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mickey ferrara



*radically re-imagining
schools + learning spaces
for youth power and joy*

FOR EGYPT, RAY, BRAYAN, SHARI, LUISA, JAYLIN,
SHAMIELLE, AALIYAHH, DAILEEN, NATALIE, MAYA,
KRYSTAL, SAMIRRA, MIA, NICOLE, SITA, NASHLI,
NAFITOU, LIA, KIARRA, MAAT, MAAME,
JUANNITA, JOHANNA, PERLA, LYNN,
JUKY, MALACHI, TIERRA, LUNA, TY,
LUCAS, AARNAV, KIKI, LAURYN, JAY,
MARIBEL, AMARELLIS, MICHAEL, KELZ,
ANGELA, CATHY, ALEX, KERON, SHARON,
BETTY, JASON, MALEEK, BELLA, CRISTINA,
JADA, PURPLE, CHRIS, ALYSSIA, MICHAEL,
TONI, ANNA, DANIELA, JADA, JULIYANNA, RY,
CYAN, ANTHONI, JADA, FATIMA, KIM, MARRIAMA,
JARIEL, ZARA, LUZ, ALECTUS, NELSON, TIESHA,
JUSTICE, LUIS, TAMARA, SHELLY-ANN & MONIQUE



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A LETTER FROM THE FUTURE

(Excerpt from "Evidence" by Alexis Pauline Gumbs)

Exhibit B is for Brilliant

Letter from Aladrix, age twelve, sent via skytablet during dream upload, third cycle of the facing moon, receipt unknown:

I'm really interested in what it was like back when you lived. It seems like people were afraid a lot. Maybe every day? It's hard to imagine, but it seems that way from the writing. I have to remember that no one knew that things would get better, and that even people who were working to make it happen had to live with oppression every day. I read your writing and the writing of your other comrades from that time and I feel grateful. It seems like maybe you knew about us. It feels like you loved us already. Thank you for being brave.

Now in the 5th generation since the time of the silence braking we are called hope holders and healers. There are still people doing a lot of healing, but it seems like generation after generation people got less and less afraid. People took those writings and started to recite them and then another generation hummed their melodies and then another generation clicked their rhythms and then another generation just breathe it, what you were saying before about how love is the most powerful thing. About how everything and everyone is sacred.

My friends and I feel possible all the time. So when you get afraid to speak, remember that you all were part of us all learning how to just to do it. Wow. Kapow.

Exhibit J is Joy

Letter from Shelly, age fourteen, sent via moonbeam on the Aquarius full moon.

It's hard to imagine that there was a time when young people like me felt afraid to be who they are. As a hope holder, my elders, my parents, my teachers ask me what present I imagine all the time. Joy is the most precious element we have and as a hope holder, I share my joy loudly, knowing that there were dark times when people could not, and were held back from it altogether.

My joy ripples everywhere I am and as I express it, I feel myself healing.

Thank you for loving us, even though you didn't know us.

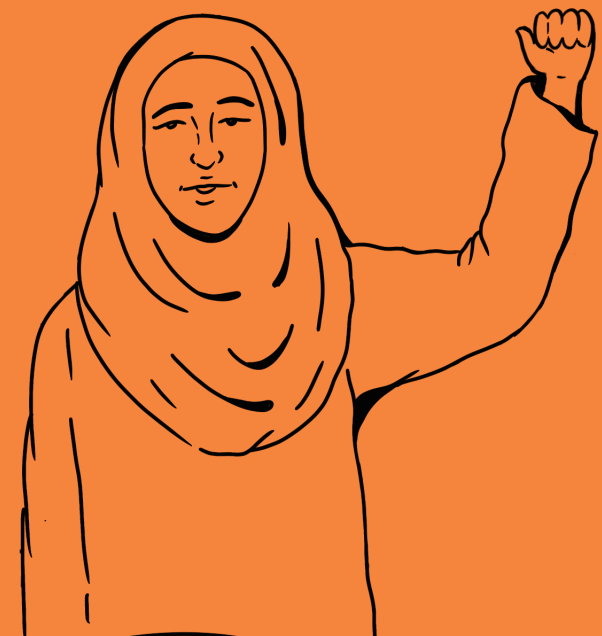
We feel your brilliance and your joy.
And we do both, loudly here.



I think if we are able to see themselves as leaders, then that we can definitely have a major impact on our collective future.

SHARI-JADE

12th grader



THE LEGACY OF EDUCATION JUSTICE WORK

This work is a ripple in the waves of youth-led activism and work. It exists in conversation with so many others before me who have worked to create new pedagogies, new political strategies, new design, and new rituals to nurture joy towards a more just and liberate future.

This work is an altar to youth-led movements and freedom fighters across space and time, the young people who guide us as ancestors and the young people rising up today for the spaces they want and need, right now.

ALTAR

Altars are a portal - they open the door across time and space and carry offerings of the dreams, hopes and healing of generations.

This work is an altar to the young people who guide us as ancestors and the activists whose work inspires us to continue to build new futures.

for Monique
for Shelly-Ann
for Mya



The classroom remains
the most radical space
of possibility.

bell hooks

*Teaching to Transgress:
Education as the Practice of Freedom*



EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM IN NEW YORK CITY

“Educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.

Working towards equity in schools involves:

- *1-Ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failures that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor;*
- *2-Interrupting inequitable practices, examining biases, and creating inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children; and*
- *3-Discovering and cultivating the unique gifts, talents and interests that every human possesses.*
- *4-To achieve equity in education, we must develop leaders who can transform our educational institutions so that success and failure are no longer predictable by student identity - racial, cultural, economic, or any other social factor.”*

A recent study from the National Equity Project shares that over **70% of families and students surveyed indicate equality and fairness as a primary concern.**

These pillars illustrate the urgency of system transformation in New York City schools, and around the country. In order to see this, we must amplify equity as a key component in school re-imagination.

The Interaction Institute for Social Change visualizes equality in schools in connection to access and outcomes. Equality asserts that every student should have the same access to a high-quality education regardless of where they come from. However, an equity frame recognizes that different students need different resources to close generations of inequitable access across race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender expression, disability, immigration status, and language proficiency.

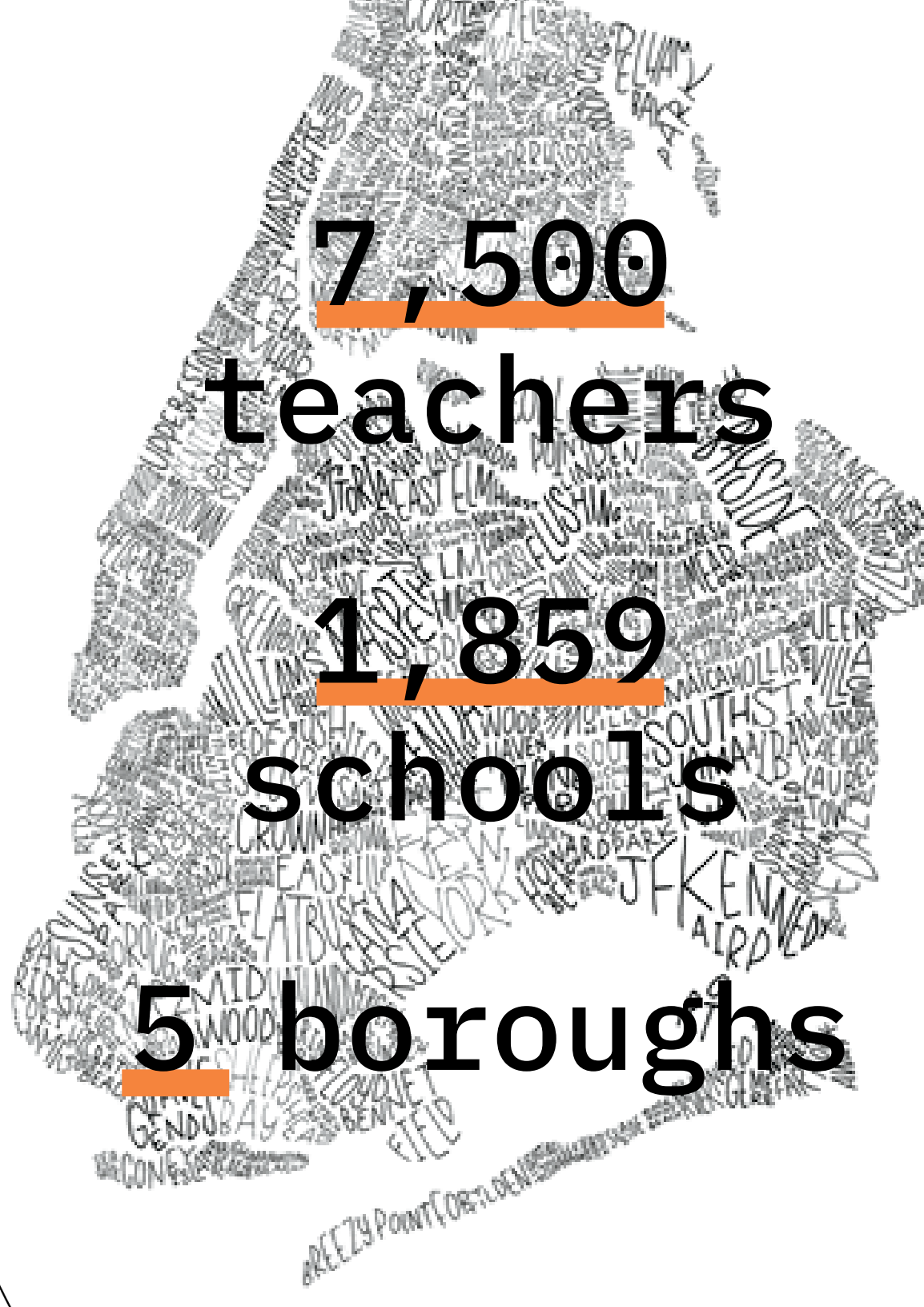
While all of my interviews, organizing and conversations with young people point to the necessity and urgency of school transformation, the complexity of the education ecosystem and landscape leave students, families and educators without a roadmap for how to make real and lasting change.

New York City is the largest school district in the United States with **1,094,138 students.**

7,500
teachers

1,859
schools

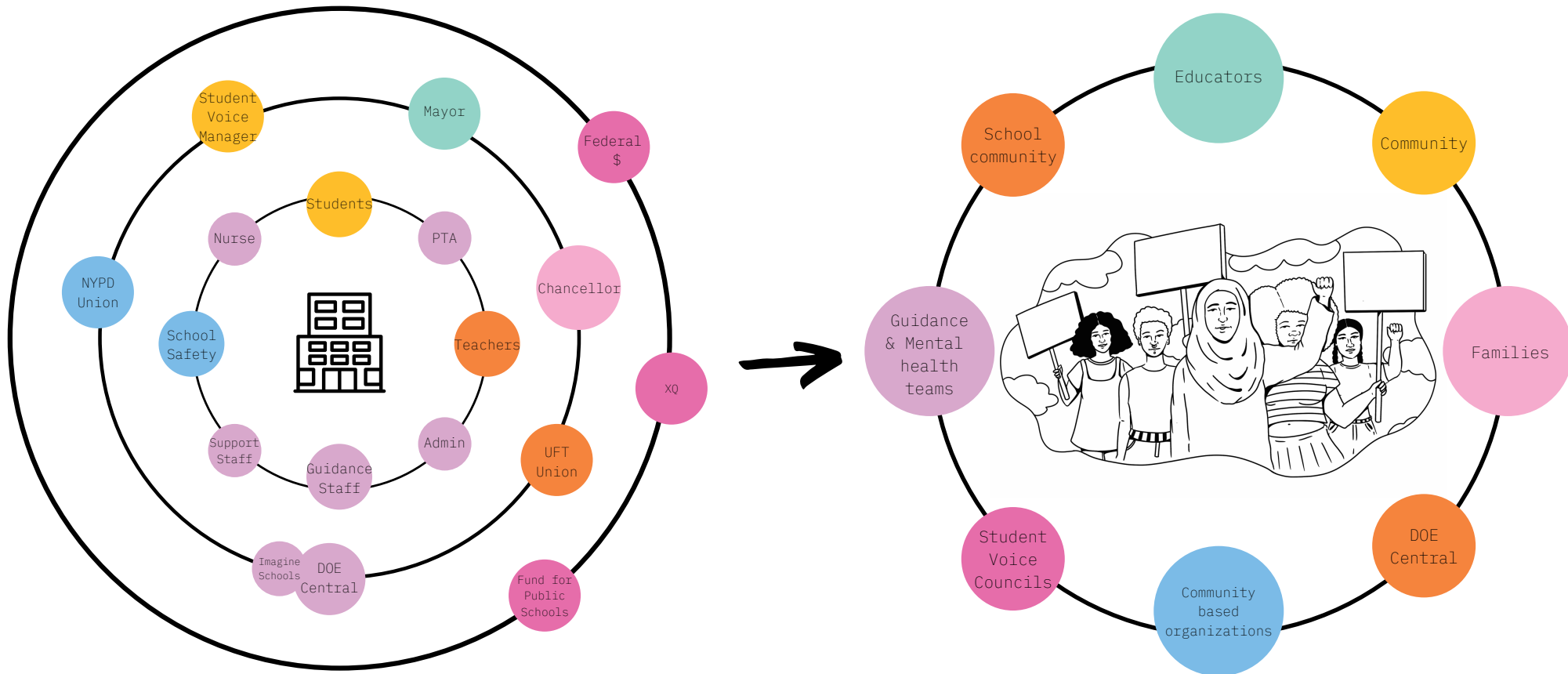
5
boroughs



A mapping of the current NYC education ecosystem -

In my work, I am looking to address the intersections of these inequities with a specific and unapologetic focus on centering and amplifying youth voices.

WHAT IF THE ECOSYSTEM LOOKED MORE LIKE THIS?



Antionette Carroll, educator and founder of Creative Reaction Lab offers us this analysis:

ALL SYSTEMS ARE DESIGNED: HARMFUL SYSTEMS MUST BE REDESIGNED.

ANTIONETTE
CARROLL

Schools then are operating exactly as they were designed to - and for who they were designed for. What is required to shift this system?

Focusing on schools as sites of transformation create new possibilities to move from

- Students as passive recipients to **creators of new pedagogies**
- Policing to **power building**
- Control to **care**

Through the process of inquiry and **imagination**, we have the ability to transform what we think and see when we hear the word "school" and to catalyze school transformation in the largest school district in the United States.

We must be willing to acknowledge this history and present day content and re-imagine them as a site of joy, play and possibility, together.

This work is deeply personal for me. I remember my first protest.

I was 13-years-old. The then, Board of Education, under the direction of Chancellor Klein issued a plan to cut all arts programming from NYC schools. Simultaneously, the city's budget for police and security equipment in schools increased by 65 percent to more than \$221 million. According to NYCLU, "In 2022, New York City had more SSAs per student than other cities have police officers per citizen." As a 6th grader, I signed up for chorus because I was excited about being a part of a group of students to put on a large show for our school. I found out two things that first - and only semester in chorus: 1. I am tone deaf and 2. The fight for school transformation starts with student action. My chorus-mates and I dressed up in our chorus uniforms, bright blue robes with small gold accents. We took the train after school to attend an evening community board meeting. We signed up to be on the speaker's list and took a seat in the back of the large conference room, filled with adults. Over an hour into testimonies about budget cuts, we were finally called to speak. I approached the podium, voice trembling and shared "This is what you'll hear next year." The Chancellor and adults leaned back in their leather roly chairs, awaiting an incredible performance. After all, we were dressed up in our chorus costumes. I stood back from the podium to join my 25-student chorus. But, we did not sing. Instead, we were quiet. We stared at the 5 adults on the panel, all middle age White men, and while they expected a show, our silence was even more powerful. Silence is what would be heard when chorus classrooms filled with students learning how to read music and practicing their melodies were transformed to detention halls, and equipment holding rooms for school safety agents. I didn't know then that this moment would mark my own commitment to raise up my voice to fight for educational equity. And that, 18 years later, I would be in art class for the first time since 6th grade, working alongside my students imagining new models for school.

AN INCOMPLETE TIMELINE OF EDUCATION (IN)JUSTICE AND YOUTH ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATION JUSTICE

1805

The New York Public School Society was formed by wealthy businessmen to provide education for poor children, inspired by the Lancasterian model. Schools are run on the "Lancasterian" model, in which one "master" can teach hundreds of students in a single room. The master gives a rote lesson to the older students, who then pass it down to the younger students. These schools emphasize discipline and obedience, qualities that factory owners want in their workers.

1820

First public high school in the U.S., Boston English, opens.

1864

Congress makes it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages. Native children as young as four years old are taken from their parents and sent to Bureau of Indian Affairs off-reservation boarding schools, whose goal, as one BIA official put it, is to "kill the Indian to save the man."

1902

The new Children's Court was opened for its first session. On that first day the court heard claims of theft, gambling, being out late at night, playing ball in the street, and throwing sticks and stones.

1905

The U.S. Supreme Court requires California to extend public education to the children of Chinese immigrants.

1906

Judge W.H. Olmsted said of the Children's Courts, "A very large proportion of the youngsters arraigned ought not to be brought here at all," claiming that the City's Board of Education (BOE) looked to the court to do its work with regard to school-based discipline.

1913

It is reported that there was one truant officer for every 7,000 or 8,000 children, and some political will to reduce that ratio to 1 for every 4,000.

1925

Teachers' complaints to a School Survey Committee included suggestions for handling the problems of discipline, such as designating a school in each district as a corrective school to deal with "problem" children.

1930

The Lemon Grove school board decided to build a separate school for children of Mexican heritage without giving notice to their parents. On January 5, 1931, Lemon Grove Grammar School principal Jerome Green, acting under instructions from school trustees, turned away Mexican children at the schoolhouse door, directing them to the new school, which came to be known within the local Mexican American community as la caballeriza, meaning "the stable".

1931

In Alvarez v. Lemon Grove this California Mexican American case was possibly the first successful court action in favor of school desegregation in the country.

1931

A survey of 150 school districts reveals that three-quarters of them are using intelligence testing to place students in different academic tracks.

1933

A class was started for New York City school teachers at the Police Academy to train them to "fight juvenile delinquency." Police instructors coordinated the courses and teachers were instructed on how to combat juvenile delinquency from the police standpoint.

1943

A six-point program to respond to the citywide "delinquency problem" was outlined by the principal of Samuel J. Tilden High School. This included a substantial reduction in class size, full utilization of social service agencies, use of police to keep intruders out of the schools, enlargement of the Bureau of Child Guidance (a training school for child guidance work, the equivalent of a contemporary social work school), full utilization of the city's recreational facilities, and the enlargement of the adult education program.

1954

Brown v. Board of Education
Supreme Court case determines that racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional

1950s

Ella Baker, chair of the NAACP's education committee in the 1950s, partnered with Black and Puerto Rican parents and school administrators to document conditions in their local public schools—an approach in line with her belief in the importance of empowering everyday people to create change in their communities. Using tools like the "Check Your Schools" questionnaire

CHECK YOUR SCHOOL!

445-129 M
P.O. Number
140 West 140 St
School Address

Christina Johnson
Name of Principal of P.S. A.
222-44th St. H43-0432
Principal's Address... Telephone

DATE ENRAGED AND REPAIRS:
What year was your school built? 1924 When was it last painted...
1947? How many toilets for boys? 4; for girls? 6

Describe Conditions of:

	Good	Adequate	Poor
Play Area			
Lunchroom		upon for lunchroom as adequate, quite poor	
Auditorium			no auditorium
Teachers Rest Rm.			
Class Rooms			100% of classrooms in need

Most Needed Repairs Are:

Heating and Plumbing Plumbing modernization

Electrical Lighting in certain periods inadequate

Others Reorganization of classrooms

DO YOU HAVE A PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM IN YOUR SCHOOL? No

PUPIL ENROLLMENT, 1950... TEACHERS, 29... ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS
How many children enrolled 465... School's Capacity 465...
Is your school on Double Session? No Has it been No?
How Many Regular Teachers 46 Substitutes 34 Probationary
How Many Children are Behind in reading: 3rd grade 1 4th 0 5th 1 6th 1
How many children behind in arithmetic: 3rd grade 1 4th 0 5th 1 6th 1
What per cent of the children are: Negro 77; Puerto Rican 1?
How Many SPANISH SPEAKING TEACHERS Have You? 3 How Many Needed
How Many Children are Now getting REMEDIAL Reading 100? Arith. 1?
How Many Remedial Teachers are Needed 4?
What is the present class size (excluding special classes) 20-25?
Submitted by the PARENTS' COMMITTEE, W.Y. 44th St. NAACP, 165 W 131 St.

Signed: Christina Johnson
Principal

1960s

The Freedom Schools of the 1960s were first developed by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the 1964 Freedom Summer in Mississippi. They were intended to counter the "sharecropper education" received by so many African Americans and poor whites.



Ken Thompson, United Methodist Board of Global Ministries

1964

NYC-wide student boycott with the demands "Fight Jim Crow" "Boycott Schools" "Integration Means Better Schools for All"

460,000 students (almost 50% of the entire school population) and teachers stayed out of school on February 3, 1964—known as "Freedom Day"—marching across the Brooklyn Bridge and demanding "complete desegregation of all schools."

1966

Audre Lorde acts as a radical librarian at New York City's Town School Library

1966

The Black Panther Party releases their Ten-Point Program, and education is prominently shared as a part of their work:

5. We Want Education for Our People That Exposes The True Nature Of This Decadent American Society. We Want Education That Teaches Us Our True History And Our Role in the Present-Day Society.

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world then he has little chance to relate to anything else.



FREEDOM DAY PROTEST

1968

Brownsville Teacher Strike

With the support of NYC Mayor John Lindsay and funding from the Ford Foundation, three city school districts were decentralized in 1968, with community-elected governing boards taking greater authority over hiring and instruction. The city's public school teacher's union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), opposed decentralization however, and after an Ocean Hill-Brownsville administrator fired 13 UFT teachers from one of the decentralized schools, the union went on strike, shutting down the city's public schools for over a month. What would come to be known as the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers' strike brought an end to community control in New York and fractured coalitions between Jewish and Black activists in the Civil Rights Movement.

1968

Community organizes freedom schools while the public schools are closed.

1968

Schools Superintendent Dr. Bernard E. Donovan, reacting to an incident of violence against a junior high school principal in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn (who had been allegedly approached by four men accusing him of keeping children outside despite sub-freezing temperatures), asked the BOE for an emergency allocation of \$1.25 million to establish a security force in the city's public schools.

1969

100 students at Taft High School in the Bronx protested the suspension of a Black student for giving another student a copy of the Black Student Union Press, breaking a rule about giving out unauthorized material in the building. The protest resulted in the arrest of seven youths. At the time of the report, large police details were assigned to two other high schools, Andrew Jackson in Queens and Canarsie High School in Brooklyn. Forty police officers patrolled Canarsie high school and students had to pass police barricades set up in front of the building. It was reported that the President of the BOE, John Doar, arranged a meeting with Police Commissioner Howard R. Leary to discuss school problems.

1969

Superintendent Donovan ordered every high school and junior high school in the city to name a security official as part of a plan to stem increasing student disruptions.

1969

Black Panther Breakfast Program launches. "The children, many of whom had never eaten breakfast before the Panthers started their program," the Sun Reporter wrote, "think the Panthers are 'groovy' and 'very nice' for doing this for them."

1970

The Young Lords' actions at Lincoln Hospital, led by Denise Oliver, were an extension of the group's activism around issues of public health in East Harlem. Their demand? Accessible, quality health care for all.

1970

The NYS Board of Higher Education launched a plan to implement Open Admissions at the City University of New York

1971

Hect-Calandra Act codified the entrance exam as the sole means of admission to specialized schools

1972

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 becomes law. Though many people associate this law only with girls and women's participation in sports, Title IX prohibits discrimination based on gender in all aspects of education.

1974

The Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974 prohibits discrimination against students. It also requires school districts and states' departments of education to take action to ensure equal participation for everyone, including removing language barriers for ELL students.

1975

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) passes

1976

CUNY was free for qualifying city students from its inception in 1847 until 1976, when a city fiscal crisis led to change. Recently, these efforts were reignited through a City Council bill that would establish a task force to propose ways to eliminate tuition at CUNY.

1982

Hundreds of students at Thomas Jefferson High School in East New York successfully protested an attempt to bring in metal detectors.

1998

Charter schools became part of NY State's public education offerings with the passing of the NY State Charter Schools Act of 1998



Transfer of school safety authority from the school system to police under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

2000

The Alliance for Quality Education is a coalition mobilizing communities across the state to keep New York true to its promise of ensuring a high quality public education to all students regardless of zip code.

2001

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is approved by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. The law, which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, holds schools accountable for student achievement levels and provides penalties for schools that do not make adequate yearly progress toward meeting the goals of NCLB.

2004

Urban Youth Collaborative is Founded



Sistas & Brothas United (SBU)

2007

The New York State Youth Leadership Council (NYSYLC) is founded to support and mobilize undocumented youth in New York through innovative leadership development opportunities and grassroots organizing.

2010

Arizona's law HB 2281, which prohibits any class that "advocates ethnic solidarity."

2011

ICE's "Sensitive Locations Memorandum" from 2011. The memo also lists churches, funeral homes, hospitals and schools as sensitive locations where arrests won't be made.

2014

New York Collective of Radical Educators shares their Points of Unity, including "1. We have a responsibility to address racism and neoliberalism as it impacts our students, our profession, and public education as a whole" and "3. We believe in restorative justice as an alternative to punitive disciplinary measures."

2015

NYC Public schools observe two Muslim holidays Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, after student protest and activism for decades.

2016

Teens Take Charge is founded by Nelson Luna & Whitney Stephenson

2019

Girls for Gender Equity's participatory action research project "The Schools Girls Deserve" wins 8 Title IX coordinators in NYC public schools

2019

NYC Department of Education hires its first Student Voice Manager, the only role agency-wide that invited students into the hiring and decision-making process. The purpose of this role will be to close the gap between decision-makers and those impacted by decisions, students.

2020

Teens Take Charge file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, with claims that "screens" violate Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act

ORGANIZING FOR EDUCATION JUSTICE

From SNCC to Teens Take Charge, young people have been rising up with their voices and their bodies. We honor their activism and their work. Now it's time to actualize their rallying calls.

We are building on brokenness

New York City schools continue to be segregated and schools with a student population of majority students of color are disproportionately impacted by policing and are chronically under-resourced. All of this contributes to inequity that maintains systems of domination and is out of alignment with the mission statement: *"Our mission is to raise the knowledge, skill, and opportunity of all the people in New York. Our vision is to provide leadership for a system that yields the best educated people in the world."*

Amidst data, metrics and stories that illustrate the misalignment of this mission statement in practice, we acknowledge that undoing this system means confronting all of the ways inequity has been concretized in policy, curriculum and practice.

What will we build toward?

The problems of the NYC public school system are by design. The design exists in the architecture of school buildings, in the iconography of school names, in the hierarchical relationships between students and adults, in the pedagogies that uphold oppressive ideologies - student's voices, dignity, lives are what's at stake in this current design. We know what we are building from, *what will we build towards?*

"Everyone acknowledges that there is bias in the system and no one acknowledges their role in the system."

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, CENTRAL STAFF

Are schools designed for *power, freedom, possibility and joy* possible? What will it take to build them? Who will it take to shift power directly to young people?

The work is meant to be a disruption.

A space to be brave, brave, brave

Looking for a home for the rage, passion and fire I felt as a young person, I was introduced to A.C.R.E.S (American Civil Rights Education Services), a program designated to bridge the gap between the history and legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and youth activists. Throughout the program, I learned about the power of young organizers who led a 380-day boycott against the segregated Montgomery bus system. I saw how young people used the creative tactics of storytelling and people power to build an intersectional movement. I began to understand organizing as a tool to dream up new worlds, even when we don't yet know what those worlds look like.

Through this program, I met Mrs. Janice Dixon. Mrs. Dixon was one of the core facilitators of the program, which would take us on a 10-day "expedition" through the South, retracing key places and meeting elders from the movement. This experiential trip made tangible and real the histories of a movement that had been intentionally excluded from history textbooks, a movement led by young people who dared to shift the world.

Mrs. Dixon was one of those young students who desegregated her middle school. She confronted the direct threats of white supremacist violence as a child, hoping that her brave leadership would make real the promise of integration. Throughout this experience, the gaze of White educators who did not value, uplift or care to educate Black children seeded a deep commitment to educate and create spaces that could be liberatory.

Years later, when Mrs. Dixon moved to New York City. She began substitute teaching to support her blooming family and was told constantly that she was meant to teach. After interacting with students, she began to see what had been seeded in her years earlier. So, after teaching biology in NYC public schools for over a decade, she was invited to be a Lead Educator at a program centering civil rights history.

That's when our worlds collided. In 2005, we met outside Marcy Houses to embark on this 10-day experience together.

My immigrant parents had never let me sleepover a friend's house, nevertheless go on an overnight trip alone before. I pleaded to be allowed to go and when they said goodbye to me that morning, I don't think we could have known that I wouldn't be coming back the same.

On the first night of our journey, Mrs. Dixon led a circle for us where she talked about what she and other young people knew was at stake when they positioned their small bodies to desegregate schools, amidst protest from White parents, teachers and children. She spoke about service towards something bigger than herself. Then through weeping eyes, she asked us "what are you willing to risk for justice?" That question would linger with me for the days, the weeks, and the years to follow.

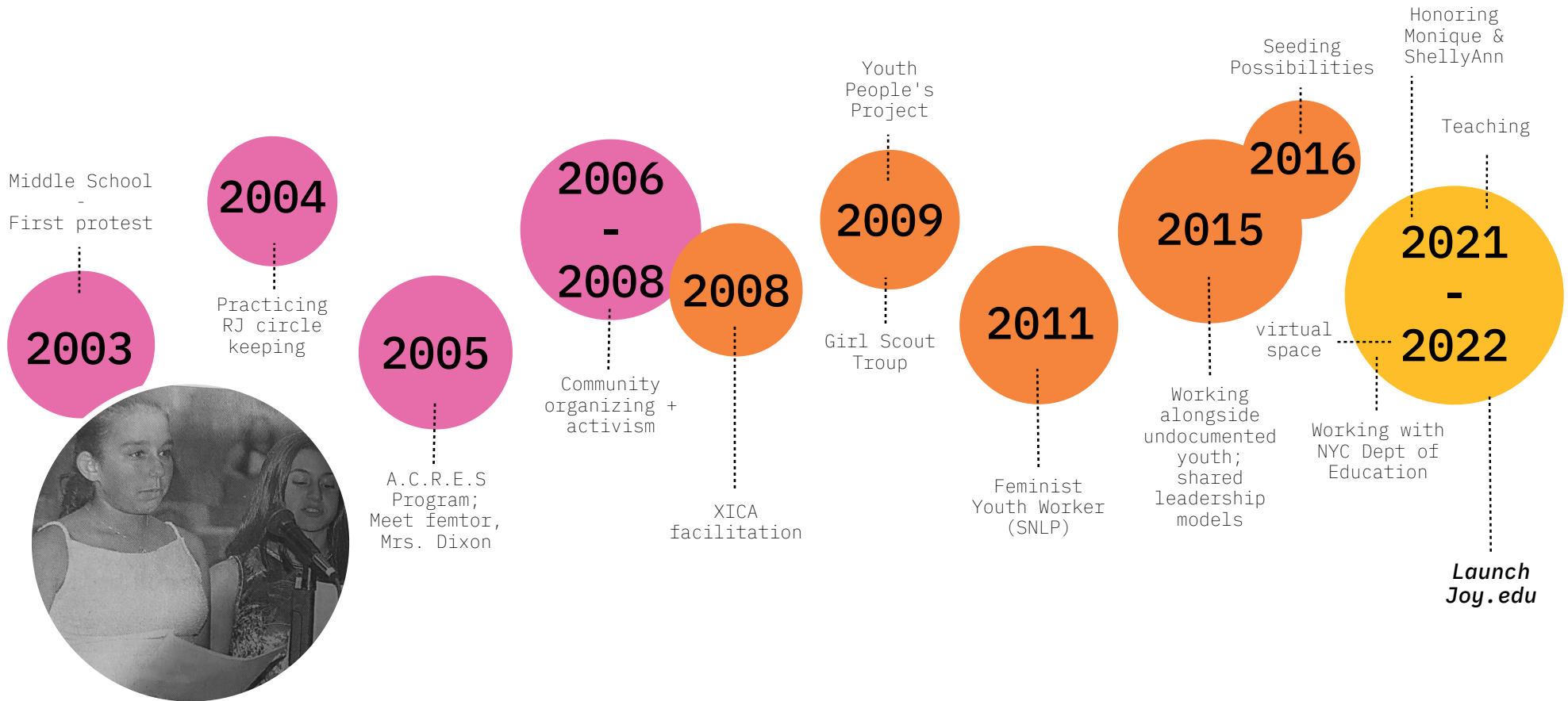
My life has a clear line in it. Before Mrs. Dixon - and after Mrs. Dixon. At breakfast that next morning, Mrs. Dixon and I were both wearing orange. A mere coincidence I thought. I went over to her table and thanked her for the night before and gave her a really big hug (I don't remember this but later she would call this a knowing hug, one where she felt loved and cared for by me). Nothing, and I mean nothing went without Mrs. Dixon's notice so best believe that she pointed out our matching. That day she called me a mirror. For every day, in our 8 day journey, we came down to breakfast wearing the same color. We would laugh about it and our connection. I was a little bird under wing for that entire experience, soaking up all the wisdom in her voice, the magic in her vulnerability, commanding nature of her voice.

When we got back to New York City, I tried to express to my family and friends what the experience meant for me but, where my words failed, they could feel a difference. My once quieter voice beamed louder. My values echoing with clarity. My path seeded. It's taken me more than 15 years to know the true impact that having an educator who loved me, who chose me, who challenged me meant - the spark that was ignited, a full flame ablaze with imagination of what relationships between educators and students could be, and what transformative spaces of learning were possible.

Later, Mrs. Dixon would be invited to a gathering of elders of the movement. Upon that gathering's invitation, each of those elders would invite 2 young people to be trained and supported by a national gathering of elders and youth, raising up the next generation of leaders, primed to lead with the wisdom of our elders and the energy that young people have always brought to movements. For years I wondered by Mrs. Dixon chose me: a young 15-year old Michelina, daughter to a southern Italian immigrant father and Brooklyn-born mother raised between Crown Heights and her family's small town in Cassoria.

My voice only beamed louder.

Personal timeline / Why this is personal



NEW MODELS & POSSIBILITIES

Educators and advocates have been sourcing, imagining and building educational spaces that live this bravery out loud, and offer create pathways forward.

In my research, I have been learning from alternative models that understand that while we can embrace incremental change inside of systems, we can work to build new ones that allow us to experiment, create and explore new ways forward.

LITTLE SUN PEOPLE BEDSTUY BROOKLYN

Conversation with Fela Barclift

A Childcare Daycare center in Bedford Stuyvesant Brooklyn. Little Sun People has an African centered focus in its curriculum. Mama Fela, the schools founder, shared "It takes courage to stand in the face of a system that not only says that what you're doing won't work but also consistently let's you know that they see it as wrong." For all the little suns, school reimagination is a commitment to seeing the beauty and power of Black culture so that when they enter into a school system that does not reflect their communities or values, that they will be armed with the power of their own radiant light.

Here's a snapshot of some of the brilliant school visionaries and models, locally and nationally that I am learning from.

UNDER A TREE NATIONAL

Conversation with Daniel Meyer

Under A Tree seeks to reclaim and redefine the meaning of leadership by empowering everyday citizens to lead socially conscious, professionally successful and personally fulfilling lives. Daniel and his team create spaces for education to be made more accessible and shift power to young people.

"Young people are side stepping traditional paths. We treat youth as vessels. When they have so much to contribute to here + now."

**ABOLITIONIST YOUTH ORGANIZING
(AYO, NYC!), NYC**

Conversation with AYO organizers

The City of New York has cut funding for this year's Summer Youth Employment Program, leaving thousands of young people across the city without access to necessary financial resources in the midst of a pandemic. In this crisis moment, we know how important it is for young people to not only have direct access to financial resources, but also a community of support and connection that challenges the normalization of policing and incarceration as the city continues to invest in policing over people. The Abolitionist Youth Organizing Institute is creating virtual space this summer for 50 young people ages 16 to 24 to organize towards liberated futures together. Their interactive curriculum is documented online and available for educators around the country to follow along.

4 MATIV

**Conversation with
Etty Bake**

Etty, an architect and brilliant space designer shed light for me on the process and barriers that are presented when we begin to imagine new types of spaces - regulation, fire codes, etc. She shared that the guidebook to building schoolbuildings has become a playbook, limiting creativity and freedom.

*"Space can make you
feel nurtured"*

SERVICE LEARNING (SLI)

BAY AREA

Conversation with Chrissy Hernandez

The Service-Learning Institute offers a unique opportunity for college-age young people to activate their social power, and works with older students in partnership with younger mentees.

"Service-learning must include conversations about oppression and must be thinking of systems as part of the process"

In this powerful conversation Chrissy reminded me of this piece that has guided both of us in our work, and is a mandate for all educators and people who believe in justice. Written by Luis Valdez --

"In Lak'ech

*Tu eres mi otro yo/You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti/If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo/I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto/
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo/
I love and respect myself."*

Phases of Imagination

In order to do this work as whole-heartedly as possible, I shifted the traditional linear design cycle to fit a more fluid, embedded approach to this work. Inside of each of these phases was deep self and community work that guided my process of inquiry forward and pushed me to sit with my questions over a commitment to solutions.

Discover

Be in the possibility of discovery, prioritize questions over answers, remain curious

Define

Build upon your learnings by drawing insights

Develop

Co-envision the next steps alongside community

Design

Design towards the future we are building, have that future in mind and be unrelenting and risk-taking in pursuit of it

Celebrate

Celebrate along the way
+ honor the people
along for the journey

Building Gardens of learning

The metaphor of a garden became really important in my work because it helped me to understand that in order to grow something new, I had to tend to the soil as tenderly and thoughtfully as I tended to the conditions of growth I hoped to foster now.

Each week, I asked myself to access my own learning and how it had been impacted, and sometimes transformed, by the work.



Rooting:

deepening and
expanding in
the soil



Seeding: sowing +

nurturing new
ideas for
work and
community



Pruning:

cutting away,
removing



Blooming:

growing
abundantly

OCT
2021

discover

KEY ACTIVITIES

Partner Immersion

- Set up consistent meetings with Partner
- Map out MOU + timeline

Community Harvesting

- Create discussion guide
- Design 3 opportunities to engage community in co-designing question

Expertise Gathering

- Connect with 2-4 school creation experts, in public and charter school spaces

LIBERATION LIBRARY

- "Teaching to Transgress" bell hooks
- "We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching" Bettina Love

DATES

OCT 11
WORKSHOP

NOV
2021

define

Finding Meaning

- Analyze connections in data from community + weave points of synergy

Scoping + Rooting

- Expand constellations of questions and revisit scope of work
- Ways Forward with Partner

- "Emergent Strategy" adrienne maree brown
- "Radical Technologies" Adam Greenfield
- "Schools that Work" Whole Schools Consortium

NOV 1
GARDEN #2

NOV 22-26
PROTOTYPING

DEC
2021

develop

Family Engagement

- Tabling and outreach material creation

Community Harvesting

- Map current experiences of Pre-K to Kingergarden goers in NYC

Needs Mapping

- Create a current roots:causes analysis from harvesting

Insight Nourishment

- Connect with 2-4 school creation experts, in public and charter school spaces

- "The Feminist Classroom" Frances A Maher
- "Feminist teaching in theory and practice" Becky Ropers-Huilman

DEC 13
ELLA'S BDAY

DEC 20
GARDEN #3

DEC 24-31
BREAK

JAN
2022

Scoping + Rooting

- Expand constellations of questions and revisit scope of work
- Analyze all interviews + mapping to date to revisit any gaps
- Consider alternative research methods + ritual creation

LIBERATION LIBRARY

- "Educating Feminists: Life Histories and Pedagogy" Sue Middleton
- "Feminism is for Everyone" bell hooks
- "Teacher of Weird Abundance" Anne Sexton
- "Girls, Single-Sex Schools, and Postfeminist Fantasies" Stephanie McCall

JAN 6
MONIQUE'S BDAY

JAN 25-28
REGENTS WEEK

FEB
2022

design

KEY ACTIVITIES

Partner Expansion

- Resubmission for school charter application
- Revisit MOU goals + hopes as partners

Designing Together

- Prototypes of school rituals
- Co-creating shared values for a feminist + just school
- Leaving evidence of our work

Tool Creation

- Create guide to engaging families + young people in schools
- Finalize shared tools - Launch site!
- Organize What's Next!

- "Research is Ceremony" by Shawn Wilson
- "Pushout" Monique W. Morris
- "In A Classroom of Their Own" Keisha Lindsay
- "Distraction: Girls, School and Sexuality" Erin Mikelec
- "Hood Feminism" Mikki Kendall

FEB 21-25
PREZ WEEK

MAR
2022

MAR 1
WOMEN'S
HERSTORY
MONTH

APR
2022

APR 15-22
DOE SPR
BREAK

celebrate

MAY
2022

Honoring Community

- Presentback learnings
- Host a community celebration!
- Send abundant thank yous

- "Rebel Girls" graphic series

MAY
THESIS SHOW

JUNE
2022

Closing Celebration with students at UAM

JUNE
YOUTH
FASHION
SHOW &
COMMUNITY
ACTION

2023

2023
Kwenda Opens

changing everything
might sound daunting,
but it also means there
are many places to
start,
infinite opportunities
to collaborate,
and **endless imaginative**
interventions
and experiments to
create.

MARIAME KABA

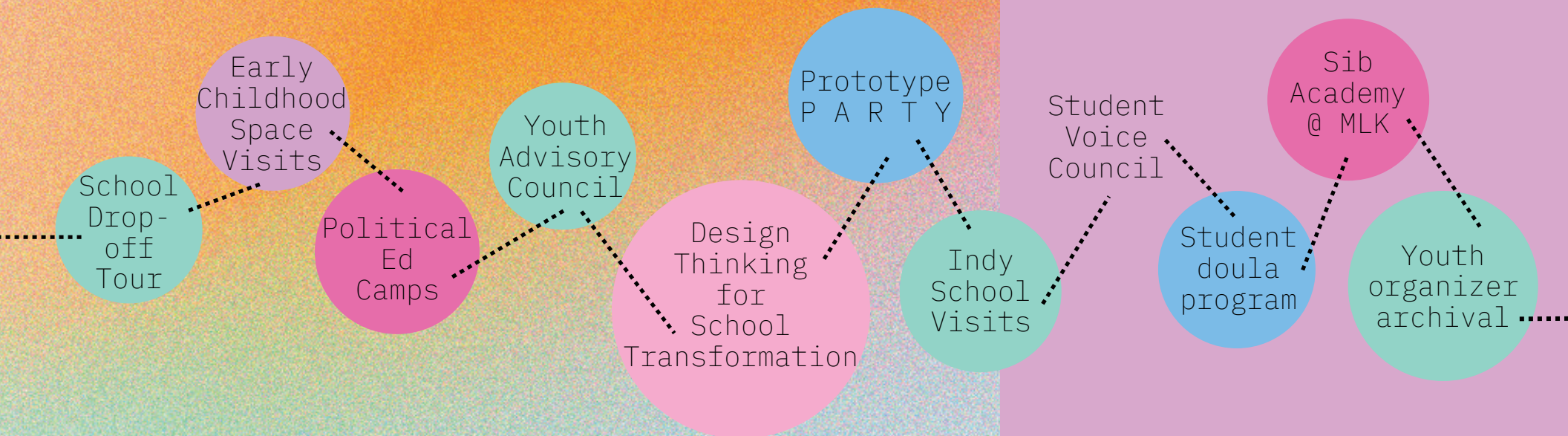
Abolitionist Educator



experiments in *education justice*

11 experiments

- **218** young people engaged
- **42** educators and administrators
- **22** distinct school visits
- **17** community organizations
- **3** community partners



RE-ORIENTING TO EXPERIMENTS

A Practice: What's possible when we take young people's leadership?

Mariame Kaba's words and her work to imagine what has not been realized yet grounds me in my own work. As a youth worker, I was always looking for ways to co-create spaces with young people - from the design of classroom space - the art, the furniture, the outlets, the snacks - all were powerfully co-designed, within the constraints of non-profit budgets., to the curriculum I taught.

I didn't always call this work experimentation but Mariame Kaba's call to understand *infinite opportunities for collaboration*, without the fear of failure or the expectation of perfection, I understood that design could be transformed with this lens.

As I explored (and will continue exploring) the endless imaginative interventions, these experiments emerged.

SCHOOL DROP OFF TOUR

Much of the context of my work is situated in a COVID-19 reality. During the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years there was a shift to remote learning and even when schools re-opened for hybrid learning, over 52% of New York City students remained completely virtual. In Fall 2021, schools re-opened citywide, amidst questions about student and school staff's wellness and safety.

With the return to school, new measures were implemented to welcome students into school buildings city-wide. Some of those measures included:

- Temperature checks
- Symptom check-in apps
- Vaccine passports for parents/guardians

After facilitating online for 18-months, I wanted to understand student's experiences in navigating back to school so, I embarked on a school drop off tour with as many of my nibblings (gender-expansive terms of niece/nephew) as possible.

So much love to my school guides!

- Sunset Park, Elementary school, School guide: Alejandra
- Crown Heights, Pre-k, School guides: Kiki and Aarnav
- Williamsburg, Elementary school, School guides: Luna and Lucas
- South Bronx, Pre-k, School guide: Heather

What I saw:

- Long lines that wrapped around school buildings. In the 4 school drop offs I did, the wait to get into a school building was 35-90 minutes long.
- Many parents could not wait with their children due to the demands of returning to work so many children waited in line alone
- There was significant stress felt from the school administrators to get people into the building safely and it made for a very tense environment

What I heard:

"I feel like teachers and principals should trust us. We know what we need because every day we think about it and hear from our friends. These are things they don't even see and they should care about." - Luna, 4th grade

The main topics of discussion among students were:

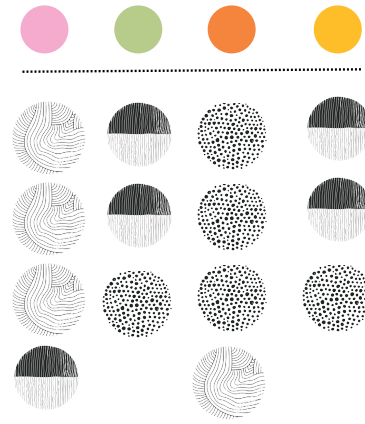
- social & emotional well-being
- transition back to school
- language accessibility
- transportation to school





What I learned:

School welcome and entrances need a lot of love and care pre-COVID but in welcoming students back after being online for a significant period of time. Student mental health and care must be prioritized from school entrances and beyond.

SCHOOL DROP OFF TOUR

Insights



-  social & emotional well-being
-  transition back to school
-  language accessibility
-  transportation to school



time waiting in line -



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION DEEP-DIVE

Early childhood education in New York City is a powerful model for culturally responsive education. In NYC, most children will be supported by “home-based” or “family child care” providers which means that across the 5-boroughs, there are hundreds of spaces offering child care support to families.

What I saw:

- Beautiful and nurturing classroom spaces for children under 4 years old
- Meals prepared with love and care

What I heard:

- “We’re in a moment where we can really transform childcare and what schools look like. We have to start with the policies that impact families like paid maternity leave and federal policies that support workers, of all immigration statuses. Everything is connected and that’s what this pandemic made very clear.”

What I learned:

- Due to the demands of working from home and then the subsequent return to work mandate, many childcare and daycare spaces did not close during the pandemic at all and demand rose in the later part of 2021
- In a recent NYS report, these facilities operate in over 30 languages and dialects and employ and are led by a women of color-led workforce. The average salary for childcare providers is \$23,000-35,000. While these spaces hold up the infrastructure of the city, not as much time, energy or care goes to supporting the workforce as a whole.
- From a culturally responsive perspective, there is a lot we can learn from these educational spaces

POLITICAL EDUCATION CAMPS

Hosted camp experiences over Winter Break for community based organizations in Brooklyn to center political education and mental health. Throughout the pandemic, many organizations became the central meeting space for youth who did not have consistent wifi at home. These organizations were necessary sources of support for young people and families, especially for households with domestic workers and deliveristas who did not stop working when the city was on pause.

What I saw:

- 25 young people committed to coming to group every day over Winter Break
- One group of students created a participatory action research project to access undocumented student’s needs during COVID and the gaps that existed city-wide
- Connecting young people to political education catalyzes their action forward

What I heard:

- “No one thought about our undocumented families during the pandemic. My mom and aunt were working in a hospital event day and then my three cousins were all working from home so I didn’t have anywhere to do online school.”
- “I never think about self-care, I am always just trying to survive.”

What I learned:

- Student led-research can lead to deeper empathy and story collection.
- Undocumented students make up 15% of NYC student population but still lack necessary resources and school placement to be fully supported

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

In 2019, the NYC Department of Education hired its first Student Voice Manager. Around the same time, a potential partner emerged to support the design and re-imagination of new schools. In 2020, XQ partnered with the Imagine Schools Initiative and requested applications from new schools or current schools looking to re-envision their space or pedagogy. As part of our Spring 2021 Communications Design class, my cohort at Design for Social Innovation was invited to join as partners to imagine the design process for teams, with a specific focus on how to engage youth in meaningful ways.

What I saw:

- There can be real barriers to involving young people that must be overcome, including but not limited to, meeting and convening time and the need for DOE clearance to talk to current students.
- There are many players in the school ecosystem and at times they are at odds with one another, such as:
 - The XQ partnership's focus is on high schools only while the rest of the Initiative is focused on K-12 schools
 - Design teams must include students as central players but many of the meetings for design work happens while students are in school
- The Youth Advisory Council emerged as a way to include young people in parallel process to the decision making of design teams, with the explicit focus on including students from all 5 boroughs and with diverse educational experiences.

What I heard:

- "I'm the person who's [thinking about], 'How can we get students to this table, or how can we get the people at this table to students?'" ... Youth are the most valuable and transformative stakeholders in education, and our most abundant resource." - Amallia Orman, Student Voice Manager

What I learned:

- Youth are necessary advisors on all projects launched
- The EDUC8 team created 2 prototypes for the Imagine School's Initiative
 - Prototype 1: Aligning XQ Learner Goals with community-building activities
 - Prototype 2: Creating a tool using the Ladder of Youth Participation (Hart 1992) that encompasses youth voice as central to community citizenship within schools, and beyond
- Care packages can be a powerful source of connection and care when we can't be together in person, with shared materials and resources. This is a practice of equity and of celebration.

DESIGN THINKING FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

Engaging students in design work can be supported by shared language. In the 12 workshops we held with 75 Youth Advisors and leaders, we placed an emphasis on harnessing design mindsets as a practice of creating equitable spaces.

- Curiosity
- Bias to Action
- Generativity
- Generosity
- Creative and strategic risk taking

What I saw:

- A willingness to jump in and try on new mindsets
- A commitment to strategic thinking and risk taking

What I heard:

- "How do you unbreak something so broken?"

What I learned:

- The design thinking process is best utilized by people most proximate to the issue they are working on: Intro to Design Mindsets -> Empathy Building -> Prototype Party -> Interaction and Feedback

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT CONTINUUM

Below is a chart of the youth engagement continuum which illustrates and outlines the range of various types of youth engagement and the impact of their approaches.

Strategy	Intervention	Development	Collective Empowerment	Systemic change		
	Youth Services	Youth Development	Youth Leadership (also supports youth development)	Youth Civic Engagement (also supports youth leadership and youth leadership)	Youth Organizing (also youth development, youth leadership and youth engagement)	
Role of Youth	Client	Participants and interns/staff	Participants, leaders, interns/staff, and board members	Leaders, interns/staff, and board members	Members, leaders, organizers, interns/staff, and board members	
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines youth as client/ recipient of services • Provides services to address individual problems and issues faced by young people • Programming defined around treatment, prevention and basic needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defines youth as participants • Provides services and support, access to caring adults and "safe" spaces • Provides opportunities for the growth and development of young people • Meets young people where they are • Builds young people's skills • Profits youth friendly support • Emphasizes positive self identity • Supports youth-adult partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds in meaningful youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization • Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues • Builds skills of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers • Youth participate in community projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages young people in political education and awareness • Builds skills and critical thinking around issues young people identify • Engages in alliances • Begins to help young people build collective identity of youth as social change agents • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Builds a membership base • Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body (board leadership) • Engages in direct action and political mobilization • Engages in alliances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation • Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation

Annotations:

- Top Left:** "It's only in situations where you have the most power"
- Top Right:** "I believe youth have the most power in systemic change because if the youth have the ability to be a leader, intern/staff and board members, etc then they will be able to create, be engaged, and create change."
- Right Side:** "Where do young people have the most power?"
- Bottom Right:** "I believe young people have the most power in school and how the schools react to situations involving young adults - onsets"
- Bottom Right:** "I think youth has power in schools because in schools, students can create relationships with the teachers and can get help from them."
- Bottom Right:** "Change starts with our generation: Hefi. We have many resources now to voice our opinions"
- Bottom Right:** "teaches youth to be smart socially"

5 Steps to Youth to Build with Adult Allies:

1. Get to know each other; Build trust
2. Listen to the young people's experiences, plans and ideas and resist making judgements
3. Be accountable & respect differences
4. Offer advice + build toward mutual understanding
5. Set goals for our collaboration

Visuals: A diagram showing a brain (Head), a heart (Heart), and a foot (Foot) with corresponding questions and icons. The Head section asks "What do you want adult allies to be thinking?" and "How can I support youth leaders?". The Heart section asks "What do you want adult allies to be feeling?" and "Inspired by us?". The Foot section asks "What do you want adult allies to be doing?" and "Pass the MIC!".

DESIGN THINKING FOR SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION

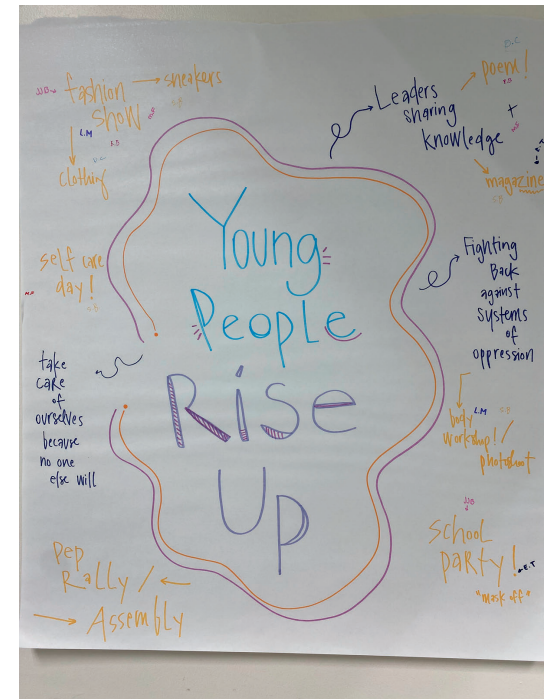
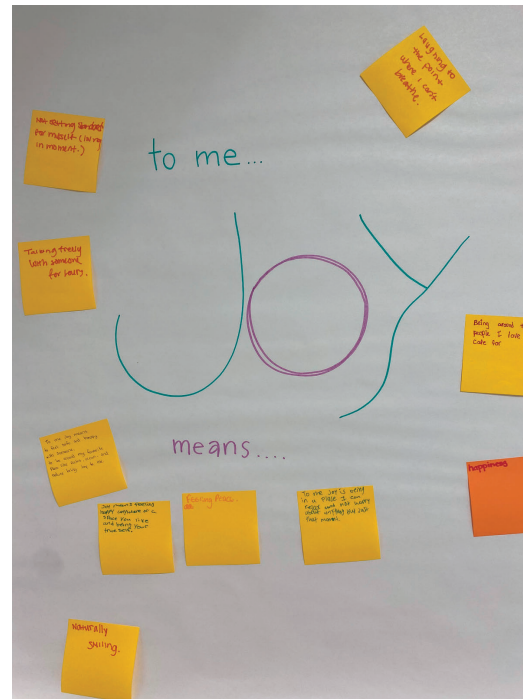
Insights

key:

- social & emotional well-being 5 prototypes
- transition back to school 2 prototypes
- restorative justice 2 prototypes
- adult:youth relationships 3 prototypes
- resource + programming allocation 3 prototypes



Community Action Prototype exploration Images from UA Media



YOUTH-LED PROTOTYPE PARTY!

In Summer 2021, I stepped into facilitating the Youth Advisory Council and brought into the space opportunities for play through Prototype Parties. The focus of the space became two fold:

- **1** - Build up and support the leadership muscles of youth leaders
- **2** - Co-design spaces for prototyping that center youth brilliance and expertise

What I saw:

22 brilliant young people coming together to create change, led by them

When asked what is most important to students right now, there was distinct focus on creating prototypes around the following themes:

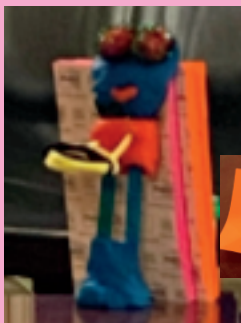
- Adult:Youth relationships
- Student mental health and wellness
- Expanded and equitable programming for students

What I heard:

- *"I think, if students are able to see themselves as leaders, then that can definitely have a major impact on [our] future."*

What I learned:

- Students are looking for and longing for spaces of belonging where they can feel less isolated and less alone in their educational experiences.
- From a mental health check-in robot to a new process for scheduling that centers youth choice, students have powerful and innovative ideas for what could transform schools that center youth power and freedom.



INDEPENDENT SCHOOL VISITS

What I saw:

When I walked into Workshop Middle School, a student rolled past me on a skateboard while another ran over to a couch with a plant potter in hand.

Independent and charter schools have much more freedom in co-creating their curriculum with young people. These schools - like Workshop Middle School in Crown Heights Brooklyn - harness private funding dollars to create new spaces and contexts for students. They are school experiments.

What I heard:

- *"We need to work against what we've always done - shift start times, add in project-based learning, engage the curiosity - don't work against it." - Denise Daniels*
- *"A school where innovative, passionate young thinkers can come and exercise their superpowers." Denise Daniels (Learning Unboxed)*

What I learned:

- Quantitative research supports activity-based and experiential learning
- Many teachers who are frustrated with the Department of Education's bureaucracy are leaving for non-traditional and independent schools

Independent Schools Cooperative - online community and conference - offers space for innovative learning "behind the curtain" learning for school leaders nationally

STUDENT VOICE COUNCIL

Schools are looking for ways to engage student's voice and leadership but need support to make it happen. In working with an elementary school in Harlem, I have convened school leaders, social workers, and 30 student leaders to co-design a new student voice council.

Leadership Muscles to Build

- Facilitation
- Mentorship
- Processing tools
- Understanding different types of leadership

Create spaces for experimentation

Throughout May-June, we will try out a few pathways for the Council and build up a foundation to launch in September 2022

- Morning meetings
- Breakfast
- Drop off / Dismissal
- Spirit Week
- School-wide events

What I saw:

- Teachers are missing from the conversation. Burnout and the ask to hold additional labor make it very hard to engage them in additional projects

What I heard:

- *"Our students are so magical and powerful. They deserve to see themselves like that and to be a model for the school and community we are a part of. After the last two years, we need hope and they are the hope holders."*

What I learned:

- The demand for student power is needed across schools

DOULA PROGRAM IN DENVER, CO

In March 2021, I was invited to co-facilitate a doula training for high school students in Denver, CO, a first of its kind. The partnership with the New Legacy High School whose motto is "impacting two generations at a time" would train high school students, who are also parents in a doula certification program.

What I saw:

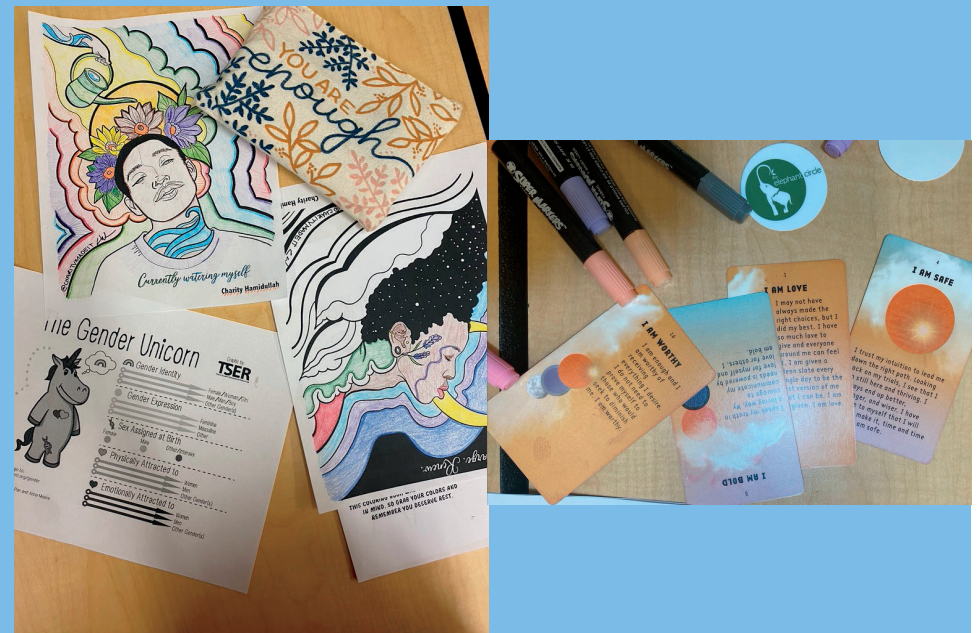
- 5 young people committed to learning about the advocacy, practices and history of doulas
- Commitment to understanding the Denver Health ecosystem and the rights pregnant and parenting people have in the state and beyond

What I heard:

- "I didn't know birth could be empowering."
- "I wish people knew that young people are ready right now. We don't need judgement or shame, we need support and love. And as a doula, that's what I am going to give."

What I learned:

- Experiential learning can support student engagement and power building
- The role of a doula is supportive beyond birth, many young people could be supported by the advocacy, connection and care that doulas provide



TEACHING IN A SCHOOL AT THE MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR CAMPUS

Three months into my thesis journey, I felt like my proximity to young people (having been facilitating online) felt too distant to do this work with integrity and alignment. I wanted to be in a school setting where our young people spend most of their days. As a youth worker for the last 14 years, I have spent a lot of time doing outreach in schools but have never taught inside, worried that I might not be able to teach as freely or openly as I would want to.

For the last 11 weeks, I have led a 3-period leadership class called "Siblinehood Academy" for 18 young people, who all identify as young women.

What I saw:

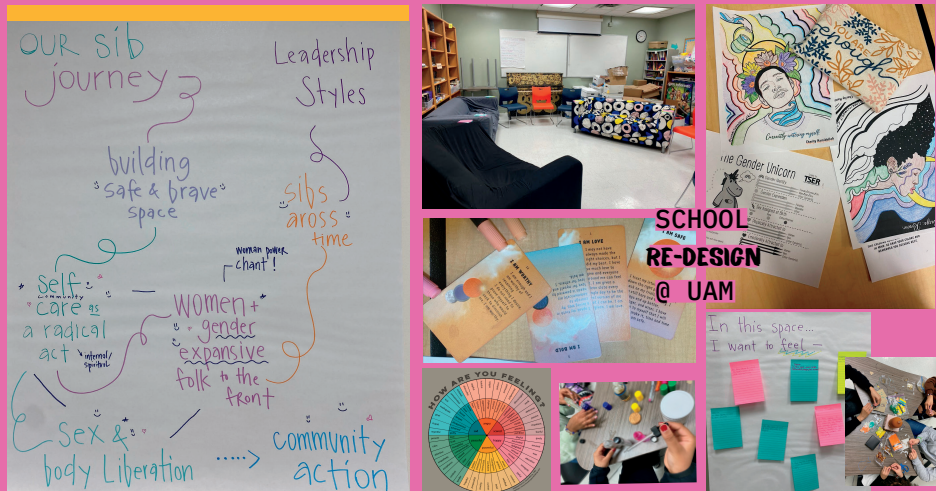
- The first thing that welcomes students at the door is metal detectors in the name of school safety
- A room full of bright, brilliant young people who regardless of being 9th and 10th graders are in a high school building for their first year in person
- Fierce conversations about gender, sexuality, pleasure, leadership and activism

What I heard:

- Young people lovingly sharing introductions and connection, many meeting in the space for the first time
- Affirmations of siblinehood

What I learned:

- Youth-led action projects can transform school culture
- Young people are craving loving and caring relationships with adults, and a space to feel heard and seen



INTERVIEWING YOUTH ACTIVISTS + ORGANIZERS

What I saw:

- 22 youth interviews

What I heard:

- "Students need to be reminded that we deserve rest."
- "Envisioning and imagining a school is revolutionary."
- "Realizing that I'm not the only one who felt this way about the school system is comforting. We are all looking forward to a better educational system. More transformative thinking leads to meaningful changes."
- "I barely feel connected. I mean we do learn about great things sometimes, but never to the level where I can connect myself fully." Joseline, 12th grader from the Bronx

What I learned:

- We expect a lot from youth activists and organizers
- For many students, school cannot be a priority



PARTNERS



Kwenda Collegiate Girls A School Designed with Girls in Mind

Kwenda means "go" in Swahili

Kwenda believes that our girls and our gender-expansive youth deserve an education that provides the knowledge, skills, and habits to "go" wherever they want to in life - from college, to the board room, to the White House. Kwenda Collegiate Girls Charter School is a proposed K-8, public, tuition-free, girls' school that reimagines education with girls at the center.

School values:

- A School Focused on Gender Justice
- 2+ Hours of Literacy Instruction Daily
- Two Teachers in Every Classroom
- Art Class for Every Student
- A Gender-Conscious & Culturally-Relevant Curriculum
- Daily Voice and Empowerment Classes
- Full STEAM Ahead: A Focus on Science, Technology, Arts and Math
- Heart + Mind: Social Emotional Learning



Imagine Schools Initiative, NYC Department of Education

Imagine NYC Schools is a community-led innovation initiative that launched in fall 2019 to design new school models and completely reimagine existing schools. The initiative seeks to empower students, families, educators, and communities to play an active, central role in creating the future of education, here and now.

*Youth Advisors Vision Statement
(youth-led statement)*

To create a space where we can feel comfortable being ourselves, and amplify student voices, to be heard loud and clear. Together, we can shape what and how we learn and take action to transform schools across NYC.

Process Note: I was able to conduct work inside of a school and work with as many students as I did because of my Department of Education Clearance. When I began working with the Imagine Schools team, outside of the context of our Communications Design class, it was necessary for me to go to the central office for finger printing and background check. This process is requested for all educators and school staff working directly inside of this system.

These processes are in place to offer as much protection to young people as possible and to ensure the safety of students by adults. While I've worked with young people for over a decade without this clearance, this opportunity offered me the space to directly impact school cultures and communities because I could be inside of schools, across the city. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have this clearance and recognize the privilege that offered me the ability as a person who is a citizen, without any justice system involvement.

PROTOTYPES

I initially identified 4 prototype directions to explore. These directions were informed by the areas that garnered the most energy in my interviews and youth prototype sessions.

STUDENT VOICE GUIDE

Toolkit style guide for educators, focused on NYC resources + mapping

- Multimodal guide for K-12 educators
- Key consideration: mental health + wellness
- Focus: activities, strategies and teach-ins on amplifying student voice to build student power in school, and beyond

Co-designers:

- Written in collaboration with current students

Inside system change:

Used and distributed by NYC Department of Education

CONTINUUM OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

A re-envisioned ladder (Hart's Ladder) into a continuum

- Actionable methods to transition between the continuum
- Accompanying training guide accompanying tool for educators and people working with youth

Co-designers:

- Co-designed by Youth Advisors and current students

Inside system change:

Used and distributed by Imagine Schools Initiative

YOUTH DEMANDS PLATFORM

A digital platform + demand tracker for current demands led by NYC youth organizations and education justice groups, city-wide

- Highlight pathways to change
- Identifies key partners + alliances citywide

Co-designers:

- Owned and run by youth organizing spaces

Outside system change:

Organized, owned and run-by youth organizing spaces

JOY.EDU inspired by 1 Million Experiments Project

"Right now on a scale of 1-10, I feel joy like at a 2-3 in school. I don't know if it's possible to feel more when this feels like a jail."

- Student, UA Media

- A catalog of experiments and rituals - by educators & students across NYC
- Focus on documenting, inspiring and catalyzing more joy in schools

Co-designers:

- Community-sourced by young people, educators, youth workers, families and any member of the community with a commitment to student joy

Outside system change:

Lives independently for use and inspiration for education justice experiments in NYC and beyond

BARRIERS TO SUPPORTING YOUTH POWER AND LEADERSHIP

While the case for this approach and methodology is strong, there are still deep barriers that exist to realizing this - and to centering young people right now. I've outlined these below as a starting point to illustrate what we're up against in realizing this vision, and equity across New York City public schools.

Ideological Barriers

"How do we de-center trauma? We have to move to a place where we see people as worthy."

- Avery Brewton
Educator

Many adults do not understand why young people need to be at the table. They believe that their degrees in education, policy or school leadership make them the foremost experts on education and reform. Talking to students and getting their insights seem "easy" but it runs counter to the framing of current expertise and requires an ideological shift.

When we see young people as worthy, powerful leaders, we seek their partnership rather than tokenizing their involvement in processes as a way to check youth participation off as a passing requirement. This shift is rooted first in ideology and then in practice where we are willing to shift the times of meetings to make possible the full contribution of people most directly impacted by the system.

Structural Barriers

"Students have a lot of the answers, but there's so much in the way to really hear them."

- NYC Department of Education
Central Staff

The pathways of participation must be democratized to fully include student voices. Hierarchical power relationships is overshadow meaningful connection and this is compounded with the structures that hold up the education system. In New York, the Mayor chooses the Chancellor of Education, among the other heads of city agencies and therefore WHO the system is accountable to has deep and roaring inequity as those in power have more say, more control, and more power than students themselves hold. The literal placement of the Department of Education building across from City Hall, and far away from actual schools filled with students, illuminates the magnitude of the gap that currently exists in the structure.

Pedagogical Barriers

*"A Teacher Who Is Not Free to Teach
Is Not a Teacher"*

- James Baldwin

The idea that we've always done things a certain way minimizes the expansive work outlined in the timeline earlier in my paper. We have made intentional decisions to not allow teachers the space to teach as a practice of freedom in the classroom. Teaching to a test and the antiquated textbooks that line classrooms are large barriers in school transformation. We can't change the experience of a school without the cultures of knowledge that hold it up also being transformed.

*Joy and love are the
missing ingredients.
When you love the
children, you treat them
differently.*

MAMA FELA

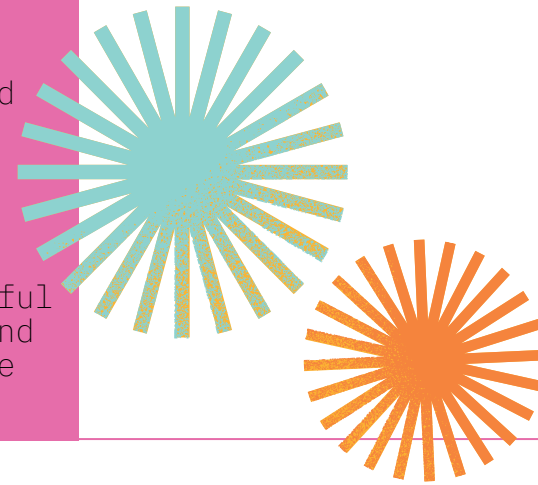
Little Sun People



NARROWING TO JOY.EDU

Joy is not a frivolous pursuit. It acknowledges that beyond surviving, there are more expansive possibilities for wholeness.






I asked my student co-designers what they wanted to see focused on, it became clear that what they desired most urgently were tools, tactics and strategies to remain hopeful and that while policies can take time to shift, the lived and embodied experience of their day to day in schools could be transformed by seeding new ways forward.



A PLATFORM FOR JOY

Joy.edu is a space to center the joy, possibility and imagination in re-designing what classrooms and educational spaces across New York City could look like. This work is an altar to youth-led movements and freedom fighters across space and time, the young people who guide us as ancestors and the young people rising up today for the spaces they want and need, right now.

Featured on the digital platform will be:

-  Experiments in student joy
-  Lesson plans
-  Articles
-  Youth demands
-  Resources: books, playlists, etc!

A call to action

Students are the most important levers in the calls for social change. It's time to shift power to the people most directly impacted by systems of education to imagine, create and sustain the classrooms of their dreams. Focusing on schools as sites of transformation creates new possibilities to move from seeing students as passive recipients to creators of new pedagogies and paradigms. Through the process of inquiry and imagination, we have the ability to transform what we think and see when we hear the word "school" and to catalyze school transformation in NYC and beyond.

A commitment

This space actively reimagines the schools that could exist, and how we are making them real, embodied and felt right now.

"Right now on a scale of 1-10, I feel joy like at a 2-3 in school. I don't know if it's possible to feel more when this feels like a jail."

- Student, UA Media

This work is urgent because there are students in schools across New York City, and beyond, that can't imagine that school and joy can co-exist.

What would happen if making the world a better place and developing student joy were the ultimate goals for education? And policymakers spent their time in these two areas. How beautiful time would be spent.

DR. GHOLDY MUHAMMAD

Cultivating Genius



j o y

IS A PEDAGOGY
IS A POLITICAL STRATEGY
IS A DESIGN PRINCIPLE
IS A RITUAL

CENTERING JOY AS PEDAGOGY, STRATEGY, DESIGN PRINCIPLE AND RITUAL

JOY AS A PEDAGOGY

Infusing pedagogy with joy requires a disruption. While currently many administrators and educators offer that things have always been done this way and therefore cannot be changed, must recognize that the work of changing systems requires us to change ourselves. In this, we interrogate the instruments of learning that have created the dysfunctional dissonance that exists in classrooms across the country. From textbooks to banned books lists to the criminalizing of critical race theory, when the tools we use to educate have been co-opted, we must look at the sources of knowledge production and then to those asked to implement it, and ask: is this was justice looks like in the classroom?

Paulo Freire's necessary work grounds education as a lifelong practice and as a commitment to resisting the concept of neutrality in education.

“THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS
NEUTRAL EDUCATION.
EDUCATION EITHER FUNCTIONS
AS AN INSTRUMENT TO BRING
ABOUT *CONFORMITY* OR
FREEDOM.”

PAULO FREIRE
PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

Joy is an important ingredient in creating an antithesis to this imbued conformist pedagogical practice because it recognizes first - that learning should interrogate the self (personal) and second - that learning must be experienced and rooted in lived reality (political). Joyful pedagogy asks what students want to learn about and roots in an understanding that when we bridge the personal and political, education serves the function of translating the student to the world and the world to the student. Inside of this is freedom. Freedom to understand, to explore, to disrupt, and to play.

What's possible when we shift to a pedagogical approach and are intent on delivering it with joy and care for students?

Seeding joyful practices in the classroom can look like:

- **Shifting** hierarchical relationships to those of shared power and shared learning
- **Creating** gamified experiences that welcome students to use their imagination to build new worlds - and new contexts
- **Curating** experiential activities that expand the classroom into the communities that surround the four walls we typically see as a classroom
- **Encouraging** enthusiastic consent in participation and co-creation

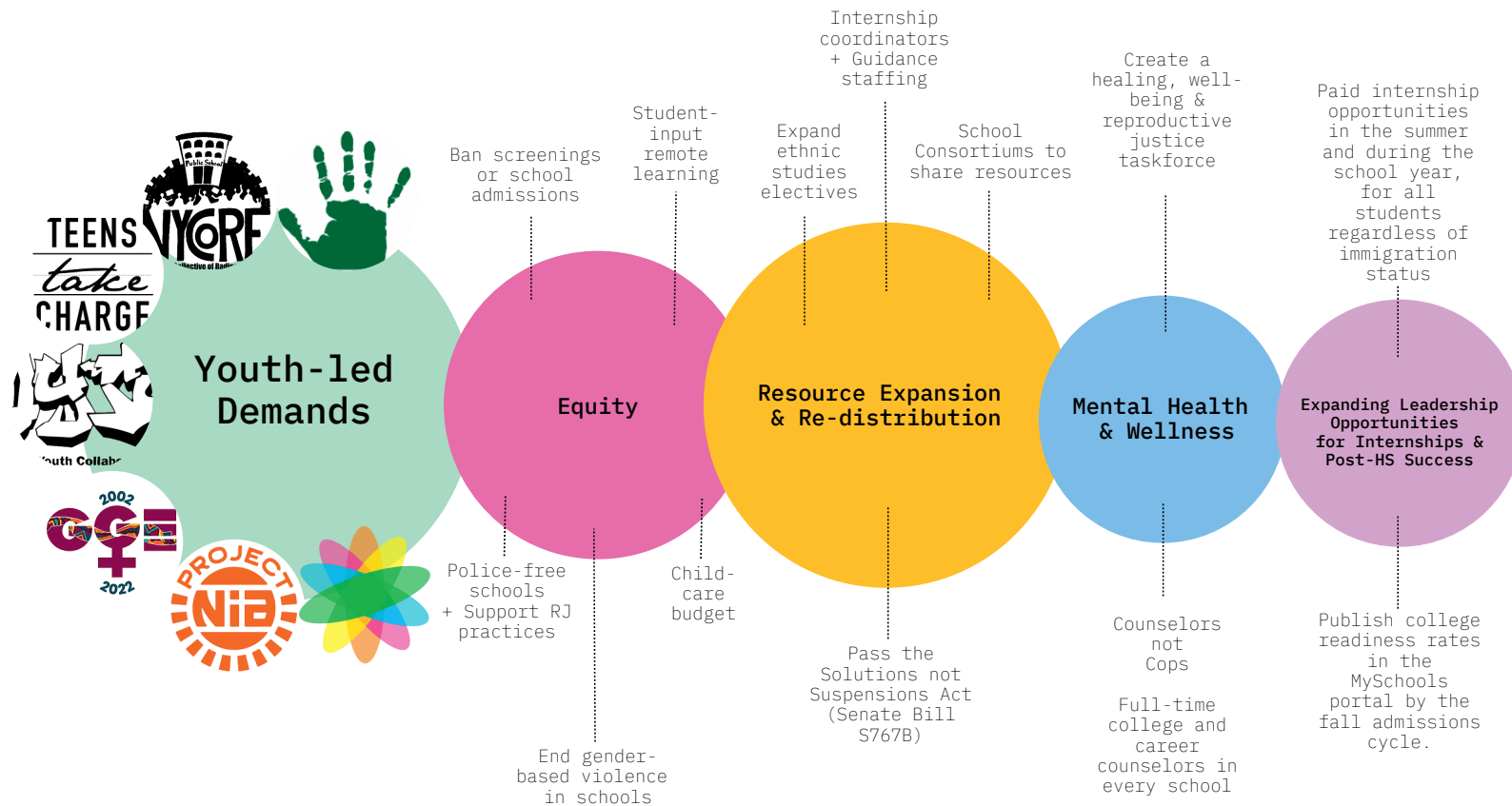
JOY AS A POLICY STRATEGY

Shifting pedagogy can seed a cultural transformation in schools. And, the system doesn't automatically change just because the curriculum and approach inside of classrooms change. Holding both of these truths, we concede that the systems upholding schools - especially as it relates to the decision making and governance must quake open to concretize in policy, structural change.

For this section of my thesis work, I place the **megaphone directly to the grassroots organizations** who, as you saw show up in the earlier timeline, have been organizing and building power towards re-envisioning schools for decades. The demands of these 5 coalitions and organizations, while not a complete list, offer a powerful pathway forward.

I organized the demands in the following categories so that the central themes could be easy to understand and code as a blueprint for action. The demands are then color-coded by the organization that is holding the rallying call to action, though all of these demands are widely supported and many have hundreds of coalition partners who support them city-wide.

- Equity
- Resource expansion and re-distribution
- Mental health and wellness
- Expanding Leadership Opportunities for Internships & Post-HS Success
- Funding





LIBERATE
SCHOOL

STUDENT
VOICE

POLICE
FREE
SCHOOLS

JOY

joy.edu

JOY

JOY

JOY

List of Core Demands:

Teens Take Charge

Urban Youth Collaborative

Girls for Gender Equity

Alliance for Quality Education

INTEGRATE NYC

EQUITY

Ban the practice of screening students using in-person interviews and specialty exams (screens that were removed in 1986 but came back) by the fall admissions cycle.

#FtheTest Standardized testing creates stressful and overly competitive learning environments that harm students' growth as learners and people. High stakes testing is racist.

End gender-based violence & build a cultures of consent in schools

Police free schools

*Fund RJ approaches

Consult students in any all decisions about school safety mandates, regarding remote learning options

We need \$3 billion dollars for child care in the state budget to support ALL children and families, regardless of immigration status.

RESOURCE EXPANSION & RE-DISTRIBUTION

Provide our suggested additional resources (internship coordinators, counselors, laptops, etc.) to schools that struggle to attract high-scoring students, starting next school year.

Create consortiums or nearby or co-located high schools and allow students to participate in sports, clubs, and advanced courses at any school in their radius if their school does not offer that class or activity. A school's size should not limit a student's ability to pursue their academic and extracurricular passions.

List of Core Demands:

Teens Take Charge

Urban Youth Collaborative

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INTEGRATE NYC

RESOURCE EXPANSION & RE-DISTRIBUTION

The city release money for schools to design curriculum for an ethnic studies electives in all high schools and pay teachers to do that work.

Pass the Solutions not Suspensions Act (Senate Bill S767B) which would

- Limit the use of suspensions for students in kindergarten through 3rd grade to only the most serious behavior
- Shorten the max length of suspension from 180 to 20 school days
- Prohibit suspensions for minor infractions like tardiness, dress code violations or insubordination

MENTAL HEALTH & WELLNESS

Create a healing, well-being & reproductive justice taskforce

Expand counselors city-wide. Guidance counselors in NYC schools are often overworked. Some have a caseload of 400 students or more and must juggle students' emotional needs with helping seniors apply to and understand the intricacies of the college system. Every high school should have a full-time college-and-career counselor, and the ratio for counselors to students should be 1:80 or lower.

EXPANDING LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNSHIPS & POST HS SUCCESS

Guarantee all high school students quality, paid internship opportunities in the summer and during the school year. Hire a full-time work-based learning coordinator at every school whose duty will be to 1) match students with positions that align to their interests in school and 2) to support them in developing soft and hard skills that will set them up for success in those roles and beyond.

List of Core Demands:

Teens Take Charge
Urban Youth Collaborative
Girls for Gender Equity

Alliance for Quality Education
INTEGRATE NYC

EXPANDING LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNSHIPS & POST HS SUCCESS

Publish college readiness rates in the MySchools portal by the fall admissions cycle.

FUNDING

Ensure that the second year of the promised increase in Foundation Aid contained in the 2021 budget agreement is provided in full. There is still \$3 billion to be delivered to our students. Also, we will need to start thinking about how to improve the foundation aid formula and the way we finance our school system.

YOUTH DEMANDS MATTER

How can uplifting and actualizing these demands bring about student joy?

Right now, these are the blockers in the system. These structures actively impede justice and care and without honoring students active calls for change, there can be only brief, fleeting moments of joy.

Many of my students and the young people I have had the opportunity to work with over the last 14 years have raised similar if not exact questions and demands of their schools. They often believe that they are the only ones who think about this because the system seems and feels so immovable. These demands have the power to clear the path for real and experienced change in public schools and I can hear young people's rejoicing the day metal detectors are replaced with new guidance suites and supportive loving adults who greet them for a new day.

JOY AS DESIGN PRINCIPLE

*"We use design to **sustain, heal, and empower our communities,** as well as to seek liberation from exploitative and oppressive systems."*

DESIGN JUSTICE PRINCIPLE

The Design Justice Network and the principles of design justice offer a framework for new ways to design with the communities we are working alongside. We must hold design processes that center equity and liberation and are infused with joy because what we are working against is great and vast. We are not just fixing problems, we are building upon brokenness in ways that require - and demand - healing, starting within ourselves all the way up to the systems and institutions we are working to shift and transform.

There can be no design for social innovation that seeks to change the world, without us first being committed to changing ourselves. This asks us to re-orient to the design process in a way that includes us, deeply and vulnerably, and invites that the design we lead, centers joy as a way to subvert exploitative and oppressive systems.

What would the design space look like if we started here?

The co-design spaces I led alongside young people were a microcosm of the world building we were engaged in. We used design as a way to practice the worlds that do not yet exist but that we are building into reality.



JOY AS RITUAL

Creating spaces of joy and allows people to tap into their own freedom. Social designer, Jennifer Ritner asked "what are we healing towards" in a workshop on the rituals of care I was recently apart of. The question echoed in my mind.

The rituals I speak of here are of remembering, of honoring, of protecting. They are the container we create around educational spaces that see these spaces as holders of healing salves.

The ritual we are cultivating is one that sees student joy as an unwavering right.

WE RITUALIZE REPAIR

WE RITUALIZE CONSENT

WE RITUALIZE CREATIVITY

WE RITUALIZE RELATIONSHIP

WE RITUALIZE ALIGNMENT

WE RITUALIZE HEALING

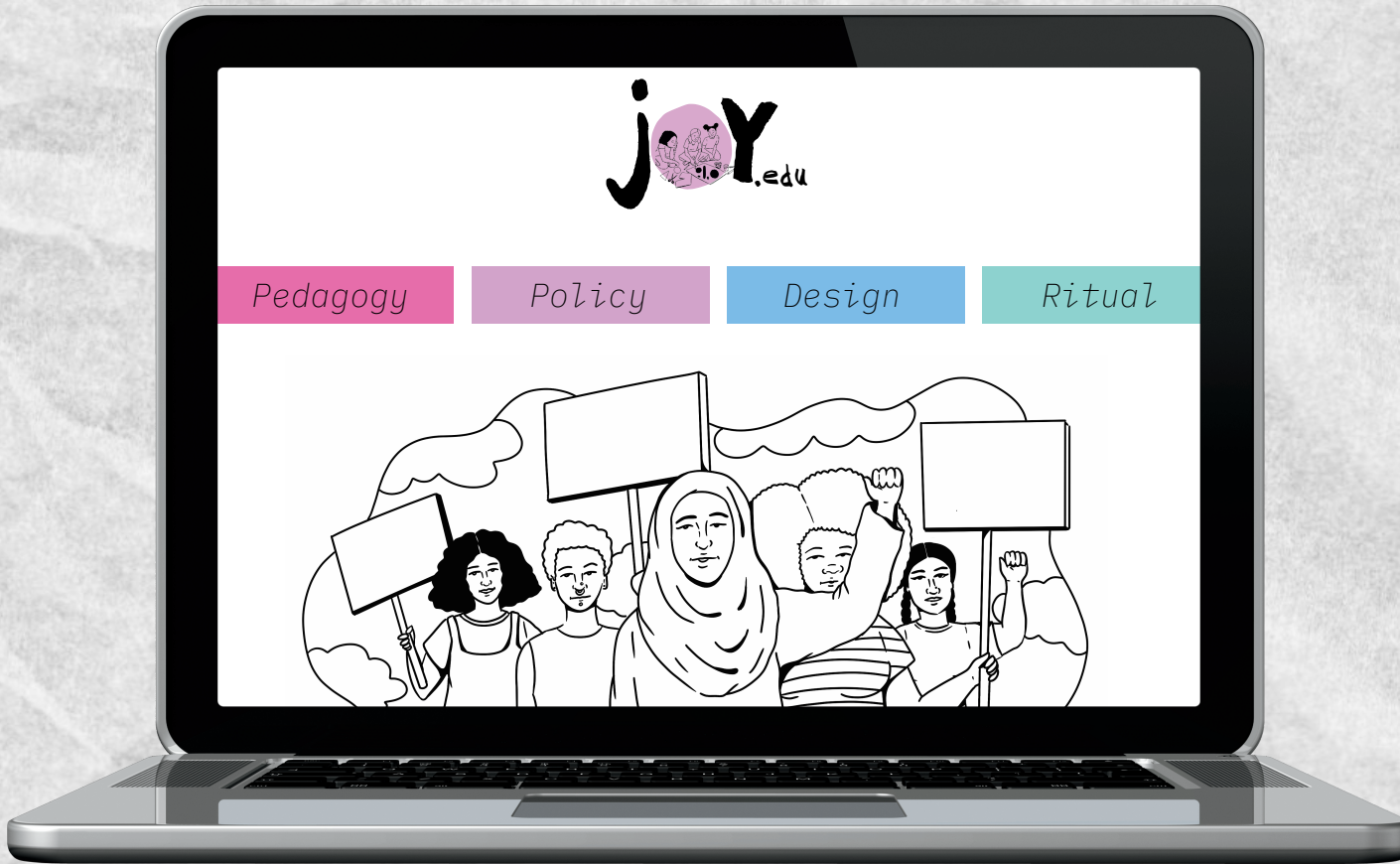
Youth deserve joy and rest.
Neither can exist without
the other. We need to
resist the urge to adultify
youth and add to their
responsibilities.

**We deserve to have
childish,
unapologetic
joy.**



NELSON

Youth organizer



This is Joy.edu, an experimental intervention, *holding up a megaphone amplifying student's voices and visions for more justice, more expansive and more joyful schools and communities.*

Grounding Vision: Young people's leadership is valuable and necessary.

"The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility."
bell hooks

Thesis Goal:

Increase the number of young people in NYC public schools who feel equipped to engage with and express their needs and begin the process of **co-designing a future of school communities** that are *youth-led and youth-envisioned*.

We will do this by...

The pre-conditions

Increasing spaces for young people to **discuss and shape system-level demands** to impact their day-to-day experiences in NYC public schools.

Increasing opportunities **for young people** to experience joy and safety as part of their school days.

Increasing the capacity of **schools and educators** to create brave spaces for youth to make decisions in their school communities through tools, activities, and coaching, that center joy.

Increase collaboration between community-based partners across New York City to track current demands and opportunities for solidarity towards achieving tangible impact for students and families.

This work will be led by...

- **Young people**
Increase youth channels of feedback
- **Young Leaders**
Increase access to the Youth Advisor Program - building power and connection across boroughs + schools, creating unified demands
- **School leaders**
Increase professional development and trainings offered to educators that focus on youth leadership and voice + being accomplices to youth
- **Department of Education**
Increase support and shifting of power to young people

We will begin seeing the following shifts happen:

Increased resources through the creation of a school "experiment" database for K-5 schools in NYC

Increased joy by increasing access to tools, rituals resources and collective brilliance by youth and educators, for youth in NYC

Increased young people at the table for key decisions around school transformation and engaged in radical re-imagining of schools here and now.

Increased resources that promote and center student joy through the sharing of classroom experiments led by educators, students + administrators.

Increased youth efficacy through the sharing of classroom experiments led by educators, students + administrators.

Increased resources that promote and center student joy through the sharing of classroom experiments led by educators, students + administrators.



A MO-MNT of student power, joy & possibility is growing...

When this happens we see..

Increased resources through the creation of a school "experiment" database for K-5 schools in NYC

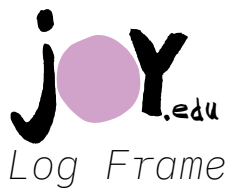
Increased joy by increasing access to tools, rituals resources and collective brilliance by youth and educators, for youth in NYC

Increased young people at the table for key decisions around school transformation and engaged in radical re-imagining of schools here and now.

Joy.edu believes:

- ▶ Youth-led processes can transform the education system
- ▶ Classroom rituals have the power to shift learning spaces from centering control to prioritizing freedom
- ▶ Joy is a student's right

"Joy and love are the missing ingredients. When you love the children, you treat them differently."
Mama Fela
Little Sun People



Problem Statement:

Inequity in schools is widespread and it's effects harm students every single day and yet, solutioning and problem solving currently excludes students who are directly impact and have the ideas, energy and imagination to create new ways forward - inside classrooms and beyond.

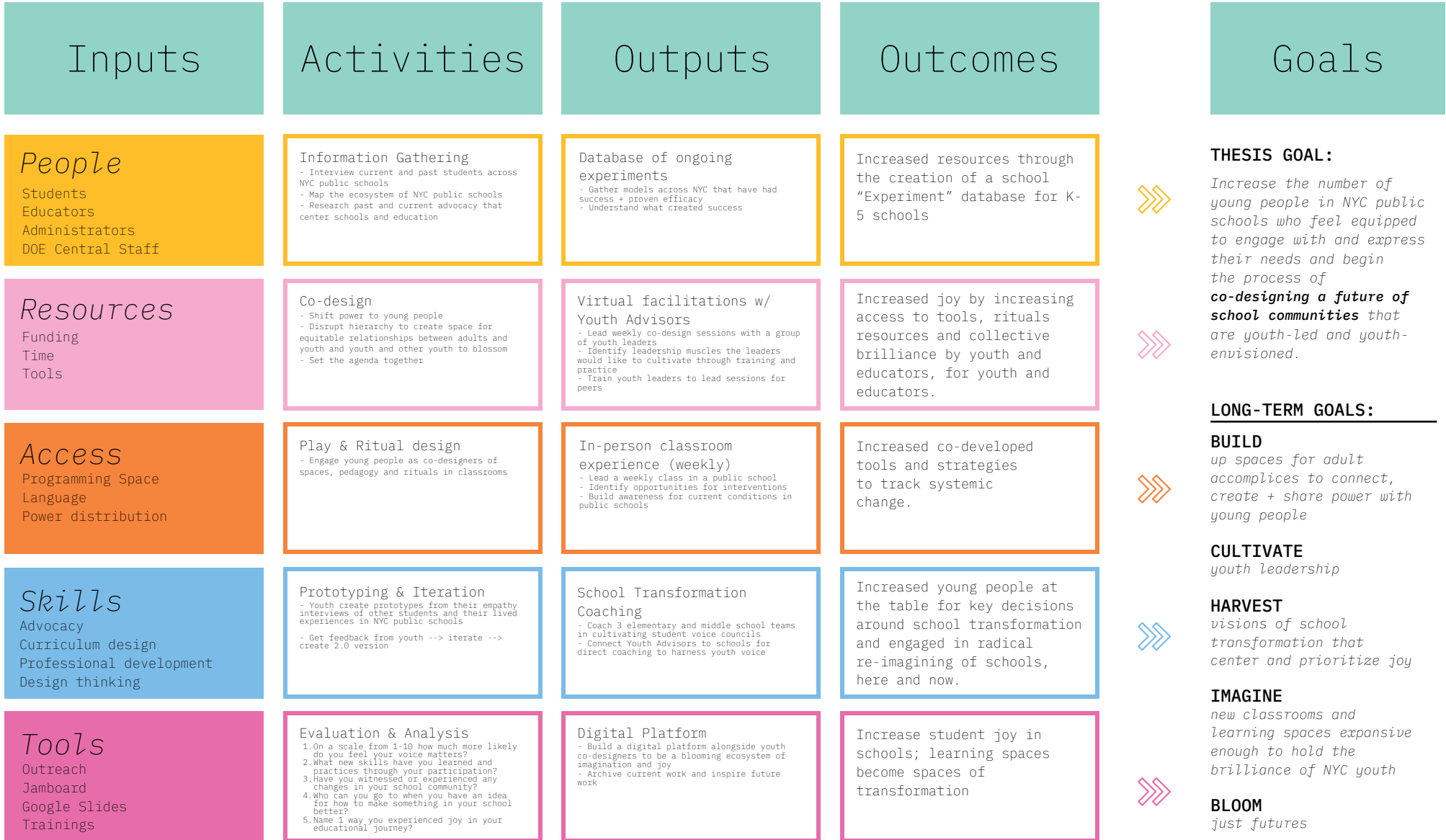
Why this matters:

There are 1.2 million students in New York City. Their learning, their dignity and their power can be catalyzed to re-imagine schools spaces and learning to orient towards joy and possibility.

Partners:

- NYC Dept. of Education, Imagine Schools Team
- Kwenda Collegiate Girls
- Youth leaders across NYC

Intervention: Joy.edu
 A platform and approach to centering youth voices and power at every level, with joy at the center.



VISUALIZING THIS WORK

The visual design for my work is a fierce collaboration between myself and *Faneshia Fabre*, a dear friend and illustrator.

Hand-drawn illustrations

The illustrations are of real young people who worked alongside me as co-designers. Two of the young people you see as the guides for Joy.edu are Monique Taylor and Shelly-Ann Wheeler, two of my students who died during the pandemic. I grieve their loss everyday and think about how they guide me as ancestors in this work.

They are meant to look like coloring pages and will be gifted to all of my co-designers in the form of a book to ground us and remind us that joy is the point.



Bright vibrant colors

The bright yellows, oranges, purples and blues offer a visual representation of the culture shift we are seeking. I wanted to imagine what colors could line classrooms and school buildings and to make more tangible the joyful presence we are building towards in this work.

Marker-tip font

The font is meant to look like handwriting and the large chart paper I have up in the facilitation and learning spaces that I co-create. It takes up space on purpose and plays with uppercase and lowercase letters to invoke playfulness and also the expansiveness of this project within the K-12 learning ecosystem.

-- I intentionally break all the rules of design knowing that what we need is more rebellious troublemakers in design - and in education.



FAILURE FÊTE

a celebration or festival of failure

As I come to celebrate the magic that was created during my thesis journey, I also want to acknowledge the failures and lessons that emerged when things did not go as planned.

- Partnerships impacted by a global pandemic:
We ask so much of each other and as dominant culture demands a "return to normalcy." While I had initially wanted to meet with partners on a bi-weekly basis, I chose to move at the speed of trust and understand that the ways I originally envisioned partnerships and collaboration would need to shift to first and foremost honor care.
- Payment for work:
I believe deeply in paying young people for their work and collaboration. Through my partnership with the Department of Education, every young person I worked with was paid for their time. However, the bureaucratic processes of the Department sometimes meant that young people were waiting 4-6 weeks to get paid for workshops and participation, which is unacceptable. Many young people work jobs to support their families, live in non-continuous housing, and overall rely on these payments. Working in deep partnership, and loving young people means we need to do better.
- President's Week and Spring Break Programming:
Many of my initial plans including holding space with young people over school breaks, a time that I have used for years as a youth worker to hold intensives and spend intentional time programming for and with young people. Except, this year was different. The return to in person school in September 2021 elevated conversations about student mental health and as you have now seen, so many youth envisioned prototypes about the need and urgency for student's mental health to be a priority. And there I was eagerly pitching to students doing a fun, engaging, interactive workshop series DURING their break time. While my intentions were good, and as a youth worker I have used this time to build deep connection and opportunities for young people, this year is different and demands more ease, more care and more slow.

Saidiya Hartman shares that "*care is the antidote to violence*" and as we work to build spaces that prioritize care over control, we have to practice actively with each other. I think all of these failures underscore that in some way.

Here's to more care, more rest and more dancing. As we work to build a world that centers and prioritizes joy, let's work to release perfectionism, precise plans, and rigidity and in it's place find emergence, ease and joy in the journey.

BUILDING FORWARD

I started out my work dreaming of building a feminist school.

Now I see the power of this work, is in impacting many schools.

As I reflect on this journey, I see the hyper-local focus in New York City as just the beginning. I hope this call for experiments in student joy ripples and is led by young people and educators in other spaces, making clear that the magic is in the the every day and in the ways we unravel from the current design of schools, stitch by stitch.

I hope I will keep experimenting, releasing perfection in place of wholeness.

I hope for more expansive roles for young people's leadership, at every single table the New York City Department of Education convenes - and for one day a Youth Chancellor at the helm of school re-imagination.

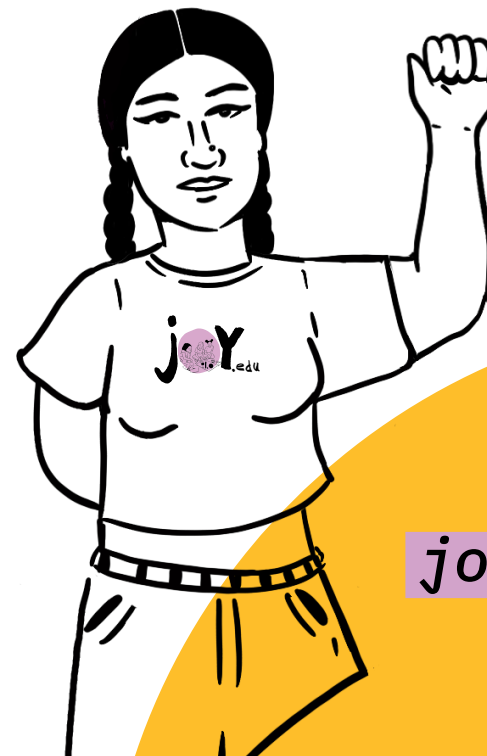
I hope the constellations of education justice continue to expand and get brighter and brighter, lighting the way forward for liberation.

I hope I will keep honoring joy.

"I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently.

*Education as the practice of freedom **is not just about liberatory knowledge, it's about a liberatory practice in the classroom.**"*

- bell hooks



JOIN US!

joyedu.community



HOPE

FREE SPACES

IMAGINE!

Joy

STUCK?

HAPPY

I feel like teachers and principals should **trust us**.

We know what we need because every day we think about it and hear from our friends.

These are things they don't even see and they should care about.



LUNA

4th grader

GRATITUDE

To all the Youth Co-designers - *I see you, I appreciate you, I love you*

To all the Design for Social Innovation advisors and guides - thank you

Marc Rettig	Karen Proctor
Hannah du Plessis	Cathy Richards
Lee-Sean Huang	Taylor Ourada
Nicholas Fortugno	Ryana Burrell
Katie Reed Petty	Despina Papadopoulos
Natalia Radywl	Sahar Ghaheri
Alison Cornyn	Kara Meyer
Jamie Lee Cloud	Natasha Kanagat
Emily Herrick	Anne K. LaFond
Grace Kwon	Caroline Mak
Sasha Charlemagne	Sloan Leo
Corwin Green	
Paul Lillehaugen	

To all my fierce collaborators -

Imagine Schools NYC
Kwenda Collegiate Girls
Sadie Nash Leadership Project
Urban Assembly School for Media Studies

To my cohort, Mighty 7 - we did it!

You all have been such great teachers in these last two years.
Here's to a lifetime of co-designing just futures

To my family - thank you for being proud of me, even though art school was not in your vision

To my rebellious youth workers + friends + movement family -

thank you for reminding me who I am and mirroring back to me my own brilliance when spaces and experiences tried to take that from me




LIBERATION LIBRARY

A starting place for anyone looking to work in the space of education.

These texts have *supported me, grounded me, expanded me* in this work.

- "Books as Abolitionist text" Mariama Kaba
- Cosmic Possibilities: An intergalactic youth guide to Abolition, AYO! NYC
- Creating community in classroom, We are in this together Collaborative
- "Distraction: Girls, School and Sexuality" Erin Mikulec
- "Emergent Strategy" adrienne maree brown
- "Educating Feminists: Life Histories and Pedagogy" Sue Middleton
- "Feminism is for Everyone" bell hooks
- "Feminist teaching in theory and practice" Becky Ropers-Huilman
- "Girls, Single-Sex Schools, and Postfeminist Fantasies" Stephanie McCall
- "Hood Feminism" Mikki Kendall
- "In A Classroom of Their Own" Keisha Lindsay
- Lessons in Liberation, An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators, AK Press

- 
- "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Paulo Friere
 - "Pushout" Monique W. Morris
 - "Radical Technologies" Adam Greenfield
 - "Rebel Girls" graphic series
 - "Research is Ceremony" by Shawn Wilson
 - "Schools that Work" Whole Schools Consortium
 - Social justice books project <https://socialjusticebooks.org/about/>
 - "Teaching to Transgress" bell hooks
 - "Teaching Community" bell hooks
 - "Teacher of Weird Abundance" Anne Sexton
 - "The Feminist Classroom" Frances A Maher
 - "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World" Ronald Abadian Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Martin Linsky
 - "We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching" Bettina Love
 - "Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality, Ben Kirshner

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"There has been no radical and revolutionary work that has existed without vulnerability. So when we think about the types of relationships that we should be and can be building as accomplices with our young people I think it demands us to take on a different level of vulnerability and willingness to share. To show up. Not as perfect. Or not as without flaws. But to really show up and to be in that journey and in that conversation with them. And to also allow yourself to be seen in your messiness, in your mistakes, in the things that have not gone well or are not currently going well."

MICKEY FERRARA

"Young People Are Healers Too" Panel

"Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators"

Mickey Ferrara
Design for Social Innovation
School of Visual Arts
Class of 2022