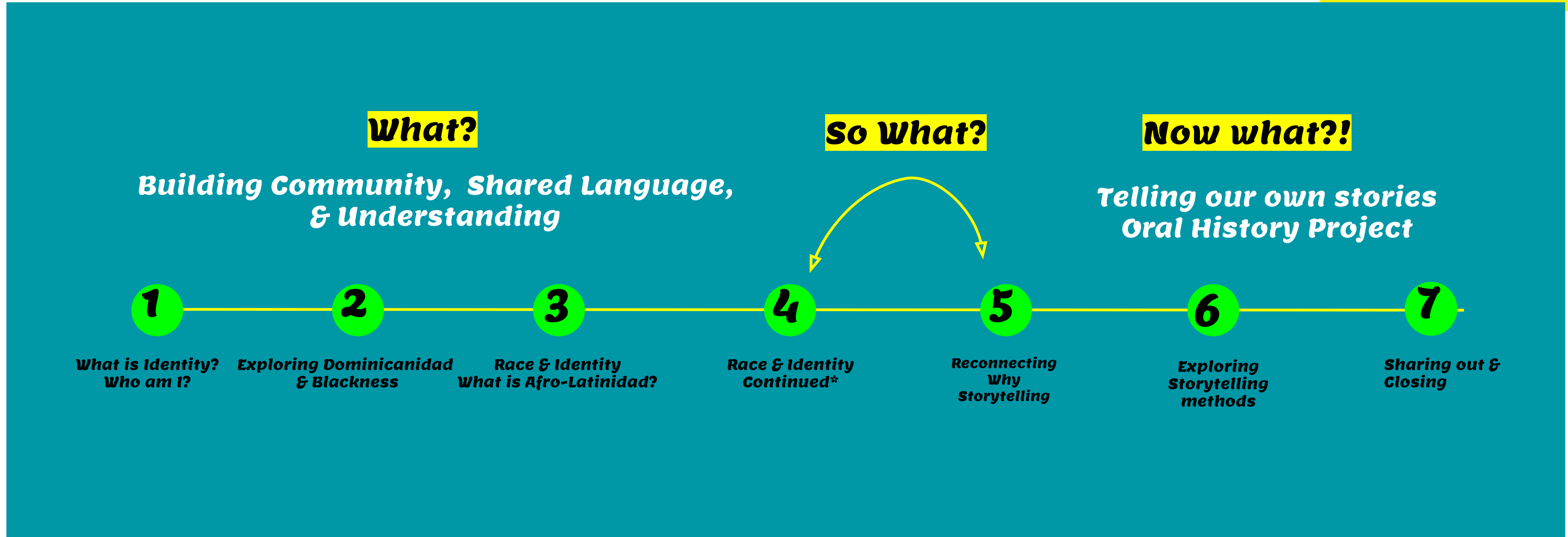
Youth Action Lab is an afterschool club for middle schoolers that uses storytelling and creative expression to explore questions on race & identity.

**Builds critical
consciousness
and racial
literacy skills**

**Develops
leadership,
empowerment
& agency**

**Promotes
pro-blackness,
disrupts
colorism
and anti-
blackness**

***Critical Consciousness is the ability to recognize and analyze systems of inequality and the commitment to take action against these systems. This term was coined by educational theorist and practitioner, Paulo Freire.**

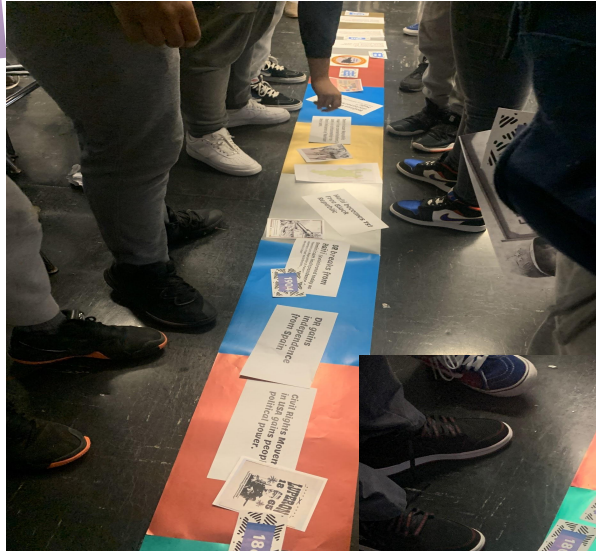
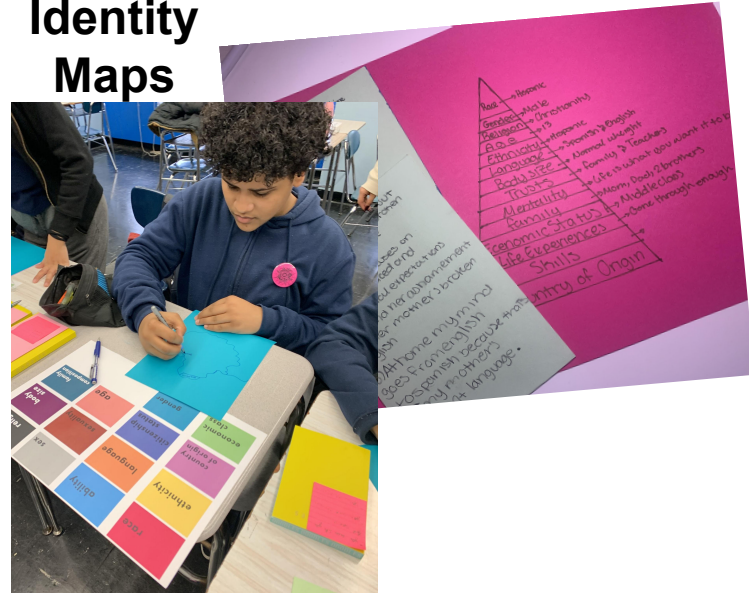


RECAP

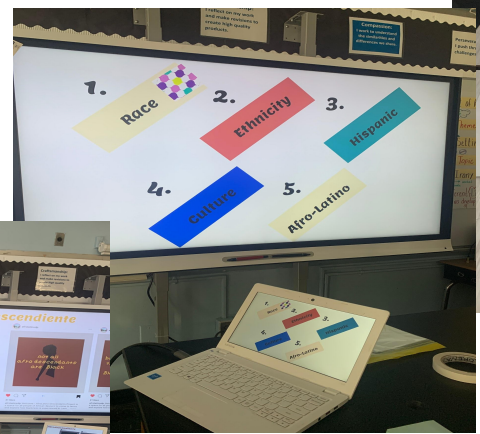
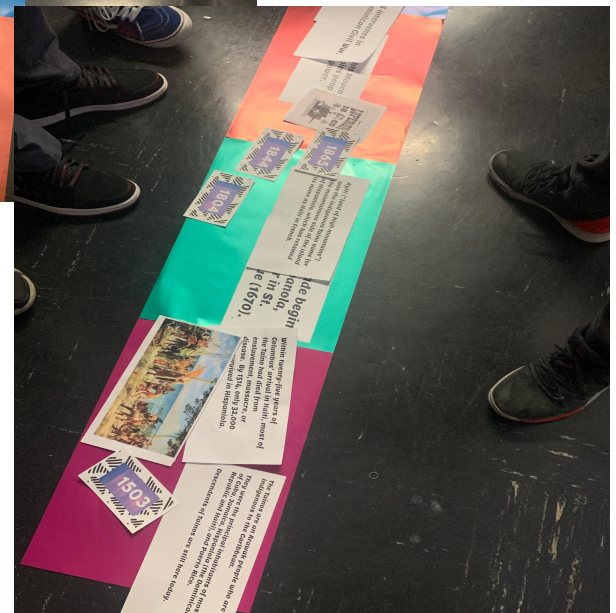
"I Speak 3 Languages"



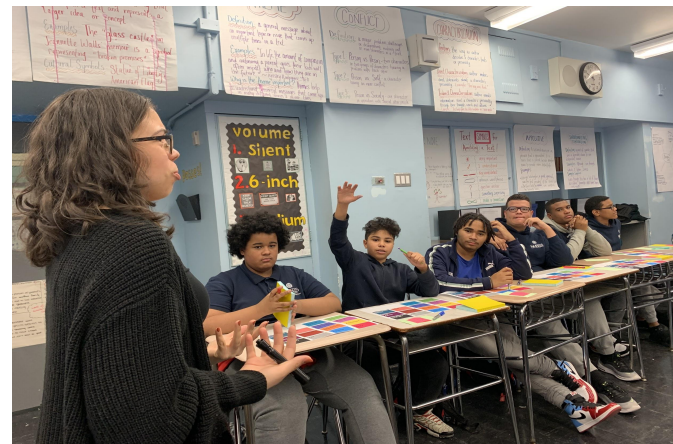
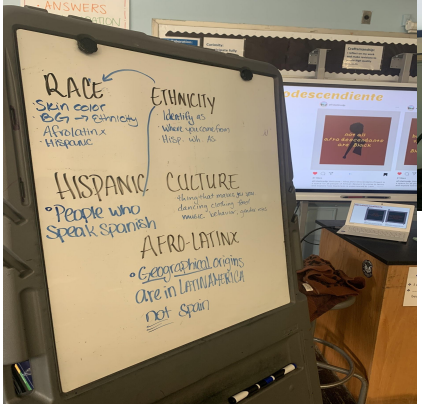
Identity Maps



DR history timeline



What is race? What is ethnicity? What is Hispanic?



Protests in DR

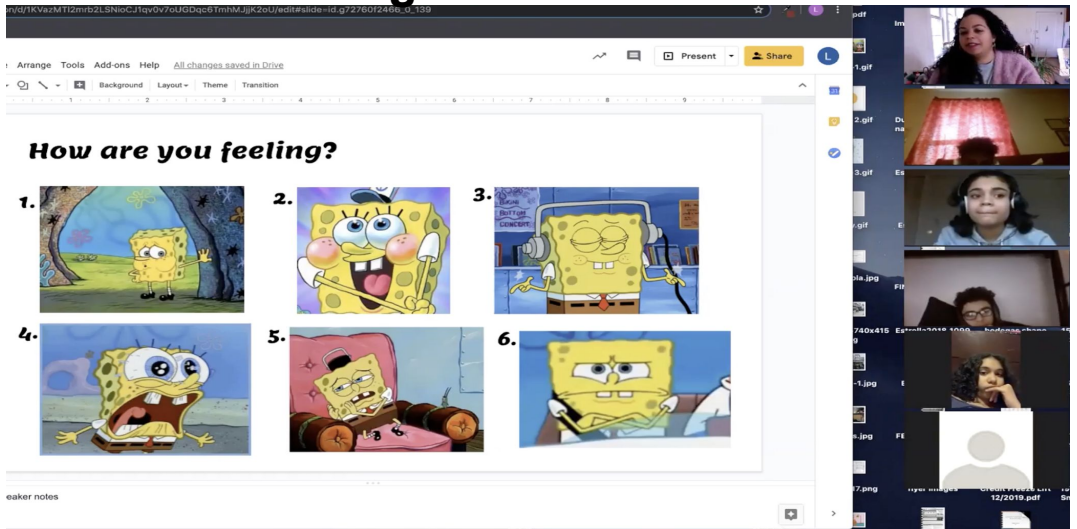


Talking about Race

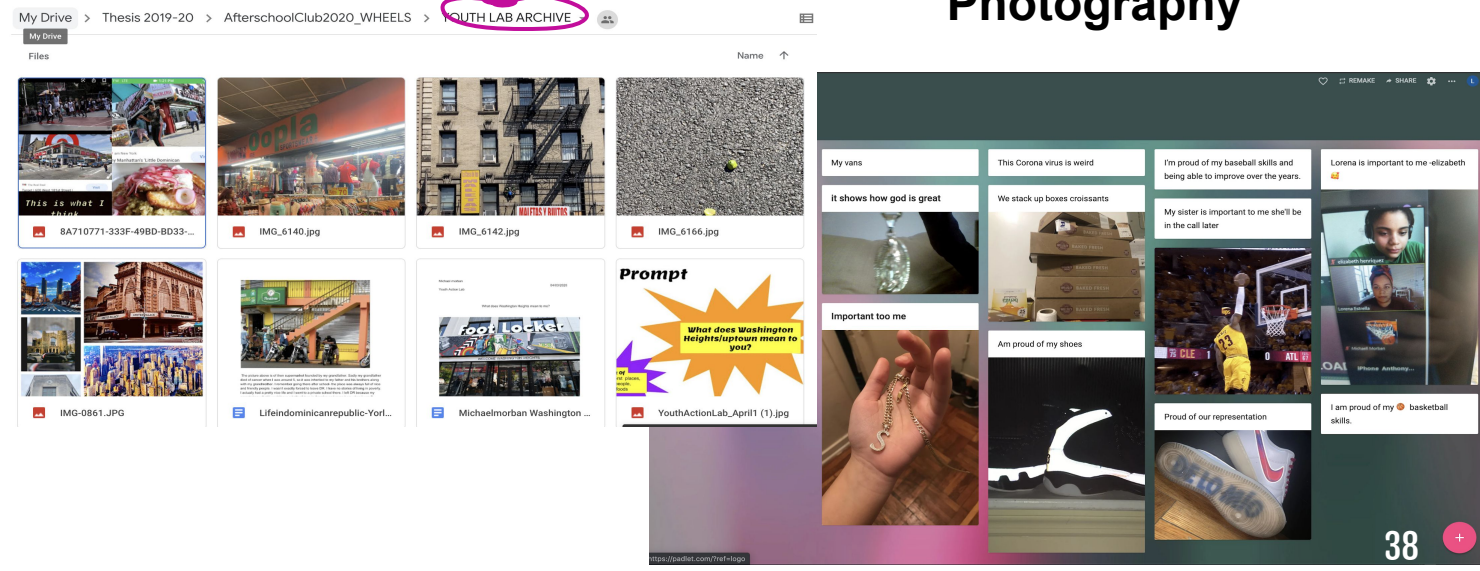


"Because I'm Latino, I can't have money?" Kids on Race

Zoom Meetings



Storytelling through Photography





“I’ve learned about race and identity and about the past and about how important it is to learn about our identity.”

Collaboration:
I work with others to
accomplish more than
what I could on my
own.

Curiosity:
I participate fully
in class.

What is
the
are
the 8th graders
reading now?

"We want to know why these elections were cancelled. We want to a system and a government that responds to the need of the people. We want those who are current to be held accountable and serve the time they deserve in jail," Anthony de la Cruz



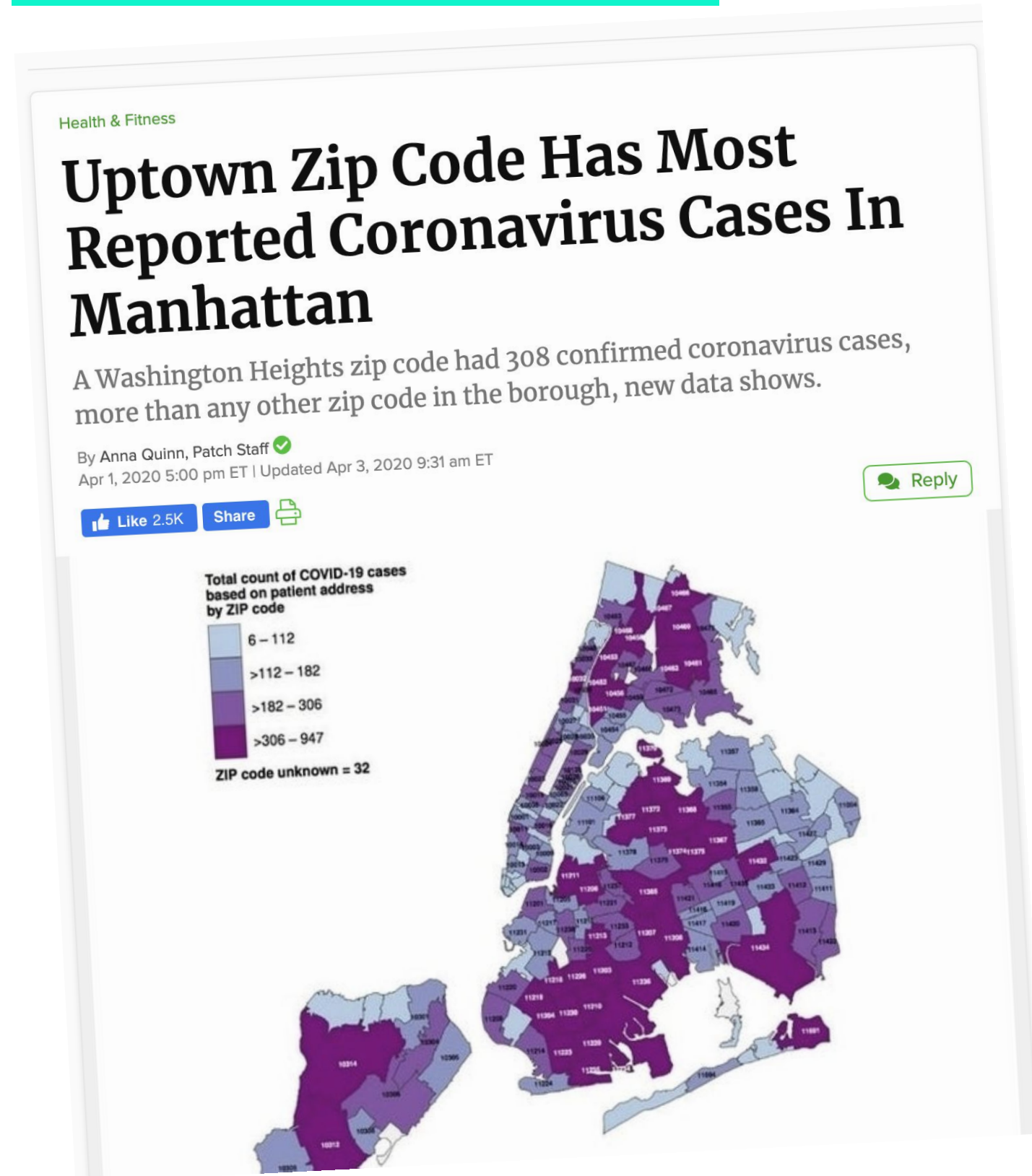
Tamo Jarro!



What's happening in
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC?
AN ILLUSTRATED THREAD (Simplified)

“How does the relation you have to a country work? I'm an immigrant that left my home country because it wasn't exactly the best and there were problems in government but I love my country. I'm very proud of being part of it, but at the same time, I left because it had problems so does that mean I don't like it?”

“COVID-19 does not see race, color, or nationality.”



Impact of COVID-19

In the middle of our planned sessions, NYC public schools had to shut down to prevent the spread of the COVID-19. The reality is that Washington Heights has been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, leaving many students and families to manage food insecurity, and a range of other challenges due to lost income and lost jobs. Many students have lost loved ones, and fear for their family members that continued to work through the peak of the outbreak.

This sudden change in “normal” meant pausing Youth Action Lab for a few weeks as students transitioned to online learning and their new routines and responsibilities. I was lucky to have a smaller number of participants continue to join virtually to keep our conversations going. This time was spent holding space for students to process what happening in the world, and how it made them feel. We found laughter and connection despite being apart. **Together, we reflected on how this moment is connected to systems of racism and inequality and what the future could hold.**

What’s happening right now? And what does **RACE/RACISM** have to do with it?

How are you feeling?

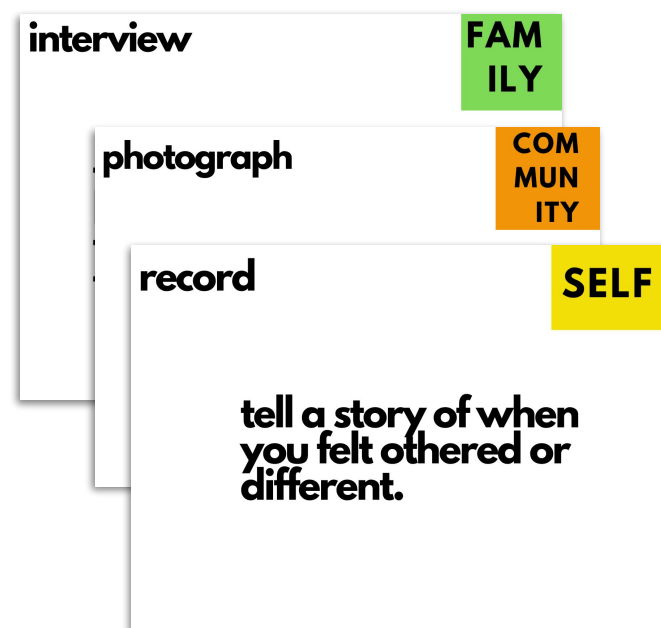
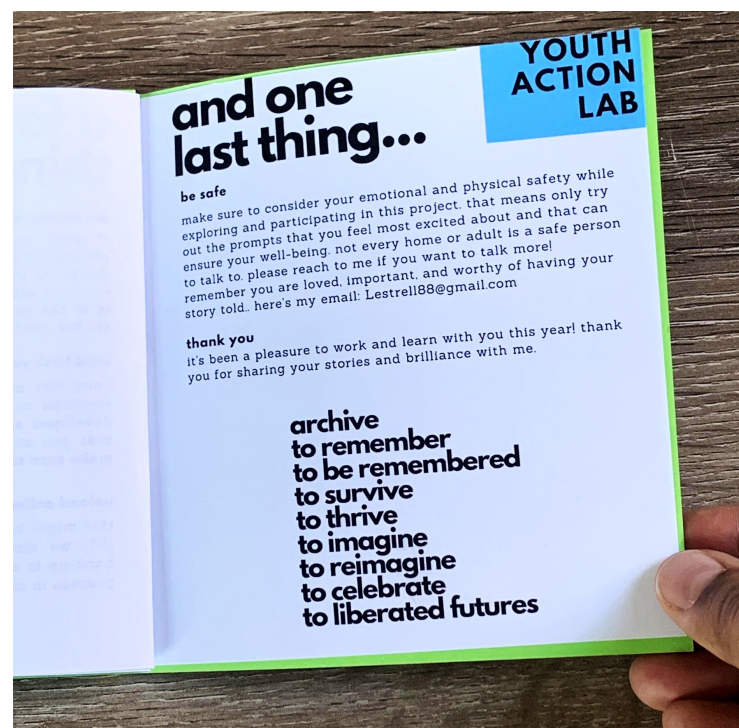
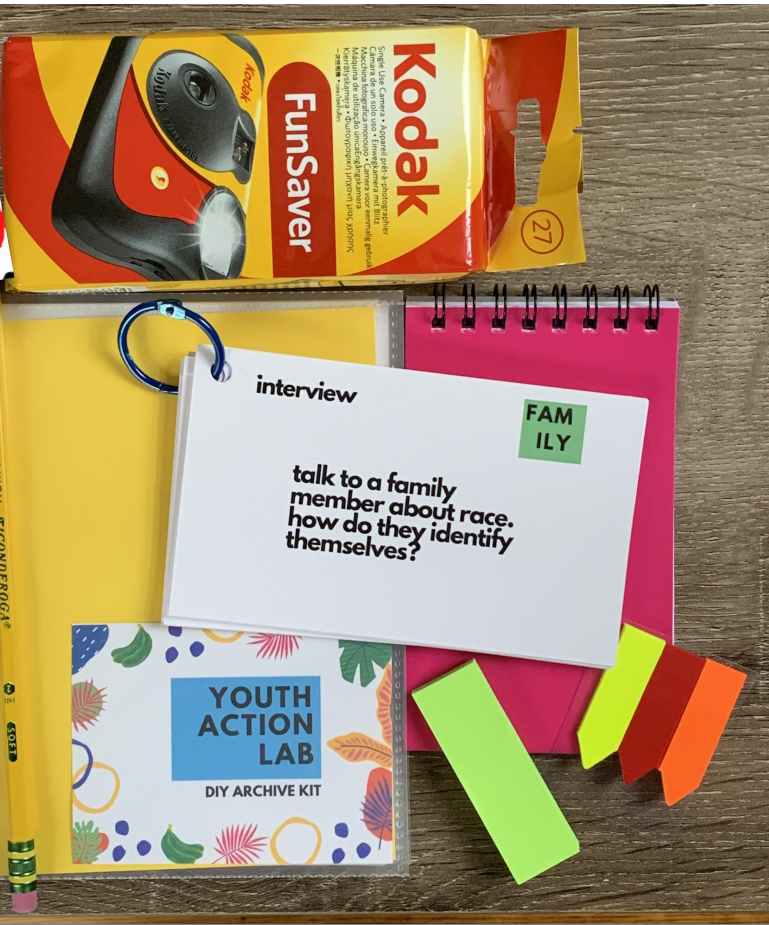


Video call interface showing a grid of participants. The top row shows a woman with long dark hair. The middle row shows a red lamp and a woman with headphones. The bottom row shows a man with glasses and a woman with her hand to her chin. A grey placeholder icon is visible at the bottom right.

DIY Archive Kits

In response to COVID-19 and the new reality of shelter at home, I wanted to find a way to engage students with storytelling practices right from their homes. I envisioned this **DIY Archive Kit** before knowing if our group would be able to meet virtually.

What emerged from this slight pivot is a beautiful resource that can be used more broadly. Using the concept of Archiving as a way to remember and engage in storytelling from homes, ten students volunteered to receive free kit via USPS with a disposable camera, question cards, notepad/pencil, and a photo album. Equipped with these tools and a guidebook, students are encouraged to document their personal and familial stories through photographs, conversations, and moments connected to race and identity. This project will be on-going and documented digitally in the near future.



Youth as Archivists



YOUTH ACTION LAB

“I learned that Latinos and people of color are still not treated the same as like white people.”

Learnings from Youth Action Lab

85%

I am more aware of how race impacts my life.

92%

I am more aware of how race impacts the world around me.

92%

I am more knowledgeable about my culture and where I come from.

19 Participants
14 Responses

Time.

While I am grateful to have had access and time to build community with the WHEELS school community, and the young people who participated, seven weeks is simply not enough time to shift deeply seeded conditioning around oppression and racism. It is life-long work, and I hope this inspires youth to keep asking questions of the world around them. We did not get the “action” portion of the roadmap we planned, and that’s okay. Future iterations should allow for an entire or half school year to truly build towards the desired goals of Youth Action Lab.

Resources.

It takes financial resources to ensure that students have the materials, food, and stipends they need to show up without worry and feel cared for. While I was able to finance this iteration of Youth Action Lab, the support of an external grant would have made this more sustainable for myself and for the teachers who volunteered their time. Investing financially in the leadership and development of youth of color is an important piece to lift up for continued iterations of Youth Action Lab.

Community Support.

With more funding and time, connecting Youth Action Lab to local Washington Heights community leaders and activists would contribute to a richer experience. By bringing new perspectives, youth are able to think more expansively about themselves and their futures.

Build Capacity.

The sustainability of Youth Action Lab means supporting the learning and practice of teachers and adults in the school building. Through professional training and establishing a community of practice, teachers can support each other in their own learning and growth around liberatory and consciousness-raising pedagogy.

Rhythm and Resistance
TEACHING POETRY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
EDITED BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN AND DYAN WATSON

TEACHING FOR
BLACK LIVES

EDITORS
DYAN WATSON
JESSE HAGOPIAN
WAY

We can reimagine & redesign
educational spaces for
healing & liberation.

Social Change

RETHINKING
ETHNIC

FunSaver
dak

FUTURE

interview

FAM
ILY

talk to a family
member about race.
how do they identify
themselves?

YOUTH
ACTION
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DIY ARCHIVE KIT

HOW-TO
MANUAL

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DIY ARCHIVE KIT

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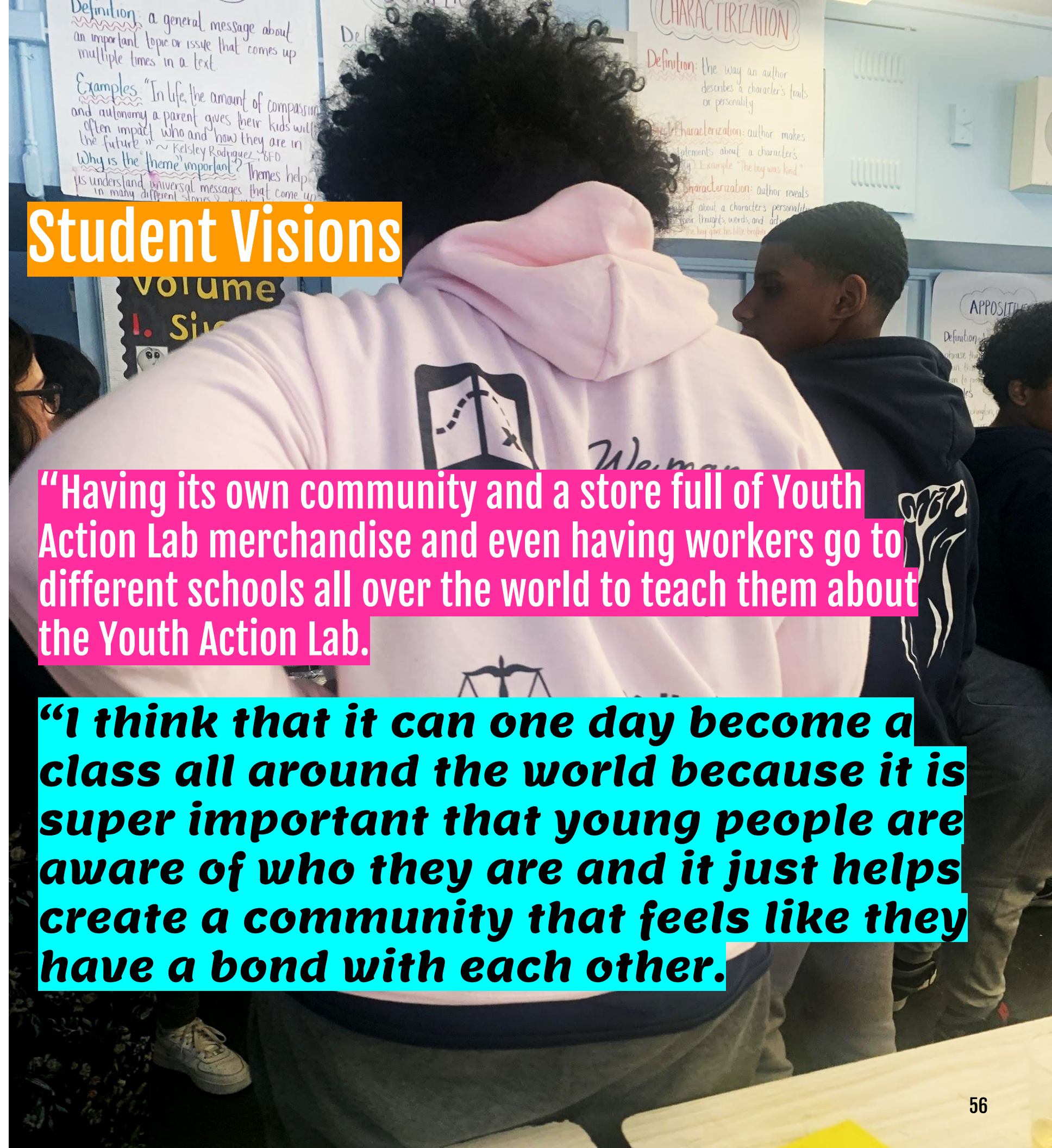
Future

Youth Action Lab opens up possibilities for the WHEELS school community, and more broadly for what's needed in the public school system in this country. The use of the word "lab" in the title of my project was intentional in this way to allow for a sense of experimentation, growth and future iterations.

I am hopeful that through centering the experiences of young people around race & identity, schools are better able to create systems and structures that allow for more youth voice and can better serve the needs of young people to see themselves reflected in their learning. The visions that participants shared with me about what Youth Action Lab could be are inspiring and moving. They know already the value community and sharing knowledge with those around them - let's learn from them and continue to build more spaces for them to shine.

While I focused on young people, I know in order for systems to shift and expand, we need adults to shift and move towards a more liberatory and anti-oppressive mindsets. Teachers, parents, and administration will also need to shift. Building the capacity of adults who support the develop of young people through trainings, reading groups, anti-racist practice is essential to this change. **It doesn't matter where you start, but starting is a must.**

And last, I am excited at the prospects of looking more closely at curriculum, and implementing Black and Ethnic Studies pedagogy and practice into classrooms. I would love to see the development of a Dominican Studies course for ethnic-majority schools like WHEELS, so that young people have the history and knowledge to move into life beyond school with deep knowing that they matter.



Student Visions

"Having its own community and a store full of Youth Action Lab merchandise and even having workers go to different schools all over the world to teach them about the Youth Action Lab."

"I think that it can one day become a class all around the world because it is super important that young people are aware of who they are and it just helps create a community that feels like they have a bond with each other."



It takes a village.

Acknowledgments

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Marilyn Zuniga
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Family & Friends:

Mom & Dad, Thank you!
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DSI:

Class of 2020, we did it!
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Thank you.

