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LEARNING TO CARE: A CASE STUDY EXPLORING ONE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS' CREATION OF LEARNING SPACES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Dedication

This dissertation is first dedicated to my friends at Foundation for Liberating Minds, who inspired this study and supported me through every step of the process. aurelius, Alham, Tevin, Joy, Ari W., Ari M., Dana, Bridget, and those who have left to achieve new goals and accomplish great things—thank you so much for your support, encouragement, and love, and thank you for the work you do for FLM. Your courage and dedication are inspiring.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how grassroots organizations create, sustain, and enact popular education spaces rooted in anti-oppression, liberation, and care**.** Using Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM)—a grassroots organization in Oklahoma—as an exemplary case study, this study explores the values, practices, and pedagogical approaches that shape community-based educational programming. Drawing on Paulo Freire's concept of popular education, the work analyzes how grassroots organizers facilitate critical dialogue, cultivate collective agency, and disrupt dominant narratives upheld by systems of white supremacy and carceral logics. An ethics of care serves as the study's central conceptual framework, highlighting how relationality, collective responsibility, and community care inform both organizational practices and the transformative potential of grassroots education.

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Chapter 1

Across the United States, communities have increasingly questioned whether formal schooling adequately serves the educational, social, and political needs of marginalized students and families. In recent decades, public education has been shaped by intensified accountability regimes, heightened political scrutiny of curriculum, ongoing racialized and linguistic inequities (San Miguel, 2005; Stritikus & English, 2009). At the same time, state-level efforts to constrain how educators address issues of power, history, and oppression pipelines have further limited what can be taught and how learning can occur (Walton, 1995; Curtis, 2014; Curran, 2017; Bell, 2015; Lagotte, 2012; Goldman et al, 2017; Debusemann, 2024). These conditions have directly impacted the educational experiences of Black, Brown, Indigenous, low-income, immigrant, queer, and disabled students, many of whom encounter schooling environments that fail to affirm their identities, address systemic harm, or prepare them to critically navigate the social realities shaping their lives. As schools operate under increasing political pressure, legislative attacks on ethnic studies, critical race theory, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and discussions of structural inequality have positioned educators as potential agents of ideological indoctrination rather than as educators and professionals engaged in public service. As a result, schools often function under restrictive conditions that limit their capacity to foster critical inquiry, dialogue, and collective meaning-making. These constraints raise important questions about where, and how, communities can engage in learning that responds to lived realities, historical injustice, and ongoing social harm.

This study examines how grassroots organizations respond to these constraints by developing popular education spaces that center collective knowledge, political education, and relational accountability. Specifically, it explores how one grassroots organization – Foundation

for Liberating Minds (FLM) – creates and sustains such space within a politically conservative context. By focusing on the values, practices, and commitments that shape the work, the study positions grassroots organizing as a critical site of education beyond formal schooling.

Situated within a politically conservative context marked by increasing restrictions on public education, this study examines how community-based educational practices emerge in response to systemic limitations. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What values and practices shape the organization's educational programming?
2. How does the organization define and enact its mission and values across different areas of praxis?

Limits of Formal Schooling

Although public education is often framed as a site of opportunity and social mobility, its organizational structures are shaped by state and federal policies that often constrain how teaching and learning are enacted. Accountability systems rooted in standardized testing have narrowed curricula, prioritized measurable outcomes over meaningful engagement, and reduced opportunities for interdisciplinary, culturally responsive, and critical forms of learning (Heise, 2017; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Dee et al, 2010). Disciplinary policies, including zero-tolerance approaches and increased school policing, have disproportionately impacted students of color and students with disabilities, reinforcing exclusionary practices rather than addressing root causes of harm (Curtis, 2014; Curran, 2017). Efforts to privatize education through charter expansion and school choice initiatives have further complicated access and equity, often shifting resources away from public schools while framed as solutions to systemic failure (Edison, 2025; "Reaffirming Walters' vision", 2025; "School Choice). At the same time, educators are increasingly restricted by laws and policies that limit their ability to address race,

gender, sexuality, and histories of oppression in the classroom (Ray & Gibbons, 2021; Gross, 2022; Schwartz, 2021). Together, these conditions create schooling environments that are tightly regulated, politically vulnerable, and structurally constrained in their ability to respond to community needs. Importantly, these limitations are not the result of individual educators' failures but of systemic arrangements that position schools as extensions of state priorities rather than as responsive, democratic public spaces. As a result, many communities experience schooling as disconnected from their lived realities, incapable of addressing ongoing harm, and ill-equipped to foster critical consciousness. These structural conditions help inform why alternative educational spaces frequently emerge outside institutional boundaries.

Grassroots Organizations and Popular Education

In response to these limitations, communities have long sought alternative educational spaces beyond institutional settings. When schools are unable—or unwilling—to address systemic inequities, communities frequently turn to grassroots, community-based efforts to create learning environments that center collective knowledge, political education, and relational accountability. These spaces emerge not as replacements for public education, but as critical supplements that respond to unmet needs, particularly in moments of heightened political pressure and social crisis. Grassroots organizations play a critical role in this process by bringing together community members to collectively identify problems, share knowledge, and engage in political and educational work responsive to local conditions. Within these organizations, education does not occur solely through formal instruction but through dialogue, storytelling, collective analysis, and action-oriented learning (Mayo & Ranford, 2023; Cavaco et al, 2023).

Popular education traditions, heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, provide a framework for understanding how learning functions within grassroots organizing. Rather than

positioning knowledge as something delivered by experts to passive recipients, popular education emphasizes collective inquiry, shared authority, and the integration of lived experience into learning processes. These practices are rooted in struggles for social justice and liberation and are designed to support participants in making sense of the social, political, and historical conditions shaping their lives**.**

Popular education spaces are participatory and oriented toward action. Participants and community come together around shared concerns, engage in critical dialogue to understand the roots and impacts of those concerns, and collectively work toward response that do not reproduce systems of oppression. For example, "Know Your Rights" trainings provide opportunities for participants to learn about legal protections in interactions with law enforcement while also sharing personal experiences that deepen collective understanding. The problem that is being addressed is police overreach and violation of rights of those they stop, especially in instances of racial profiling. Through this process, critical dialogue becomes central, enabling what Freire (2018) describes as conscientization, or the development of critical awareness of oppressive systems. Popular education spaces have more freedom to cover topics that are not covered in public schools. Popular education spaces are created out of a necessity to address and eradicate oppression, as a means of providing a liberatory educational space.

Combating oppressive ideologies requires empowering forms of teaching (Freire, 2018; Hancock et al, 2021), but it also requires individuals to be educated on the history of oppression and the current statistics surrounding social inequities. Freire (2018) describes this as developing critical consciousness, a process that requires both reflection and action, which are inseparable. Conscientization works alongside critical pedagogy, which frames education as a political project rooted in resistance, struggle, and social transformation. Providing a space to

learn about the history and practices of oppression, to unlearn harmful narratives surrounding the carceral system and notions of criminality, and providing a space to imagine a different approach to accountability and harm reduction represents one way grassroots organizations create popular education spaces in response to systemic oppression. Popular education spaces exist within grassroots organizations because there is a need to disrupt harmful narratives, education on political issues and harms is lacking, there are social injustices that need to be addressed, and/or there is a need for conscientization within a community. Grassroots organizations respond to the various harms that arise due to social and/or political moments of injustice by building popular education spaces as a means of providing education within the community as well as eliciting social and/or political change through direct action.

Responding to the Current Political Moment

The emergence of popular education spaces is not new; rather it is rooted in a long history of communities responding to systemic inequities in public education. While this study cannot address every manifestation of oppression, it focuses on public education because popular education often arises directly in response to its limitations. Grassroots organizations frequently create popular education spaces to address gaps and harms produced by public education policies, making the relationship between public education, popular education, and grassroots organizing central to this analysis. A brief historical overview that reveal how public education has systematically upheld white supremacy and marginalized Black, Brown, Indigenous, low-income, immigrant, queer, and disabled communities. Collectively, these histories underscore the necessity of popular education spaces as sites where people across age groups can critically examine, resist, and work to dismantle oppressive educational systems.

Although Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) catalyzed school desegregation, its protections initially applied only to Black students, leaving Latin American students vulnerable to continued segregation via linguistic racism until Cisneros v. Corpus Christi ISD (1970) (San Miguel, 2005; Stritikus & English, 2009). In subsequent decades, educational policy shifted from overt segregation to disciplinary and carceral practices, including zero-tolerance policies, increased policing in schools, and military recruitment under No Child Left Behind—developments that disproportionately targeted low-income Black and Brown students and contributed to academic disengagement and the school-to-prison pipeline (Walton, 1995; Curtis, 2014; Curran, 2017; Southern Education Foundation, 2019; Bell, 2015; Lagotte, 2012; Goldman et al, 2017). NCLB's emphasis on high-stakes testing further narrowed curricula, failed to improve literacy outcomes, and deepened public distrust of schools, fueling demands for school choice (Heise, 2017; Dee & Jacob, 2011; Dee et al, 2010). Contemporary school choice policies, championed by state leaders in Texas, Oklahoma, and Florida, redirect public funds toward private education and shift power away from public institutions, with unclear consequences for marginalized communities (Edison, 2025; "Reaffirming Walters' vision", 2025; "School Choice). Ongoing efforts to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education under the Trump administration and Project 2025 further destabilize public education, creating new conditions in which grassroots organizations are likely to develop popular education spaces to help communities understand policy changes, identify resulting harms, and organize collective responses.

Context of the Study

This study focuses on Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM), a grassroots organization operating within Oklahoma, where debates surrounding public education, curriculum, and school

choice are especially pronounced. Potential changes in Oklahoma laws and policies regarding public education and school choice remains uncertain and are a concern for many[1]. Recent policy discussions have included efforts to reshape public education through increased privatization and heighted security of classroom content. These dynamics contribute to a broader sociopolitical context in which communities must navigate competing visions of education and its purpose. Within these environments, grassroots organizations such as FLM play an important role in creating alternative spaces for learning and engagement. These spaces provide opportunities for participants to critically examine policy changes, share experiences, and develop collective responses to issues affecting their communities. As such, the Oklahoma context is significant and integral for understanding both the necessity and the development of popular education spaces.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on grassroots organizing, popular education, and ethics of care by examine how these areas intersect in practice. It offers insight into how alternative educational spaces function beyond formal institutions and how care operates as a central force in sustaining community-based learning and organizing. Through this analysis, the study seeks to expand understandings of education as a collective, relational practice rooted in community knowledge and shared struggle.

The goal of this study was twofold—one was to understand the experiences of grassroots organizers and how they applied popular education principles within their programs, and the other was to understand how those programs reflected an ethics of care. Literature on grassroots

[1] For example, former Oklahoma Secretary of Education Ryan Walters (2023-2025) mentioned combatting indoctrination by so-called "woke "activists as another aspect of the school choice conversation. Walters was pushing for the Bible, American exceptionalism, and patriotism to be taught in Oklahoma public schools (Debusemann, 2024). With the state board of education pushing for private schools and indoctrination of conservative values in public schools, parents may have to make a choice on whether their students remain in public schools or are moved to private schools that align more closely with their own values.

organizations often explores the relationship between grassroots organizing and social movements—even the role of grassroots organizations in public school reform—however there is limited research highlighting the connection between grassroots organizing and an ethics of care. This study builds on the concept of care by specifically looking at how grassroots organizations utilize popular education spaces as a tool for change in their respective communities and relies on the literature on grassroots organizing, popular education, and ethics of care as a means to ground and analyze the data. As is explored in the literature review, one noted gap in the literature is the exploration of specific educational initiatives in grassroots organizations (Tarlau, 2014, p. 392), which this study takes up in a preliminary manner. This study explores education initiatives created FLM and how those initiatives contribute to anti-oppressive frameworks in praxis. In providing a beginning to this conversation, this study creates the opportunity for further examination of education programming in popular education spaces, as well as in the more formal settings of public school systems. This benefits parents, community members, students, and teachers as they explore the ways in which they are able to address systems of oppression and develop their own grassroots organizations or join grassroots organizations in their respective communities. Further research that can and should build off this study includes explorations of anti-oppressive frameworks in parent-teacher organizations such as the PTA, the ways in which grassroots organizations collaborate to create popular education spaces as a means of combatting and disrupting systems of oppression, and the ways in which popular education practices are made necessary by systems of oppression.

Defining Key Terms

I define key terms and concepts here so that readers have an established definition of concepts that were explored in the study and to capture the complexity of the terminology. My

goal is to establish these concepts as key components for the research and ensuing conversations. Liberation, transformative justice, anti-oppression, and abolition are defined below, drawing from just a few sources in an attempt to keep definitions brief. There are several other sources that would define these concepts in similar ways, so the choice was made to include definitions from texts compiled for the literature review, as these texts predominantly align with the ways in which the case study organization defines these concepts and the ways in which these concepts are utilized in the work the case study organization engages.

Liberation: Liberation is a form of freedom. This is "the right to be free from oppression, the right to make determinations about your life free from duress, coercion, or threat of harm" (Taylor, 2016, p. 192). Liberation is living "in peace, without the constant threat of the social, economic, and political woes of a society that places almost no value on the vast majority of Black lives" (Taylor, 2016, p. 194) and the lives of Indigenous, Brown, and queer people. The need for liberation stems from the act of colonization. If colonization did not exist, then liberation would not be needed. According to Fanon (1963, p. 182), "[b]ecause it is a systemized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity, colonialism forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: 'Who am I in reality.'" Colonization is at the root of the creation of many countries, including the United States. White Europeans came to the so-called New World to create a new life for themselves, forcing the Indigenous peoples off their traditional lands and onto reservations, restricting their lives and societies, while also bringing kidnapped and enslaved Africans, forcing them into hard labor, inhumane living conditions, and exposing both Indigenous and enslaved Africans and their descendants to genocide and centuries of oppression. When Black,

Indigenous, and other people of color claim they are seeking liberation, they are seeking liberation from the historical impacts and practices that stem from genocide and enslavement. According to Foundation for Liberating Minds, liberation is "freeing someone from some sort of slavery or imprisonment. It begins with the mind, freeing it from oppressive norms" ("Principles"). While yes, liberation can be from a physical imprisonment, it is also mental, spiritual, and emotional. Liberation is more than just freedom; it is freedom from the oppressor and centuries of oppressive standards that have permeated society and its systems.

Transformative Justice: Transformative justice is a broad concept that allows for the disruption of violence that takes place in systems of oppression. As an abolitionist framework, it is a means of "responding to violence, harm, and abuse. At its most basic, it seeks to respond to violence without creating more violence and/or engaging in harm reduction to lessen the violence" (Mingus, 2019, para. 3). Applied more broadly, transformative justice can "be applied anywhere at any time to address concerns such as structural and everyday violence" (Gready & Robins, 2014, p. 340). Systems of oppression rely upon violence to maintain control of politics and society and perpetuate and maintain white supremacy. These acts of violence can be physical, mental, and/or emotional. In the public education system, transformative justice takes shape as a transformative pedagogy, which includes previously excluded perspectives and experiences of groups that historically have had marginalized participation in educational settings" as educators seek to engage "students as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners, and envisioners of alternative possibilities of social reality" (Nagda et al, 2003, p. 167).

Anti-oppression: To be oppressed is to face systematic and systemic harm and/or violence by the hands of those in power. In America, straight, white, Christian men are in power and, as a system, they work to maintain that power through mental, physical, and/or emotional violence. Anti-oppression is a framework that seeks to disrupt systems of oppression. Peters and Luke (2022) name ten principles of anti-oppression in their study, which include "developing critical consciousness through critical reflexology, overcoming comfort and fragility through unlearning privilege and domination, centering the margins through empowerment and liberation, wellness and self-care acts through acts of compassion and vigilance, co-constructing a brave space through relationships and community, developing goals and assessing outcomes through stakeholder investment, challenging and disrupting oppression through broaching and accountability, identifying and addressing barriers through resistance and opposition, socioecological advocacy and activism through collective action, and redistributing social, cultural, and political capital through access and opportunity" (Peters & Luke, 2022, p. 343). These principles are guides for how to engage in an anti-oppressive framework in any space.

Abolition: Abolition of the prison industrial complex (PIC) is a multi-faceted approach to dismantling systems of white supremacy that seek to oppress and/or enact violence against those who stand against white supremacy or those who do not uphold whiteness as a system. The systems that uphold white supremacy are prisons and the legal system, but also the health care system; systems of economics, such as banking and lending; and education. Transform Harm is a resource hub that provides several resources on transformative justice and abolition, including definitions of these concepts. They define abolition as "a word with zero police, a world without prisons, and a world where we

build life-sustaining systems of safety and accountability" (Agbebiyi et al, 2020). This work—abolishing the current punitive system of punishment—requires dismantling systems of policing and the creation of a new system.

Chapter Summary & Dissertation Outline

Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM) is an important case to explore because of the ways in which they name and implement their value of abolition into their overall goal of liberation as they create popular education spaces and work to engage with the community. Utilizing FLM as an exemplary case study contributes to the literature on grassroots organizing and popular education spaces because this organization does not focus on education reform, rather they center the concept of liberation to create new educational spaces where participants engage in critical thinking and dialogue to address various system harms that impact the community. The existing scholarship on grassroots organizing centers education reform, not abolition, making this a unique case study, especially as FLM is situated within the conservative state of Oklahoma.

The following chapter provides a literature review that defines grassroots organizing, explores how grassroots organizing differs from social movements, makes connections between grassroots organizing and popular education as well as public education, and explores noted gaps in the literature from relevant studies. The literature review also discusses the foundations of popular education and how it functions as an anti-oppressive framework. Chapter 3 provides the research methods, methodology, research questions, data recruitment and analysis, limitations, and provide a positionality statement. Chapter 4 provides interview data in relation to identified themes, which include experiences as foundational to organizing work, naming the work, and enacting praxis. Chapter 5 presents analysis on the intersection of grassroots organizing and

popular education, the impact of care on grassroots popular education programs and spaces, the implications for grassroots organizations, and the implications for research before providing closing reflections.

Chapter 2

This literature review examines scholarship on popular education and grassroots organizing to situate this study within existing research on learning, community engagement, and social change. Rather than operationalize education as an activity confined to formal schooling, the literature reviewed collectively demonstrates that learning frequently occurs through collective struggle, political engagement, and community-based practices. Grassroots organizing spaces in particular function as important sites of knowledge production, leadership development, and political education, especially for marginalized communities navigating systems of oppression. While these bodies of literature offer important insights into how education, organizing, and care intersect, they have often developed along parallel tracks. For example, scholarship on popular education has articulated education as a dialogical, liberatory, and collective process grounded in critical consciousness and praxis. Research on grassroots organizing has emphasized the ways organizing fosters leadership development, civic participation, and social change—often highlighting educational dimensions of organizing work without fully theorizing them as such. Taken together, these bodies of literature suggest that education is deeply relational and political, yet they have rarely been examined in sustained conversation with one another.

The chapter is organized around three sections. The first examines popular education as a conceptual foundation, with particular attention to Paulo Freire's contributions. The second explores grassroots organizing and education as a site of informal and political learning. The third reviews scholarship that explicitly examine educational practices within grassroots and community organizations. The chapter concludes by identifying key gaps in the literature and establishing the need for this study.

Understanding Popular Education

Popular education has been interpreted in multiple ways across geographic and political contexts. In some European traditions, popular education refers to the ways in which the poor receive an education in history, mathematics, and literacy (Braster, 2011; Ferrer, 2011; Aubert et al., 2016; Cavaco et al, 2021). In contrast, across Latin America, popular education has been more closely tied to social movements and struggles against oppression, drawing on theorists such as Marx, Gramsci, and Freire (Leite, 2021). As Leite (2021) explains, there is no single definition of popular education; rather, its meaning and practice are shaped by local conditions, political commitments, and community needs. Across these contexts, however, popular education is consistently linked to critical, anti-oppressive, and emancipatory approaches to learning.

This study draws primarily on Paulo Freire's conceptualization of popular education as a liberatory practice. Freire (2018) believed that combatting oppression requires an understanding of what it is and how it occurs. This education thus has the potential to become liberatory—to liberate the learner from their oppression and their oppressor(s)—which is why it is often termed liberatory education. It is not enough, however, to merely question the world. Freire critiques traditional schooling models that position students as passive recipients of knowledge, arguing that such approaches reproduce domination by denying learners agency and historical consciousness. He describes this as the "banking model" of education, in which knowledge is deposited into students who are treated as empty vessels. This model, Freire argues, reinforces hierarchical power relations between teacher and student, while erasing the knowledge that learners already possess. Therefore, the banking model of education is oppressive, as educators determine what is taught and how.

In contrast to the banking model, Freire proposes a problem posing model of education grounded in dialogue, collective inquiry, and critical reflection. In this approach, teachers and students work together to become critical co-investigators of real-world problems, learning with and from one another (Beckett, 2013). Problem-posing education is a means to "affirm men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (Freire, 2018, p. 84, italics in original). Knowledge is not transmitted but co-created, drawing on lived experiences and social realities. The problem-posing method presents life as a problem to be understood and navigated, thus requiring humanization of potential approaches to the problem. This process supports what Freire describes as conscientization, or the development of critical awareness of the social, political, and historical conditions shaping one's life. Such an emphasis on lived experience aligns with Moll's (2019) concept of funds of knowledge, which recognizes that individuals bring valuable knowledge from their homes, communities, and lives into learning spaces. Rather than viewing students as lacking knowledge, Moll highlights the relational and transactional nature of learning. Participants contribute different forms of expertise, and learning occurs through exchange, dialogue, and shared inquiry.

From a Freirean perspective, education is inherently political. Problem-posing education encourages individuals to critically examine their realities and to imagine possibilities for transformation and liberation. As Freire (2018) argues, education becomes liberatory when it enables people to recognize and challenge oppressive conditions rather than adapt to them. Liberatory education, then, is part of the revolution against oppression. In the banking education model, teachers have all the knowledge, and therefore all the power, while students have no knowledge, and therefore no power. In liberatory education, everyone has knowledge of some

kind. Freire states that “problem-posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis, posits as fundamental that the people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation” (2018, p. 86). In this sense, popular education is not simply about learning new information, it is about developing the capacity to act upon the world.

Kumashiro builds on Freire’s concept of liberatory education, noting that multiple researchers have argued “that schools need to be and provide helpful spaces for all students, especially for those who are targeted by” forms of oppression (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28). Public school systems are largely unable to do so as they are limited in practice by legislation that restricts addressing needs and calls for diversity, equity, anti-oppression, and culturally responsive classrooms. Kumashiro further notes that the entire school—from faculty to curriculum to accessibility—“needs to be a space that is for students that welcomes, educates, and addresses the needs of the Other” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28). When marginalized students—those who are Othered—feel welcome in their educational environment, they feel empowered and can then shift into finding and/or creating resources to challenge oppression (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28). As it stands, the public education system does not foster such a welcoming environment. In Texas and Kansas, for example, anti-trans laws impact students at all educational levels (Chilson, 2026; Casey, 2026; Klosterboer, 2026). When students do not feel safe or welcome, they do not learn. Such an unwelcoming environment necessitates the creation of popular education spaces, where students of all ages can gain knowledge about oppression and learn to engage in change-making grassroots spaces (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 43).

Popular education is co-created with others as a means of learning with one another and about one another and takes place beyond formal schooling environments, emerging in community spaces, including in conversations between neighbors, community-led gatherings,

and community schools that operate independently of public schools. Such spaces require community development, which Ledwith (2018) explains "involves teaching people to question the everyday contradictions we live by rather than passively taking them for granted" (p. 20). Central to these practices is critical dialogue. Popular education is "rooted in a reflexive relational practice, which includes expansive notions of what it political" (Beckett, 2020, p. 123) and "has the potential to engage people in processes of critical dialogue, exploring alternative understandings of the causes of their problems, building solidarity for more progressive futures" (Mayo & Ranford, 2023, p. 98). Through dialogue, participants collectively analyze the causes of social problems, explore alternative perspectives and build shared understandings that can inform action (Mayo & Ranford, 2023). These processes strengthen agency and support efforts toward social transformation. In this way, popular education is both a pedagogical approach and a political practice.

Scholars have connected popular education to broader frameworks of liberatory and transformative education. For example, Jefferson, Gutierrez, and Silverstein (2018) describe the Liberatory Public Education (LPE) as a process in which communities collaboratively examine social conditions and work toward solutions. They write that the aims of this model,

> support local communities by coalescing community adults, teachers, and youth to identify and examine the dynamics of existing societal pressures, to explore the political, social and physical contexts of the communities surrounding schools, and to work collectively to identify opportunities to find solutions and access resources needed to implement solutions (Jefferson et al, 2018, p. 736).

Similarly, Hancock et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of creating learning environments that support critical dialogue, trust, and reflection when engaging issues of power and inequity.

Utilizing a social justice framework and critical race theory to explore how critical race-based projects can develop critical consciousness, the write that teaching to empower,

> requires a learning environment that is a safe, trustworthy, and brave space and that embraces open and critical dialogue while also interrogating the historical, personal, and cultural perspectives, lived experiences, and ways of knowing of teachers, students, and our collective society. Teaching to empower recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities of teaching to transform inequitable and socially unjust environments (Hancock et al,. 2021, p 3).

The open dialogue that grassroots organizations provide allow communities to have a space to share and address issues of oppression and thus develop ways to combat oppression. Together, this literature positions popular education as a framework for understanding how learning can support liberation and social change. However, while it provides a strong conceptual foundation, it does not fully explain where and how these practices are sustained. Grassroots organizing offers one such site.

Grassroots Organizing and Education

Grassroots organizing and social movements are closely related but distinct. Scholars distinguish between social movements and grassroots organizing in terms of scale, structure, and function. Social movements typically operate at broader regional or national levels, involving networks of organizations and actors working toward large-scale political or social change (Anyon, 2009; Oakes et al., 2006). Applying Snow and colleagues' (2004) definition, social movements are "collectives acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional and organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority" (Oakes et al, 2006, p. 15). In contrast, grassroots organizing is locally grounded,

focusing on community-specific issues and building collective power through sustained engagement among residents (Christens et al., 2021).

Grassroots organization bring together community members to identify shared concerns, build collective power, and take sustained action on system issues. These organizations may include neighborhood groups and national networks, religious congregations and secular organizations (Oakes et al., 2006). While their goals may vary, they often seek "to build the power of low-income communities, engage students, parents, and community members in powerful actions aimed at exposing and disrupting inequalities. They challenge cultural and political norms as they seek structural and practical change" (Oakes & Rogers, 2007, p. 199). Grassroots organizations can form in any place and can have any focus or focus on multiple issues. Anyon explains that grassroots organizations "although occasionally aimed at fundamental social change, [are] more typically geared toward specific local issue campaigns" (2009, p. 196).

A key feature of grassroots organizing is its emphasis on participation and collective decision-making. Community members are not passive recipients of service but active participants in identifying problems and developing strategies for change. Grassroots organizers, broadly speaking, "are producers of community change through their direct involvement to engage others and the emergent issues and strategies that participants determine as a collective" (Christens et al, 2021, p. 3004). The work of grassroots organizations at the community level is crucial for immediate and local change and the betterment of the community in which the work takes place. This emphasis on participation positions grassroots spaces as important sites of learning. Grassroots organizations offer a way to elicit change, to make a difference, rather than shift blame and accountability. This localized focus shapes grassroots organizations as pivotal

informal educational spaces where participants cultivate political knowledge and leadership, as seen in Garcia's (2018) study of 1940s. In this work, Garcia explores how Black and Mexican communities in the Ventura-Oxnard area created grassroots organizations to address several issues impacting the ways in which students were educated. He describes how the Good Citizenship Club wrote a letter to the local paper to call out the Ventura City Council, asking to provide an existing building to educate Black students in the district (Garcia, 2018, p. 102). He also writes about how the organization Los Guardianes de La Colonia worked to raise money for a drainage system to keep water off the streets and prevent flooding. This was relevant to education because, at that time in the mid-1940s, schools were segregated. Black and Mexican students did not have washroom facilities in the school buildings, and they had to walk home to use the toilet, wash their hands, and eat their lunches. If the roads were flooded, they were unable to get to and from school. They also were not permitted to wear filthy clothes in the classroom, which meant if the roads were muddy or washed out, then Black and Mexican students could not go to school that day because there was no way to keep their clothes clean according to the school's standards (Garcia, 2018). Good Citizenship Club and Los Guardianes de La Colonia are examples of different grassroots organizations within the same community working to address issues related to their needs and problems. They are an example of how different organizations can address similar issues in different ways, even within the same city borders.

Research consistently shows grassroots organizing function as a form of informal and political education. Through involvement in campaigns, meetings, workshops, and collective action, participants develop political knowledge, leadership skills, and shared frameworks for understanding structural inequality (Oakes et al., 2006; Christens et al., 2021; Mediratta et al., 2009). Learning is embedded within organizing itself, emerging through participation, reflection,

and engagement with real-world issues. For example, Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009) illustrate how grassroots organizing operates through the analysis of Community Coalition in Los Angeles. The organization combined adult-led advocacy with youth organizing through South Central Youth Empowered through Action (SCYEA), where students identified issues such as school facilities, instructional quality, and college access. This example highlights how grassroots organizations generate knowledge through participant experience while building collective capacity for educational reform.

Similarly, in her dissertation, Lafore (2022) explores the Grassroots Empowerment and Leadership program as an example of a grassroots organization engaging in popular education. She describes how participants in this grassroots leadership program collaborated to address housing issues, engage with policymakers, and negotiate with developers. For example, she details how the organization presented their housing sustainability agenda at a city hall meeting, made demands of city officials to elicit legislative change through civil disobedience, worked with their neighbors to develop solutions to address community economic issues, and negotiated with corporate developers to create developments that benefitted community members and which had the support of community members. These activities required building knowledge, developing strategies, and working collectively toward shared goals.

Grassroots organizations are a means of declaring agency and reclaiming and exercising power. Grassroots organizing requires sustained collective action, which "is central to the ultimate goals of community organizing efforts: to build and exercise power" (Christens et al, 2021, p. 3004). Furthermore, "sustained pressure is tantamount to exercising power, and this pressure requires the ongoing engagement of residents in organizing efforts. This distinction also highlights the long-standing nature of community organizing initiatives, which often persist and

evolve over decades" (Christens et al, 2021, p. 3004). The function and necessity of grassroots organizations is clear—they engage and support the community to achieve long-term goals that tend to empower community members and organization members as they seek social and political change in their communities. Grassroots organizations accomplish this in several ways, such as protests, petitions, community gatherings, regular meetings, workshops, canvassing, and mobilizing voters, among other tactics and approaches (Oakes et al, 2006, p. 13). These organizing tactics not only unite the community but provide knowledge and information to encourage community members to engage in organizing; this is what Oakes et al (2006) call disruptive knowledge, as it disrupts the status quo and the systems that perpetuate and rely upon oppression. To generate such disruptive knowledge requires grassroots organizers to engage in research, as it involves imagining the projects, its aspects and goals, and anticipating outcomes and participation (Zavala, 2013, p. 65).

Research is pivotal to the work grassroots organizations do. Surveys, interviews, community conversations, and canvassing are among the ways in which research is developed. For example, SCYEA utilized student surveys to learn what their peers deemed important issues that needed to be addressed, coupled with their own experiences and exploration of what courses their schools offered in contrast to what courses schools in other communities offered. They noted repeating themes, and built their projects and campaigns based on those themes (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009, pp. 97-98). In this way, goals can be prioritized, and next steps can be taken with the people who have the power to make change. Organizing spaces function as informal educational spaces and as political education spaces because grassroots organizations challenge cultural and political norms by design (Oakes & Rogers, 2007, p. 199). Cultural and

political norms cannot be challenged if they are not understood, so organizations must provide at least a foundational level of education on the specific issues they address.

Because grassroots organizations are not bound by formal curricular constraints, they have greater flexibility in how learning occurs. Educational practices may take the form of workshops, discussions, storytelling, or collective planning. the ways in which grassroots organizations are able to create educational spaces are varied and multifaceted. As producers of community change (Christens et al, 2021), grassroots organizers are responsible for developing a path towards social and political change, which requires organizers to create and sustain learning spaces in which all participants can explore the history and current status of an issue, as well as potential outcomes of deliberate and sustained action. Rather than separating education from action, this literature highlights learning as embedded within organizing practice itself, where knowledge is produced through collective struggle, reflection, and sustained engagement with social issues.

Popular Education in Grassroots Organizations and Social Movements

While organizing scholarship often identifies learning as an outcome of participation, some literature frames grassroots organizing itself as a form of popular education. Creating of "disruptive knowledge" (Oakes et al. 2016) requires organizers to deeply understand the issues and effective strategies to engage their communities—which has several benefits including cognitive liberation and the creation of a critical pedagogy. Tarlau (2014), citing Doug McAdam, defines cognitive liberation as a process "in which people jointly begin to define their situation as unjust and subject to change through some type of collective action" (p.375). Freire (2018) also addresses cognitive liberation, or critical consciousness, referring to this process as a "critical analysis of reality" that occurs simultaneously with action to identify the means of

oppression and the ways in which people are oppressed (p. 128). Freire emphasizes "critical reflection is action" (2018, p. 128), supporting Tarlau's assessment that cognitive liberation is a process of learning and collective action. Such cognitive liberation is essential for the emergence of grassroots organizing (Tarlau, 2014, pp. 375-376). Cognitive liberation works hand-in-hand with critical pedagogy, which is a political strategy of "community resistance and struggle" (Zavala, 2013, p. 57). Furthermore, Tarlau (2014) describes critical pedagogy as "a field of education dedicated to theorizing how education can be a progressive force for social change" (p. 371), while Kincheloe (2008) claims that defining critical pedagogy is difficult because it encompasses "wider forms of education in the culture" including "alternative bodies of knowledge produced by marginalized or low-status groups, the ways power operates to construct identities and oppress particular groups [and] the complex processes of racism, gender bias, class bias, cultural bias, heterosexism, religious intolerance, etc." (pp. 8-9). Critical pedagogy, then, is a means of action and reflection—or cognitive liberation—which grassroots organizations facilitate through activism and community engagement.

Grassroots organizations are inherently educational spaces, where community members learn about social and political issues through shared research and lived experience. This is the formation of popular education in grassroots spaces, as "popular education is a form of public pedagogy that grows out of action research" (Zavala, 2013, p. 66). Within spaces created by grassroots organizations, organizers and participants learn more about the issue alongside one another, conduct research together, and share their research with one another. In short, "people struggle, learn, educate and theorize where they find themselves" (Choudry, 2014, p. 111), and grassroots organizing is one place where people often find themselves as they attempt to elicit social and/or political change in order to combat systems of oppression. These are inherently

educational processes (Choudry, 2014, p. 89) due to the learning, research, and theorizing that takes place, thus creating what Freire terms these sites as popular education spaces. Through these popular education spaces, grassroots organizations empower participants to address systemic oppression within their communities by disrupting the knowledge and narratives of the oppressor.

Education within and through social movements is not a new phenomenon. Education researcher Jean Anyon (2009) explained that social movements, and the community and grassroots organizations that make up a social movement, have historically provided education to members since the 19th century. Though she claims that most social movements do not provide their own educational programs any longer and instead focus on public education reform, she does emphasize that social movements, and thus the community and grassroots organizations that create a social movement, "provide a way of connecting with other individuals and groups across neighborhoods, cities, regions, and states…They offer a forum for working together to develop community power" (Anyon, 2009, p. 194). The connection and community power that grassroots organizations develop are crucial to the creation of learning spaces, as well as to the ways in which learning takes place. In her studies on learning that takes place in social movements, Kilgore (1999) emphasizes that learning in social movements occurs at multiple levels: individuals, as members of groups, and as collective learning spaces. Kilgore states that "understanding learning in social movements requires not only a concept of the group as a learner and constructor of knowledge, but also as an understanding of the centrality of the group's vision of social justice that drives it to act" (Kilgore, 1999, p. 191). Drawing on Freirean thought, Kilgore argues that educators hold authority in teacher-learner relationship and must be transparent about the values they bring to this dynamic. When a grassroots organization creates a

learning space with others, the organization constructs a space where conscientization occurs, which is what Freire describes as a way to help people consider "taken-for-granted assumptions about the structures" that negatively affect their lives so they can actively engage in unlearning the oppression that comes from such structures, but also become agents of change (Lafore, 2022, p. 13).

Carcerality, Abolition, and Transformative Justice

Abolitionist scholar Catherine Besteman opens her article *Carcerality and Violence* by defining carcerality. She states, "carcerality—the use of punitive confinement as a form of social control and to stifle political dissent—is a signature form of state violence of our era" (Besteman, 2023, p. 338). She goes on to state that carceral violence goes beyond the use of physical force to include violent media images that invoke and perpetuate a fear of the incarcerated (Besteman, 2023, p 338). Establishing a working definition of carcerality is important, as it is not a commonly used term outside of abolitionist circles, but also because it lays the foundation for exploring the ways carcerality is enacted and the ways in which education about carcerality take place. Conversations about crime, criminalization, and carcerality center the notion of safety, though safety is rarely defined by those engaging in the conversation at the time. How people define and enact safety varies, but all too often the focus is on incarceration and what makes people feel safe, not how safety itself is defined and enacted. Chaudhary, Prowse, and Weaver write that "little is known about how people living in highly policed, race-class subjugated communities describe their vision for community safety and whether it alludes to an abolitionist future" (2021, p. 3059). This lack of defining safety is but one contributing factor to continued existence of carcerality and carceral mindsets that result in over-policing, surveillance, and state limitations of resources in marginalized communities.

To combat carcerality, an education on carcerality—including but not limited to the history, psychology, experiences, and social aspects—is needed. Chaudhary et al (2021) note that there are several grassroots organizations that exist as reference points for abolitionist organizers, but that does not negate the need for a broader education and more community organizing around anti-carceral and abolitionist principles. Social work scholars Nagda and Gurin, as well as psychology scholar Lopez (2003, p. 167), note that "transformative education includes previously excluded perspectives and experiences of groups that historically have had marginalized participation in educational settings", which includes the perspectives of historically oppressed communities and the currently and formerly incarcerated. Engaging these participants in critical thinking learning spaces is one way to envision an abolitionist future (Nagda et al, 2003, p. 167). Additionally, utilizing a Freirean approach to abolitionist popular education is a means of "unearthing the silenced and subjugated voices, and examining why these voices have been suppressed" (Nagda et al, 2003, p. 168). As Strand so brilliantly states, "education is the place where a culture or society reproduces or transforms itself" (2022, p. 142), and this is especially true for abolitionist education. Abolitionist educational spaces are places (physical and mental) where empowerment occurs, where open dialogue is encouraged, and where it is essential to interrogate the historical, social, political, economic, cultural, and lived perspectives and experiences (Hancock et al, 2021) of marginalized communities seeking to learn about and enact abolitionist practices as a means of disrupting carceral narratives.

Transformative justice is one abolitionist practice that addresses violence and harm. It can be applied anywhere, and consists of focusing on social and political concerns, addressing the needs and lives of the communities in which it is practiced (Gready & Robins, 2014). Described as a "future-oriented approach to the past" (Gready & Robins, 2014, p. 350),

transformative justice takes conflict arising in immediate problems—which often stem from structural systems of oppression—and creates community-involved and community-led processes to explore avenues of change. This requires embracing tough conversations and disagreements in order to work together to develop a collective solution or way forward (Gready & Robins, 2014; Kim, 2018; Nagda et al, 2003). Several grassroots organizations have been recognized for taking up this wok, including Bay Area Transformative Justice Coalition, the Chrysalis Collective, and Philly Stands Up, indicating that 1) grassroots organizations are central to providing anti-carceral and transformative justice-based educational spaces, and 2) this work is not new, but it is also not explored in much research. The common theme within the research presented is that more studies are needed to explore the role of grassroots organizations in creating and implementing anti-carceral, abolitionist, and transformative justice spaces in relation to aspects of community healing, community care, and visions of an abolitionist future.

Gaps in the Literature

Collectively, the literature reviewed demonstrate that education is not confined to formal schooling and that learning frequently occurs within grassroots organizing and community-based struggles. Scholarship on popular education has established education as a collective, political practice rooted in dialogue, critical consciousness, and action (Freire, 2018; Beckett, 2020; Mayo & Ranford, 2023). Research on grassroots organizing further illustrates how community members develop knowledge, leadership, and political agency through participation in organizing efforts. Additionally, ethics of care literature emphasizes the importance of relationships, responsibility, and attentiveness to social and emotional needs in educational and community contexts (Woodly et al, 2021; Alvarez & francisco, 2026; McBee & Westcott, 2008).

Although these literatures affirm that learning, organizing, and care are deeply interconnected, they also reveal significant gaps that this study aims to address.

First, although substantial scholarship examines education reform and the role of organizing in advancing policy change, comparatively little research conceptualizes grassroots organizations themselves as educational spaces. Much of the existing literature prioritizes outcomes such as policy victories, institutional reform, or civic participation, rather than examining how education functions internally within grassroots organizations. As a result, the everyday educational practices through which organizers and participants learn with and from one another—such as dialogue, curriculum development, popular education workshops, and collective reflection—remain underexplored. This limits our understanding of how learning is produced, sustained, and experienced within organizing contexts. Second, while popular education is frequently referenced in studies of social movements and community organizing, there is limited empirical research that closely examines how popular education practices are developed, implemented, and adapted. Existing studies often describe popular education in broad or historical terms, without attending to how these practices take shape in contemporary organizing spaces, particularly under conditions of intensified political repression and educational restriction. Consequently, there is a lack of attention to how popular education operates in practice across different areas of an organization's work and how participants understand and enact these educational approaches in their daily organizing efforts. Third, despite increasing attention to relational, affective, and care-centered frameworks, research rarely integrates an ethics of care into analyses. Ethics of care has been widely explored in fields such as education, disability studies, political theory, and queer and feminist scholarship, yet it remains largely absent from analyses of grassroots organizing as an educational practice. When

care does appear in organizing literature, it is often treated implicitly or descriptively rather than as an analytic framework for understanding how relationships, accountability, and community responsibility shape educational practices. This gap restricts our ability to analyze how grassroots organizations attend to participants' social and emotional needs, navigate harm and conflict, and sustain long-term engagement through care-based practices. Finally, the intersection of popular education, grassroots organizing, and ethics of care has not been sufficiently examined within politically conservative contexts where formal schooling is increasingly constrained by state policy. Much of the existing literature centers urban or progressive regions, leaving less insight into how community-based educational practices emerge and function in locations where public education is subject to heightened surveillance, privatization efforts, and ideological regulation. Understanding how grassroots organizations navigate these conditions is necessary for expanding scholarship on popular education beyond formal schooling and reform-focused frameworks.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how one grassroots organization creates and sustains popular education spaces rooted in anti-oppression, liberation, and care. By centering the experiences and practices of organizers and participants within the organization, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of grassroots organizations as sites of education. Additionally. the study brings ethics of care into conversation with popular education and grassroots organizing, providing a framework to analyze how relationships, collective responsibility, and care shape educational practices in community-based spaces. In doing so, the study advances scholarship on education beyond formal institutions and highlights the educational significance of grassroots organizing in contemporary political contexts.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design, epistemological framework, and methodological approach guiding this qualitative case study. It begins by introducing the research case– Foundation for Liberating Minds—and situating the grassroots organization within its geographic, sociopolitical, and educational context. Providing this background grounds the methodological choices that follow and clarifies the scope and focus of the study. The chapter then details the qualitative case study design, which is informed by a social constructivist epistemological framework. This approach is well suited to examine how members of a grassroots organization conceptualize, create, and engage in educational spaces, as well as how these practices reflect broader commitments to popular education. A qualitative methodology was selected to foreground participants' meaning making processes and to attend to the social, cultural, and relational contexts in which knowledge is constructed. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What values and practices shape the organization's educational programming, and
2. How does the organization define and enact its mission and values across different areas of praxis?

Introduction to the Research Case: Foundation for Liberating Minds

Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM) is a small grassroots organization based in Oklahoma that is guided by principles of liberation, anti-oppression, and abolition. At the beginning of this study in 2024, the organization was in the process of obtaining 501(c)(3) status, which was obtained before the conclusion of this study in 2026. While FLM does not currently maintain a permanent physical space within the community due to financial constraints, its work

is embedded in and responsive to a predominantly Black and lower socio-economic community in Oklahoma. FLM was founded in 2017 after one of the organization's co-founders—Alham—envisioned the creation of an educational space that centered the experiences, knowledges, and cultures of Black students. Alham shared his vision with friends and collaborators Tevin and aurelius, and together they established the organization. The early years of FLM were less structured. Meetings took place in public libraries, coffee shops, or cafes and were once or twice a week. There was no funding and relationships were being developed with organizations, businesses, and individuals over time. Not long after the Covid-19 pandemic hit, FLM started bringing in multiple grants to sustain the work long-term, and in 2023 FLM was able to share a location on the Eastside with another organization[2]. Grands and funding started to come in more steadily, so the co-founders were able to begin working full-time and earn a living wage. Partnerships with organizations and funders continued to develop, workshops and trainings were booked more steadily, and the We the Eastside Initiative and the I in II Campaign came to fruition. In 2025, FLM was able to bring on a third full-time staff member to take over the SAFE Commune program as well as secure premises solely for FLM's work. Unfortunately, those premises were not on the Eastside, but they are not far. Several meetings take place at FLM's premises, as well as smaller events, while the We the Eastside program events all remain on the Eastside at partner locations. While Alham, Tevin, and aurelius are the co-founders, Alham left in 2024 for law school on the West Coast.

Although Alham, aurelius, and Tevin are recognized as co-founders, FLM does not operate through a hierarchical leadership structure. Instead, the organization identifies as a collective, emphasizing shared leadership, collaboration, and mutual accountability. While

[2] The organization FLM shared a location with has never been made public for safety reasons.

certain members take on administrative or coordinating roles—such as aurelius' role as executive director—these positions do not function as top-down leadership roles. Decision-making, program development, and facilitation are distributed among members based on interest, capacity, and collective need. Members routinely collaborate, exchange ideas, and rotate leadership responsibilities across programs, events, and initiatives. An example of this is weekly staff meetings. Staff meets on Monday mornings to check in and provide an overview of their goals and tasks for the week. This is a time where all members can contribute to the conversation, highlighting where they need to collaborate, where they can offer support, and indicate their more pressing needs. At the end of the week, there is a wrap-up meeting, where staff outline their major wins and accomplishments and pose any questions or thoughts that did not make into conversations throughout the week's work. Once again, this is a collaborative meeting, where all staff can engage in conversation to provide responses, indicate where they can help with what work still needs to be done the coming week, and provide feedback on the work that was completed. No one's work is privileged over another's, and everyone's voice and input is valued and respected.

FLM's mission is to "disrupt the root causes of oppression and marginalization through transformative education" ("Home"). Education, as understood by the organization, extends beyond formal schooling and includes political education, popular education, and community-based learning spaces. Across its work, FLM emphasizes the relationship between education, community care, and collective liberation, particularly in relation to abolitionist thought, anti-oppressive practice, and community organizing. As will become clear in Chapter 4, the reason the organization was created was because there was a gap in education, especially for Black students. The co-founders all felt—based on lived experiences and witnessed events—that Black

students and their experiences were not valued in education, and that the education that has historically been provided centers white experiences and ways of knowing. They wanted to fill the gap by providing an education to Black youth, as well as other marginalized youth and their communities, where marginalized students felt seen, heard, and respected and were able to learn more about their own communities. Additionally, this meant providing a similar education to the adults in the community to help them understand, navigate, and put a name to their experiences of systemic oppression. In doing so, the organization has been able to create programs that disrupt the causes of oppression.

Organizational Structure and Educational Initiatives. FLM's educational work is organized through a combination of long-term initiatives, community-based programs, and requested trainings and workshops. These efforts reflect the organization's commitment to popular education as a means of fostering critical consciousness, community connection, and collective action. At the time of this study, FLM operated two primary initiatives: the We the Eastside Initiative and the Free Our People Initiative.

We the Eastside. The We the Eastside Initiative functions as a community-engaged program focused on listening, relationship-building, and collective problem-solving. Through regular meetings and outreach efforts, the initiative creates space for community members to name issues impacting their lives and to collaboratively explore potential responses. These responses have included facilitated conversations, community resource sharing, voter registration efforts, and other forms of collective actions. All We the Eastside gatherings begin with the establishment of shared group norms intended to mitigate harm and ensure all participant voices are heard. Since the onset of this study, the We the Eastside Initiative has expanded to include a monthly free breakfast program, which has served hundreds of youth and families, an example

illuminating the evolving nature of FLM's community-based educational work. The Free Our People Initiative encompasses multiple programs that center abolitionist principles and community accountability. While one program within this initiative involved individualized community partnerships that fall outside the scope of this study, two programs are outlined here and discussed further in subsequent chapters: the SAFE Commune program and the I in II Campaign.

SAFE Commune. As part of the Free Our People Initiative, the SAFE Commune program launched in 2024 and consists of multi-week cohort-based trainings designed to support participants in learning abolitionist principles and developing non-carceral responses to interpersonal harm. Cohorts include both FLM members and community participants, who work together toward building collective approaches to accountability, harm reduction, and healing.

I in II Campaign. This is another Free Our People Initiative program that centers the voices and experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals and examines the role of narrative in sustaining or disrupting carceral systems. Developed in collaboration with a local restorative justice organization, the campaign emerged from a program focused on political education related to incarceration and policing practice in Oklahoma. The campaign includes workshops, video interviews, and community events that explore how carceral narratives are produced and how they might be challenged.

Trainings and Workshops. In addition to the programming described above, FLM facilitates trainings and workshops on a range of topics that include toxic masculinity, community organizing, white supremacy, and cultural competence. These programs are offered by request and are tailored to the needs and contexts of participating organizations while

remaining grounded in FLM's core values. Though workshop content varies, all sessions center participatory connection, reflection, and collaborative problem solving.

Rationale for Case Selection

Foundation for Liberating Minds was selected as the exemplary case for this study due to its sustained engagement in popular education, its explicit grounding in abolitionist and anti-oppressive frameworks, and its use of multiple educational approaches within grassroots organizing contexts. The organization's combination of initiatives, programming, and trainings provides a rich context for examining how popular education is conceptualized and enacted outside formal schooling. FLM's work engages individuals and communities who are directly impacted by structural oppression and marginalization, while also collaborating with organization and educational efforts across the region. Examining how this work is organized, sustained, and understood by those involved offers insight into the broader possibilities and challenges of grassroots popular education. As such, this case contributes to scholarship on education, community care, and social justice organizing, while also offering practical implications for educators and organizers working in similar areas.

Epistemological Framework: Social Constructivism

The qualitative design of this study is informed by a social constructivist epistemological framework which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge through social interaction and meaning making. The theory of social constructivism established by Vygotsky in 1968 states that "language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality" (Akpan et al, 2020, p. 50). As a research paradigm, social constructivism allows for interpretations of reality based on the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of participants based on interviews and observations (Boyland, 2019, p. 30). Furthermore, from a

social constructivist perspective, "data gathering and data analysis processes seek to elicit an understanding of how persons create their knowledge constructs and how these constructs contribute to understanding social influences and individual thought processes" (Boyland, 2019, p. 33). This worldview is particularly appropriate for this study, as it centers participant's interpretations of their experiences and foregrounds the ways in which educational knowledge is constructed collectively through language, relationships, and cultural context.

Methodological Design: Qualitative Case Study

Guided by this worldview, this study utilizes a qualitative case study methodology to examine the practices and perspectives of a single grassroots organization in depth—a means of inquisition that requires in-depth exploration of a specific event, organization, or activity (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1988). According to Creswell (2009), cases are bounded by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures. A case study is a form of "descriptive, non-experimental research," which means that it "is undertaken when description and explanation are sought, when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study" (Merriam, 1988, p. 7). This qualitative case study consists of the exploration of one grassroots organization—Foundation for Liberating Minds—and their creation of, and engagement within, educational spaces. This is similar to the exemplary case study by Oakes and Lipton (2002), where they also explored one organization as a case study in their research. Other grassroots organizing researchers have also utilized case study methodologies (Warren & Mapp, 2011; Ferman, 2017; Mediratta et al, 2009) in various ways, including exemplary case studies (Oakes & Lipton, 2002) and iterative case studies (Su, 2009). The case is bounded by the organization's educational

initiatives, programs, and events as well as by the period during which data were collected and analyzed. Data were collected through one-on-one interviews that took place from June to July 2024; document collection and analysis, which took place after interviews were conducted; and observations, which took place over years as a member of the organization and participant at several events. Because this study draws on interviews, documents, and observations generated through intimate engagement with the organization, my positionality and observational role are central to the research process.

Observations were made as a participant at events from June 2024 through December 2025, in a role known as participant observer. According to sociologist William Whyte, "a participant observer is a researcher who participates in social activities with the subjects of a study over an extended period of time" (1979, p. 56). In Whyte's explanation of participant observer, he goes on to explain the need to distinguish between being an overt or covert participant observer. He points out that in some cases, the researcher cannot avoid an overt researcher role, while in other instances, a covert role may be the only way to access data. He also states that there may be a combination overt-covert researcher role, in which researchers inform participants that they are part of a study, but just what all that study included was not clear (Whyte, 1979, p. 57). In this study, my role was a combination overt-covert participant observer role. As a member of FLM, participants in FLM events knew that I was a member and that I was also a graduate student. They did not know that I was conducting a study on FLM itself. Participants of FLM events were not included in this study—in interviews or observations—so their knowledge of this study was not necessary. FLM members were informed that I was conducting a case study of FLM and that it included interviews and document analysis, but they were not aware of how those documents would be included nor were they

aware my own observations would be included as well. As a member of FLM and participant of FLM events, I had the unique position to view and experience FLM in multiple ways and include those experiences in my understanding of FLM's work.

Conceptual Framework: Ethics of Care

This study is grounded in an ethics of care as a conceptual and analytic framework for understanding how grassroots organizations create and sustain popular education spaces. Broadly, an ethics of care foregrounds relationships, shared responsibility, and attentiveness to the needs of others, emphasizing care as a collective practice rather than an individual disposition (Tronto, 1993; Vasudevan et al., 2023). As Jean Tronto (1998) explains, care holds a dual meaning: it refers both to a "mental disposition of concern" and to the concrete practices that emerge from that concern (p. 16). This understanding of care moves beyond sentimentality, situating care as an active, relational, and ethical practice embedded within social and political contexts. While care is often framed as apolitical or private, critical scholars argue that care cannot be separated from systems of power and oppression. The ways care is defined, enacted, and distributed are shaped by capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and white supremacy (Woodly et al., 2021; Vasudevan et al., 2023). Caring practices are therefore never neutral; they reflect whose lives are valued, whose needs are prioritized, and whose suffering is rendered invisible. Attending to care requires acknowledging how social identities and structural inequities condition both vulnerability and access to care and demands a critical stance toward the systems that produce harm (Vasudevan et al., 2023).

Abolitionist Care and the Critique of the Prison Industrial Complex

Abolitionist approaches to care make explicit the relationship between care and oppression by rejecting systems that rely on punishment, surveillance, and disposability.

Drawing from the work of Mariame Kaba, Angela Y. Davis, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, abolitionist care critiques the prison industrial complex as a system that fails to prevent harm, address underlying conditions of violence, or support community healing (Davis, 2016; Kaba, 2021; Abraham, 2023). Rather than providing safety, the prison system absorbs those abandoned by the state—particularly Black, Indigenous, disabled, poor, and other marginalized communities—while foreclosing possibilities for transformation. Abolitionist care is not limited to decarceration; it is a broader politics of care that seeks to dismantle all systems of oppression and build alternative forms of collective support (Woodly et al., 2021). Kaba (2021) emphasizes that abolition is about making oppressive institutions obsolete by creating the conditions that allow communities to thrive—such as accessible mental health care, community-based accountability practices, food justice initiatives, and transformative justice spaces. These practices exemplify care as a communal response to harm, rooted in accountability, healing, and the prevention of future violence. Wilson Gilmore's notion of abolition geography further underscores that freedom is relational and spatial, produced through networks of people and the bonds among them (Abraham, 2023). In this sense, abolitionist care centers how communities organize themselves to respond to harm without reliance on carceral systems, affirming care as both a survival strategy and a political project.

Educational and Critical Care

Educational care, when understood through a critical lens, extends these insights into learning spaces. Public education institutions, while ostensibly designed to provide access and opportunity, are deeply entangled with state power and often reproduce racial, gendered, and ableist forms of oppression. State-mandated curricula, disciplinary practices, and surveillance mechanisms limit the extent to which abolitionist care can be realized within formal schooling

contexts. Critical approaches to educational care emphasize attending to the social and emotional needs of learners while explicitly naming and challenging systems of oppression embedded in education (McBee & Westcott, 2008; Sosa-Provencio, 2016). Critical care recognizes students as whole human beings whose identities, lived experiences, and vulnerabilities must be centered in the learning process. Feminist, queer, disabled, and abolitionist frameworks of care highlight how schooling often fails marginalized students by neglecting these needs and reinforcing normative standards of race, gender, ability, and behavior (McCann & Sharp, 2025; Owis, 2024; Noddings, 2013; Vasudevan et al, 2023). A disabled approach to care further emphasizes care as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden. Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2018) concept of care webs illustrates how communities can organize networks of mutual support that address access needs while fostering joy, sustainability, and political organizing. These care webs challenge dominant narratives that frame care as isolated, transactional, or burdensome, instead positioning care as a relational praxis essential to collective liberation.

Ethics of Care in Grassroots Popular Education

Because public education institutions are constrained by state regulations and carceral logics, popular education spaces play a crucial role in enacting abolitionist and critical forms of care. Grassroots educational spaces are not beholden to the same institutional constraints and are thus better positioned to center culturally responsive, abolitionist, and collective care practices. In these spaces, learning is embedded within relationships of trust, mutual accountability, and shared responsibility. An ethics of care provides a lens for understanding how grassroots organizations sustain collective learning amid ongoing structural violence. Learning in these contexts often emerges from shared experiences of harm, marginalization, and struggle, making care central to both pedagogy and organizing. Rather than treating education as separate from

relationships, care emphasizes how learning is produced through ongoing practices of support, dialogue, and collective responsibility (hooks, 1994; Woodly et al., 2021; Padamsee, 2018). Through culturally responsive and critical approaches to care, grassroots popular education spaces work to disrupt white supremacy, challenge the status quo, and imagine alternative ways of being together. Ethics of care, when understood through critical, abolitionist, and culturally responsive frameworks, explains how these spaces sustain collective learning while resisting oppression. In this study, ethics of care functions as both a conceptual foundation and an analytic tool, illuminating how care-based practices enable grassroots organizations to nurture transformative, liberatory educational spaces rooted in community, accountability, and collective well-being.

Data Collection Process

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining IRB approval, this study employed purposeful sampling to identify active FLM members, combined with convenience sampling when appropriate (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). FLM is a small organization, and at the time of recruitment, consisted of only seven staff members living across the country and eight to ten non-staff members who were significantly less active in FLM's work and events. Active staff members were those who devote at least five hours per week to FLM, attending bi-weekly staff meetings and participating in program planning, workshops, and community outreach. Active members were chosen because of their familiarity with the day-to-day work of FLM, as well as their understanding of the mission and inception of the organization. Non-staff or former staff members maintain limited engagement, attending occasional events and were generally excluded except in cases where their involvement was recent or significant. Non-staff were excluded solely based on their

limited engagement in events and planning, as their knowledge of the work would be minimal and they would not be able to respond to the interview questions. I contacted participants via email and text message, deliberately keeping communication separate from FLM's Slack workspace to maintain research boundaries. Those who did not participate could not due to personal time constraints and prior commitments. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Four of the seven members contacted consented to participate and all were aware of my positionality within the organization and my role as a researchers and long-term member. They were assured that their responses would remain confidential and stored securely. One non-staff member, who knew of my study through our private conversations, asked to participate. Participants were asked to provide demographic information they wanted to be included in the study, provided in Table 1.

Because of my relationship to the organization, scheduling interviews was not difficult. The interview process was somewhat awkward, as I entered a new role in the way in which the participants and I spoke with one another about the organization, but the adjustment was quick. Because of our familiarity with one another, I did not have to establish rapport before meeting with the participants, and they were more willing to provide detailed and personal responses. Their contributions were because they wanted to help me with my work, but also because they knew I would share the work with FLM and it could be used to benefit the organization in gaining more funding and prestige within the community. Their participation, and open desire to be named in the study, stemmed from their love of the organization and their desire to bring more success to the organization.

Table 1

Chart of participant demographics

Participant	**Gender**	**Race/Ethnicity**	**Education**
Dana	Cis Woman	Middle Eastern/Arab	PhD Student
aurelius	Cis Man	Black	MA in Sociology
Tevin	Cis Man	Black	HS diploma, Air Force
Alham	Cis Man	Black	MEd, current law student
Ariana	Cis Woman	Black, Hispanic	Bachelor's & Master's

Anonymity—Or Lack Thereof

From the beginning of this study, participants made it clear to me they wanted the organization and themselves to be named in the study. They did not want to be anonymous, nor did they want to be provided pseudonyms. It was important to them that the organization and the work be named because of how it could benefit the organization as a whole. I was informed at the beginning of the study that the organization and members should be anonymous, and it was stated so in IRB and the data was presented as anonymous in the defense presentation. However, after the defense, participants reiterated their desire to not be anonymous. I verified with IRB that the organization and participants could be named, and I verified with each participant individually that they wanted to be named. Upon approval from IRB and all participants, the data was changed to remove pseudonyms and anonymity. All participants and programs are represented in this study by their actual names. In my correspondence with Alham regarding anonymity, he stated that "I have been attached to the organization since its inception. I love it with my everything. It's your organization, too, and I think you should be able to name and take

credit for it." However, while participants gave permission to be named explicitly, I did not include their surnames to retain an aspect of safety and security for participants.

Data Artifacts of Qualitative Case Study Design: Interviews

From June to July 2024, I conducted individual semi-structured (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) open-ended interviews with FLM members. Interviews were organized around six thematic sections to guide conversations and elicit thick descriptions and responses:

1. *Interest, Reasons, and Background Prior to FLM*: In this part, I planned for participants to share their motivations for joining FLM and prior experiences in social justice organizing;
2. *Experiences and Motivations in Social Justice and Education:* I planned for participants to reflect on their engagement and experience with anti-oppressive work and the meaning of education across these contexts;
3. *FLM-Focused Trainings and Workshops:* I planned questions around curriculum development, workshop facilitation, and educational approaches within FLM;
4. *Community Building:* Questions here explored how participant described FLM's approaches to relationships and community engagement;
5. *Abolition Narratives*: Here questions were to address how FLM's principles informed their work, programs, and organizational philosophy; and
6. *Future Thinking:* Questions reflected on organizational goals, potential changes, and the radical dreams they envision for FLM.

Interview questions were drafted in three iterative rounds. The first two rounds of drafts produced interview questions that were overly narrow and limited participants' opportunities to provide nuanced responses as I had hoped. The final revision broadened the scope, leading to

participants providing thoughtful engagement (See Appendix A). Interview questions were provided to participants via email, along with the consent form to be signed and returned prior to the interview, a week in advance to allow them to prepare and consider their responses. Interviews provided specific contexts for individual leaders to explore their own work within the organization, how they envision anti-oppressive and transformative strategies coming to fruition in all aspects of the organization, and how their own experiences influence and shape the work they do. Interviews were important to this process because they allowed me to ask intentional questions to learn more about members of the organization and their unique perspectives of the work the organization does.

Interviews were conducted both in person and recorded via Zoom. There was no difference in Zoom or in-person interviews besides the location where the interview took place. Two interviewees reside out of state and distance made Zoom a necessity, while local interviews that were conducted in person were recorded on Zoom for preservation. As this was my first experience in conducting interviews for a research study, I did not refer to documents or programs that participants mentioned in their interviews nor did I shift my questions in response to mentions of documents or programs during the interview process. I also did not do this because FLM is a small organization and, even if not all members participate in all events and work on all the same programs, they were all aware of all of FLM's programming. This approach ensured that all participants could contribute meaningfully, regardless of program-specific experience. While not all participants were equally familiar with all FLM programs and could not provide the same level of detail, all participants were aware of what programs existed. Some interview questions were adapted when needed to address varying degrees of information participants had about specific programs. For example, Ariana lives on the East Coast and has

never been able to attend a We the Eastside event, though she is aware of the program, its intent, and its impact. The interview questions about the We the Eastside event were adjusted to reflect her familiarity and experiences with the program so that she could provide her own insights to the best of her ability.

All interviews were transcribed and stored on a secure password-protected network. Interviews were first transcribed by Zoom, followed by a second-round where I went in and fixed transcription errors. Once interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to MAXQDA, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis. The intent in using MAXQDA was to utilize the program to help code and identify themes, but the program proved more time consuming than helpful, and it was easier to read through transcripts and identify themes by hand than to use MAXQDA. After individual interviews were completed, I moved into the second aspect of research design, which consisted of document exploration. I collected documents and materials that organization members shared or used in their work to better understand their experiences. These documents contextualized data from the interviews, expanding on insight shared from interviews.

Data Artifacts of Qualitative Case Study Design: Document Collection

Once I completed interviews, I focused my attention on gathering documents from FLM to contextualize and expand upon participant insights and the overall organization. Documents were selected through two complementary approaches: interview-informed selection and exploratory collection. Participants frequently referenced specific programs or materials during interviews. These references guided the identification of relevant documents that could provide additional context, such as program descriptions, curricula, or materials highlighting organizational values and visions. The second way, through exploratory collection, occurred

after obtaining verbal permission from FLM's co-directors. I accessed the organization's shared documents folder and identified materials that aligned with the study's scope and research questions. The final corpus of documents (See Appendix C) included four documents related to FLM's abolition programming, materials describing programs such as the "Deconstructing Toxic Masculinity" workshop documents detailing organizational vision, community building efforts and general programming, and finally visual materials like flyers and screenshots of webpages that illuminate FLM's outreach. Only documents that supported the research questions were included in the appendix; materials outside the scope or containing sensitive participant information were excluded. Documents were downloaded to my desktop on a secure server for security.

Data Artifacts of Qualitative Case Study Design: Observations

Observations took place over the course of the entire study, from conception until the finalization of Chapter 4. I was able to observe a variety of events, from staff meetings to We the Eastside community conversations and community walks to I in II Campaign trainings to SAFE Commune cohort training and meetings. FLM staff have been aware of my role as researcher since the inception of the study, as I spoke with staff before proceeding to ensure the organization was comfortable serving as the exemplary case study and with my dual role as researcher-member. In several instances, such as SAFE cohort trainings and meetings, participants were also aware of the study and my role, however, they were informed that they as participants were not included in the study and that the focus of data collection was on the content and structure of events. Due to time limitations, participant feedback and involvement was not included in this study. Because many events also utilized notes in the Google drive, I was able to pair observations with documents. In instances where events did not utilize notes,

pictures were taken and were able to be referenced as reminders of what transpired at events. Observation notes were not meticulously kept, however, my participation at recurring events made it easier to recall what took place, when, and why so I could include observation materials based on physical and mental memory.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis was guided by an ethics of care conceptual framing, emphasizing responsibility, relationality, and community-centered practices (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Epistemologically informed, three guiding questions shaped the iterative analysis processes:

1. What constitutes care in the context of grassroots organizing,
2. How is community care enacted within FLM, individually and collectively, and
3. How do themes that emerge reflect and inform notions of care and relationality?

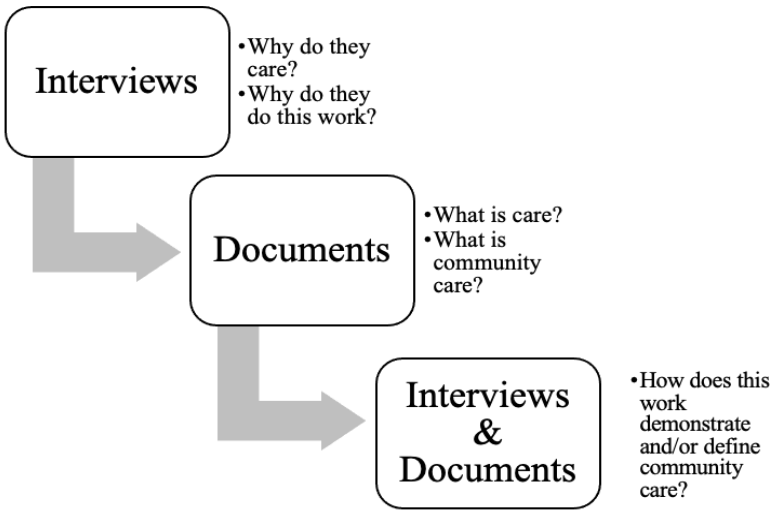
This reflexive process and guiding analytic framing allowed for a deeper understanding of why and how the organization's practices are significant within anti-oppressive popular education. Figure 1 below provides a visual representation of analysis.

Taken together, the analysis questions outlined above and in Figure 1 and the interview questions connect to ethics of care by exploring the ways in which participants' backgrounds, motivations, and prior experiences—their reason for joining FLM and their history in social justice work—reveals what care means to them, as well as how the values they bring into FLM shape the work. Trainings and workshops show how care is practiced through pedagogy; community building shows relational care in how people show up for one another; and abolition narratives reveal the ideological grounding that shapes how care gets operationalized organizationally. Emerging themes reflect and inform care and relationality by examining all six areas of interview questions to look at the responses holistically. Structurally, the analysis

questions allow for movement through the interview questions by starting at the individual level and moving out to the organizational vision.

Figure 1

Visual connection between interview data, document data, and document analysis approach



The analysis integrated both interview transcripts and documents. As interviews were transcribed, data were organized according to the six thematic interview sections: background/interest, experiences and motivations, trainings and workshops, community building, abolition narratives, and looking ahead. This process highlighted passages that referenced values, motivations, and specific programs. From there, I noted in the margins or highlighted areas of interviews and documents that were connected by the values and motivations that were identified through the organization process. Once I did this, I reviewed the notes and highlights in the margins, and then considered observation data, making more connections between values but also beginning to identify recurring thoughts and themes.

Concepts of background, empowerment, and humanization joined to create the theme of past educational experiences and motivations as foundational to the work, because the background of participants, what empowered them and/or how they chose to empower others,

and the value of humanizing others informed or motivated their relationship to the work they do with FLM. Likewise, participant experiences and motivations and the values of liberation and community building helped ascertain how they define the work they do. The work that is done, which was mentioned in interviews and collected in observations and document analysis, included trainings and workshops, community building, abolition, organization building, providing care, and providing education. This work, coupled with the values of abolition, liberation, education, care, and empowerment, created the theme of praxis, which is where in the findings I explore how the work comes together.

The themes cross the categories of interview questions and data collected from documents. According to Bowen (2009, p. 28), "document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative research methods as a means of triangulation." Triangulation helps reduce biases and provide other forms of substantiated evidence to support analyses and findings (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). Document inclusion and analyses are important because they can provide context to the conversation, provide supplementary data, track changes and developments, and corroborate findings (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). The documents included in this study were identified by participants in the interviews and correlate to the concepts of anti-oppression, liberation, transformative justice, community care, and popular education.

Document analysis provided contextual and corroborative insights to supplement interview data. Through systematic coding, thematic analysis, and a care-oriented lens, document analysis illuminated how FLM operationalizes its values in practice and how participants understand, experience, and contribute to the organization's educational and community-oriented initiatives. Combined, interview, observation, and document data lay the foundation for findings that integrate participant perspectives, program materials, and organizational practices. This

analysis addresses the study's research questions, demonstrating how anti-oppressive community-centered education unfolds in a grassroots context.

Researcher Accountability and Ethical Consideration

As a member of the grassroots organization Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM), and a participant in several of the programs and events discussed in this study, my observations as both a member and a participant inform my understanding and interpretation of the organization and shape my analysis. I engage in this research as someone who is actively involved in grassroots organizing, and my positionality as an insider influenced the research process, including data collection, interpretation, and representation. As a grassroots organizer, the work is personal to me and reflects my personal morals and code of ethics.

My longstanding involvement with FLM facilitated a level of familiarity and trust with participants that greatly shaped the interview process. Because we shared prior knowledge of the organizations' work, interviews were conversational and reflective, and participants often referenced events or programs without providing extensive details. This familiarity contributed to a sense of ease and openness during interviews, allowing participants to speak candidly and without hesitation or self-censorship. At the same time, this shared context required heightened reflexivity on my part, particularly when writing findings for an audience unfamiliar with the organization. This positionality also introduced ethical considerations related to confidentiality and representation. In some instances, participants shared information that, while appropriate within internal organizational contexts, could compromise relationships or partnerships if disclosed publicly. For example, one participant named an organization in which FLM had collaborated unsuccessfully. To protect existing relationships and uphold ethical research practices, identifying details were removed and the organization way anonymized in this study.

These decisions reflect ongoing attention to the responsibilities inherent in conducting researching with a community of which the researcher is a part. Finally, my familiarity with FLM's work posed challenges during analysis and writing, as my intimate knowledge of the organization made it necessary to continually consider what contextual information needed to be explicit for readers. Throughout this process, I engaged in reflexive practices to account for my dual role as researcher and participant, recognizing both the affordances and limitations of insider-outsider research. Reflexive practices in research are varied but are necessary to address power dynamics. Social scientists Smith and Luke (2024) claim that "reflexivity demands that researchers situate themselves within the social and contextual context of their study, while openly exploring the self, others, and relationships as the fieldwork proceeds" (p. 576). Furthermore, they state that critical reflexive researchers "call attention to their intersectional identities and the complexities of these identities as they enter the field, negotiate relationships, and engage in the inquiry process" (Smith & Luke, 2024, p. 578). My own reflexive practices consisted of routinely questioning and considering my relationship with the organization as an insider/outsider. An insider/outsider refers to "the degree to which a researcher is located either within or outside the group being researched" (Gair, 2012, p. 137). One question that I noted in research on insider-outsider positionality and that I adopted into practice was "what does our embeddedness mean for our research" (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 164). It has been a fine line between my role as researcher and my role as a member of FLM, one that has required constant reflexion and consideration. In addition to methodological transparency, this study is guided by a relational and ethical commitment to reciprocity, responsibility, and respect in the production of knowledge and community care.

Relationality and Ethical Commitments

Relationality in this study functions as both an ethical orientation and a methodological stance, shaping decisions related to consent, anonymity, data use, and the intended outcomes of the research. As a member of FLM, I am grounded in organizational values that emphasize shared learning, accountability, and the reciprocal exchange of knowledge. I was taught by early mentors that it is important to give as much as one takes, particularly in research contexts, and that researchers have a responsibility to honor the relationships that make knowledge production possible. As Nelson and Shotton (2022) note, research must "honor our mutual responsibilities to one another as we engage in knowledge sharing" (104). Guided by these commitments, this study is designed to produce knowledge that extends beyond the dissertation. In addition to contributing to scholarly conversations about grassroots organizations and popular education, the findings are intended to serve as a resource for FLM as the organization seeks to expand its work, strengthen community partnership, and pursue local, regional, and national funding opportunities. In this way, relationality informs not only how data were collected and analyzed, but also how the outcomes of the research are understood and mobilized.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that, should this work be taken up by others in the future, be considered in the research design. These limitations also could have impacts on the outcome of the study and are important to mention. The first limitation is the sample size of participants. While this is an exemplary case study and participants are limited, the small sample size of participants, especially as FLM is a small organization, limits the data collected. A larger sample size, either by expanding the number of cases explored in a case study or through a

different methodology that allows for more participants would provide more data and potentially different findings.

The second limitation is my position as an insider-outsider, which I explained in the Researcher Accountability section. My role is not only as sole researcher in this study, but I am a member of the organization and, at the time of revising the final chapters for submission, I shifted to working for FLM full-time. This insider status made it difficult at times to differentiate between the work I was doing as an employee and the work I was doing as a researcher, which required moments of deep reflection to sift through what constituted part of the study and what did not fit the parameters of the study, as well as what was not covered by Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Additionally, my insider status could have contributed to the participants not providing as many details or information in the interviews as they might have contributed if the interviewer were someone who was not familiar with the organization. The participants and I spoke together in interviews on the assumptions that I was familiar with all aspects of the organization, which may have led to the participants editing their thoughts with this in mind. The information I received may have been different if I were an outsider. The biggest struggle as an insider-outsider was separating what the study was asking for and what I found to be important about the organization in the current political moment, as my biases suggest all the work FLM does is equally important. I worked diligently to remove my biases, but no academic research is bias free, no matter how much effort the researcher puts into removing their biases.

A third limitation are the effects of the political moment. As FLM is situated in Oklahoma, state politics are influential to the work they do and the ways in which the work is analyzed and collected. Additionally, the political situation in Oklahoma, as well as nationally, is constantly shifting, and new policies and political commentary are made each day that impacts

the work FLM does, sometimes causing a shift in the work and how it is interpreted. Some of these political changes have been omitted due to time constraints in completing this dissertation, and including these political changes and commentaries in future research could result in different findings, outcomes, analyses, or understandings of grassroots organizing.

The research design allows for a robust and in-depth exploration of a singular case study in order to explore the ways in which grassroots organizations create popular education spaces based on values of liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression. In the following chapter, the findings of the study are presented, organized around the themes that emerged from the data. These findings demonstrate organizers' personal educational histories, commitments to abolition, and community-centered values that shape FLM's programs, including the We the Eastside Initiative, the Transformative Justice/Community Accountability program, and the I in II Campaign.

Chapter 4

The chapter illuminates findings drawn from FLM participant interviews, organizational documents, and my observations as a member of the organization and participant at some of the events discussed. This chapter begins with a snapshot of the participants, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of who they are as individuals, the work they do in FLM, and what is important to them. The chapter moves through the findings organized by theme, providing quotes from interviews and descriptions of observations and documents to tie together the data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the organization.

Participant Snapshots: Meeting the Leaders of FLM

An introduction to the participants is necessary to provide background information and a better understanding of the connection between the participants and the work. The introductions provided are based on interview data and personal knowledge of the participants from working with them in FLM.

Alham

Raised in Oklahoma, Alham (a cis Black man) is one of FLM's co-founders, the one who started the conversation to establish FLM from the beginning. When I first met Alham at my interview to join the organization, he was attending a graduate program in education. He eventually earned a master's degree in education and began his second year of law school, with a focus on education law, in the fall of 2025. Alham created the We the Eastside program, but due to living out of state to attend university, he handed the program over. Alham has presented at trainings and workshops over the years, facilitated several staff meetings and organization retreats, and offers support and encouragement to all other FLM members in their personal and FLM endeavors. When asked what he thought was the most important work FLM does, he said it

was the teaching component, where FLM works on "translating what we learn and say, like in an academic setting, to the real world." It became clear quickly that making sure that everyone is having the same conversation and understands one another before engaging in difficult and heavy conversations about liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression is something that takes place across all FLM programs and events.

aurelius

aurelius (a cis Black man) is another one of the three co-founders of FLM. He uses lowercase letters in his name as a means of de-centering himself, and his decision is honored throughout this study. He holds the executive director position and was also raised in Oklahoma like Alham. I officially met him at my interview to join FLM, however we both attended the same university at the same time, though for different degrees, and that is where I first saw him. From 2015 until 2020, there were several racialized violent incidents across the nation, and aurelius at that time was a co-founder and co-director of a campus organization that addressed instances of racism on our college campus. Just as he is for FLM, aurelius was also a prominent face in the campus organization. aurelius so simply stated in his interview, "I'm a good spokesperson, and so I was a very visible sort of face at press conferences and at protests. I was the one doing the speeches and getting the crowd riled up." When people in the local area hear about FLM's work in the community, aurelius is the face many first associate with the organization for this reason. In fact, he made a public statement on behalf of FLM at the 2020 George Floyd protest. His ability to state his ideas, to get audiences excited and invested in a cause, is part of his charm and role in FLM. aurelius' main focus in FLM is abolition work, which includes the I in II Campaign, among other programs, events, and workshops.

Tevin

Tevin (a cis Black man)—the third co-founder of FLM—works as the community building coordinator and describes himself as predominantly raised in Oklahoma. Where Alham and aurelius provide structure, organization, and detail, Tevin provides a present-moment appreciation to the co-founders' team, leading to a powerful balance for FLM collectively. His easy-going demeanor makes him someone people want to talk to, someone people feel at ease talking to. Tevin was on the interview panel to determine if I was the right fit to join FLM, and his demeanor made me feel at ease, as if I fit in easily with the group. Early on, Tevin and I worked closely together on school development and outlining different trainings that the organization could provide. Tevin's current focus within FLM is the We the Eastside campaign, which includes free breakfast for the youth and their families in the community once a month, community outreach, and developing community relationships. Tevin believes that, for FLM, "The goal is safety for our people and to build those strong communities," and everything he does works towards this goal.

Ariana

Ariana (a cis Black and Hispanic woman) was raised in Kansas and, at the time of the interviews, held the development specialist title for FLM; this means she helped with fundraising, program development, and working closely with the organization's board of governors. Ariana has never lived in the same state where FLM primarily operates, so she is unable to attend many events or programs. However, Ariana joins the online events from a distance. If someone in the organization shares their ideas or events in Slack or at a staff meeting, Ariana is always asking questions and cheering them on. Her support and contributions

to FLM are invaluable, which is why she has shifted to serving as a board member. Such feelings were expressed during our interview when she shared that,

> I literally love [FLM] and love all the people that's about it. I know I've said it before, but I'll say I really do [love FLM]. They rejuvenate me. They encourage me. They made me feel good on my bad days. It's such a breath of fresh air working with these people. They're some of the most loving, accepting, and wonderful…and smartest—I'm standing on it—they're some of the smartest people I've ever met in my life.

Dana

Dana (a cis Middle Eastern and Arab woman) also raised in Oklahoma, is the only participant in the study who is no longer an active staff member. Due to her commitments in her graduate program, Dana had to step down to a non-active member role, but she offers support and attends events when her schedule allows. Although now assuming a non-active member role, she is very familiar and connected to the work FLM does. Dana joined FLM in 2020, around the time of the protests of George Floyd's murder in Minnesota. She has witnessed FLM's growth and development over the years and shared one thing for certain about FLM: "If we had a billion dollars we could change the world immediately." Her belief in the work is the reason she joined and the reason she remains a supporter of the work. Dana is certain that, were money not a factor, FLM has the power to change the world.

These brief introductions to the participants lay the foundation to explore further the ways in which they work together to build the organization and accomplish the overall goals of FLM. The following thematic overview outlines the findings, which come together to provide a more nuanced exploration of FLM so that, in Chapter 5, deeper analysis of the significance of the work they do can be provided. Within each theme, we learn more about the individual members

of FLM as well as how and why FLM functions the way it does. The data often overlaps, so that it is not always clear where one theme ends and another begins. This is by design of the organization, as theory and practice are inseparable.

Thematic Overview

Three themes emerged from the data:

1. Educational Experiences as Foundational to Organizing Work;
2. Naming the Work: Shared Values, Language, and Commitments; and
3. Enacting Praxis: Pedagogy, Programs, and Living Abolition.

The first theme explores the educational experiences of the participants and how those educational experiences shaped their desire to engage in grassroots organizing. Across this theme, concepts of racialized schooling and early resistance, speaking truth to power, and learning beyond the classroom are conversations that are centered, as participants noted these aspects as central to their desire to engage in grassroots organizing as well as being crucial to their educational experiences. Shifting into the next theme, ideas of liberation as a relational and collective idea, naming anti-oppression as an expansive commitment to organizing, values in opposition to dominant educational structures, and the ways in which these concepts shift from values to orientation begin to take shape. These sub-themes help explore the broader theme of naming the work, identifying shared values, understanding the language, and maintaining a commitment to community, which are a driving force behind FLM's work and help contextualize the first theme, providing a firm understanding of why it is important to recognize experiences in education as they shape the ways in which values and commitments are developed. The final theme explores praxis, which includes establishing a relational pedagogy through group norms. The idea of praxis as "miracle work", as well as the confluence of organizational praxis and care,

provides an overarching understanding into how experience and commitments shape practice. Overall, these themes provide a broad overview of what FLM does, how, and why, while also providing answers to the research questions. The significance of these themes, as well as the work that FLM does, is also explored within the chapter.

Theme 1—Educational Experiences as Foundational to Organizing Work

Across interviews, all five participants described formative educational experiences that shaped their early counters with organizing and continue to inform how they conceptualize learning, justice, and educational responsibility. These narratives span secondary and postsecondary schooling contexts and reveal how experiences of exclusion, racialized harm, and curricular absence became catalysts for organizing work. Collectively, participants framed education not as a neutral process, but as a site of power—a site that demands intervention, collective action, and radical reimagining. Rather than positioning organizing as something that emerged outside of education, participants consistently described organizing as emerging *through* educational experiences. In this way, schooling functioned as both a site of harm and a site of political awakening, shaping participants' orientations toward justice-oriented educational work.

Racialized Schooling and Early Resistance. Participants' earliest engagements with organizing emerged from experiences of racialized schooling that exposed the limits of dominant educational narratives. For aurelius and Tevin, these foundations developed during secondary school. They both attended the same private high school and were already close friends at the time, meaning they began collaborating as teenagers, over a decade of time together organizing. Both described their school as racially exclusionary, with curricula and institutional cultures that

privileged whiteness and avoided discussions of identity and systemic injustices. aurelius described the school as:

> a white flight school, very white, very, very wealthy. So you had a lot of kids of privilege, and you didn't have an education…that talked at all about identity, or about difference or um about uh any of those things. Um, and so it was important for us to have those conversations and to formalize them in a diversity club, where we were incorporating diverse education and educating from a sort of different perspective than a Eurocentric one and help to organize the first high school wide Diversity Day, where we had multiple speakers and intentional conversations about meritocracy and the history of the United States. Um, and about slavery and Indigenous genocide, and things of that nature that were really profound in that kind of space. And so I remember that as like a really special moment in high school.

Tevin's account reinforced this context, explaining their education was,

> very non-Black, very white, very white-centered, very white-taught, and we knew that that wasn't necessarily right. Without really understanding how we could change it, we just knew there was a lot more to education regardless to how much better it was than public school education.

White flight institutions emerged following *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1950)*, as desegregation prompted many white families to seek alternative schooling environments (Garcia, 2018). These schools—often private, though sometimes public and charter schools—remain predominantly white and frequently privilege whiteness through curriculum and institutional culture. aurelius and Tevin's accounts illustrate how these environments, while often framed as academically "excellent", simultaneously reproduce exclusion and silence histories of racial violence. Experiencing education through this lens as Black teenagers had a lasting impact on both participants. While they lacked a fully articulated critical framework at the time, their dissatisfaction with exclusionary practices prompted early collective resistance. They knew that there was more to education than learning about what Tevin refers to as the "European American way of thinking, learning, and understanding" so they began collaborating to make the education more meaningful, to ensure they and their peers received an education that explored different

perspectives, experiences, and ways of thinking. Their formation of a diversity club and organization of a school-wide Diversity Day reflect how educational marginalization generated organizing impulses, particularly as students attempted to fill curricular and relational gaps through peer-led initiatives.

Speaking Truth to Power. aurelius' experiences across secondary and post-secondary education further illuminated how racialized harm within schooling environments can shape their orientations toward resistance. He described a pivotal moment in middle school following the murder of Trayvon Martin, when his eighth grade United States history teacher repeatedly framed Trayvon Martin as "deserving of his death". aurelius recalled,

> What I consider my sort of first moment of speaking truth to power was in 2012. Trayvon Martin had just been murdered and it was obviously all over the news every night, every day. This was sort of the biggest story, at least from my perspective, in the country at the time. And our eighth grade US History teacher was a bloody racist. He was just treacherous, you know a very conservative right winger and came to class multiple days over a couple of weeks just sort of lambasting Trayvon Martin, as like this thug, as this person who um, you know, essentially deserved to be killed because he had been suspended from school for marijuana. And the liberal media were showing all these images of him, smiling and being young, but actually, like they should be showing these pictures, and then he showed a picture in our class—where Black students were and white students, right, like malleable 8th grade students—he showed pictures of Trayvon with his pants sagging and having a grill in. Just like really propagating this narrative of like Trayvon is a thug and a criminal, and you know, just a bad Black man, Black bad boy trope.

This did not sit well with aurelius; he spoke so passionately about the experience. This marked aurelius' first explicit act of resistance within formal education. The dehumanizing discourse he encountered in the classroom stood in stark contrast to the affirming conversations he was having at home, which he described as "very humanizing, very heartfelt". Speaking back to his teacher became both a personal and political act, rooted in negotiation and identification. aurelius further reflected,

> [I] found the nerve somewhere deep inside me to speak up and to have a conversation that turned into a heated sort of back and forth and debate about Trayvon and George Zimmerman and you know, that he is essentially criminalizing this dead Black boy who I very closely connected to cause I looked like him. You know what I'm saying. I wore hoodies, and I walked around in neighborhoods that maybe I wasn't supposed to be in according to him, right, and so felt the need and the urge in that moment to speak up. [I] look back at that as like one of the earliest sort of powerful moments of me speaking up in a time where that wasn't the popular thing to do, it would have been cool to just sit back and be like, oh, I don't care, you know, but did it, anyway.

This experience illustrates how racialized harm within schooling environments can simultaneously wound and politicize students, shaping their sense of self and their willingness to challenge authority. For aurelius, education became inseparable from questions of power, voice, and responsibility.

Learning Beyond the Classroom. Across participants, postsecondary education further blurred the boundaries between learning and organizing. Rather than described learning as confined to classrooms, participants consistently framed education as unfolding through protest, organizing, and community engagement. aurelius' undergraduate experiences further reinforced this orientation. aurelius described their undergraduate education alongside political protests, particularly following the killing of Terence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Beginning college in fall 2016 amid heightened national political tensions and the presidential election of Donald Trump, aurelius described how classroom discussions of electoral politics intersected with university campus organizing:

> I remember my first semester on campus. I was a young political science student, so was looking at the polls every single day, and sitting in my American Federal Government class and talking about Trump and talking about Clinton, who's gonna win and all this kind of stuff. And at the same time that we were having those conversations, September came around, and Terrence Crutcher was killed in Tulsa. There was obviously a lot of students from Tulsa, from North Tulsa, who felt connected. You even have family members of Terence Crutcher, who went to [University] at the time. And so we had a protest, and that was, I remember, the first protest that I attended at [University]. We had a die-in at the Student Union. Die-ins are, you know, a specific tactic popularized by Black Lives Matter movement. But that was, you know, again, a really sort of powerful

> display of connection and of community and of stopping business as usual to make sure that you know students getting their Chick Fil A or their Quiznos, or whatever, like knew what was happening in our state, and what our police force was doing to Black people up in Tulsa and across the state.

For aurelius, protest became an extension of learning, an act of care for Black communities in Oklahoma and beyond: for Crutcher's family (whether he knew them personally at the time of his murder or not), for his Black friends and family in Oklahoma who were also grieving, and for the victims of police violence nationwide. These experiences reinforced his understanding of education as relational, political, and accountable to lived realities.

Similar patterns emerged for Alham and Ariana, who met through organizing efforts on their university campus in Texas. Both were involved in re-chartering the NAACP chapter, and Alham described advocating for a multicultural center to support marginalized students and communities. He noted that these efforts placed him in ongoing tension with institutional leadership. Ariana traced her organizing roots even earlier, to her experienced attending a predominately white rural school:

> [I] went to a predominantly white rural high school and was noticing a lot of issues in regards to kind of just treatments of students of color across our districts. Because our district was actually one that had the most students of color and we probably had, out of a 150 in my grade, we probably had about 30 and it would slowly increase with each class. But other districts would have like one student of color.

She described organizing an interdistrict DEI cohort following racist incidents at sporting events, including one in which her friend was called the N-word:

> I was kind of like, I want this to change. So I actually started an interdistrict DEI cohort and essentially what it was is, me and my friend had gone to our administrators, and was like, hey, after these instances have occurred of where other schools are having conflict regarding race, I think it'd be good if we all joined together, had a meeting about our issues, and had administrators present. And actually all the schools opted in with no issue. And so we had an initial meeting. I had run it with me and my colleague. Our administrator was like, you guys do it, like it's your idea. Take control of it. So they gave us all the agency, and we ran like a 2 hour meeting, heard from other schools, other students of color at these schools, and kind of talked about the issues and the solution and

> the students left, and then literally, like the following week our administrator helped us launch it.

Through this experience, Ariana began to see organizing work as integral to her identity:

> [organizing] was always kind of like ingratiated in me, just as more of an understanding of who I was as a woman of color

Because her parents taught her about the Civil Rights Movement and the United Farmworkers Movement, and all the people who helped and engaged her in organizing work over the decades, she felt such work came naturally to her.

For Dana, organizing was similarly rooted in identity and care. During her undergraduate years, she helped build an organization centered on Arab community-building:

> it was very very community oriented, so events and meetings, just getting people together, essentially helping people realize there is a community here that understands sort of where they come from, what their culture looks like, and how to both embrace it and teach folks in the area what that culture is, just due to the fact that it is sort of vilified in media and in the general population right now.

Being Arab is an important aspect of Dana's identity. She also speaks often of her Arab community, particularly the issues they face, how beautiful their culture is, and how it sustains her. It felt natural for her to want others to see the beauty in Arab cultures as well, which is why she engaged in creating an organization that highlighted the wonderful things about Arab culture. Dana's engagement reflected a desire to counter the vilification of Arab communities by creating spaces of connection and visibility. She later connected this work to her involvement with FLM, particularly following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor:

> I care a lot about essentially teaching that marginalized communities not only exist, but they have the right to exist, I guess I want to say harmoniously, with everyone else without having to like shrink themselves in any way, shape, or form. The communities that I care very very much about and like have learned about a lot and continue to teach myself about are the Palestinians and Black communities, really globally.

Her care for these communities, one she is part of and one she is not, was a strong motivator for Dana. Dana's motivation—that "marginalized communities not only exist, but they have the right to exist...without having to shrink themselves"—frames care as a demand for full humanity rather than a soft feeling. Across participant narratives, care consistently functioned as a motivating force. These commitments shaped how participants approached education, understood not as transmission, but as communal practice. Taken together, participants' educational journeys reveal how encounters with racism, isolation, and erasure became the foundation to organizing. They shaped how FLM members conceptualize education as a communal, relational practice rather than a top-down process. Care is not a resource distributed from the top, but something reproduced collectively. While these experiences illuminated *why* participants organized, they do yet fully explain *how* FLM understands and articulates it work today. The following theme examines how these commitments are named and described through shared language, values, and intentions.

Theme 2—Naming the Work: Shared Values, Language, and Commitments

Participant narratives revealed a shared and intentional language through which members of FLM articulated their commitments to liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression in relation to education, organizing, and responsibility to community. Across interviews, participants consistently emphasized that these values were not abstract ideals but guiding principles that shaped how the organization understood its purpose and obligations. Naming the work functioned as a critical practice of alignment, establishing a shared vocabulary that both signaled political commitments and clarified collective intentions.

Liberation as Relational and Collective. Liberation was most often described as relational and collective, rather than individualistic. Tevin's description of the I in II Campaign

illustrates how liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression are deeply interconnected. Reflecting on the campaign's purpose, he explained:

> …literally [it] speaks directly to what we should be doing versus what we are doing. How we should be accountable instead of punishing people. How we should not be scared of other people and rather be accepting of other people. And so we think about the school and not punishing kids or not suspending kids, that's an abolitionist thinking. We don't believe in punishment, they're not learning anything from punishment. And the anti-oppressive, the work against our own sort of oppressions and privileges that we hold, that is abolitionist work. To be able to identify and navigate the spaces in which you do hold power and to be able to reduce that harm as much as you can all the time…

In Tevin's account, abolition is framed as a rejection of punitive logics in favor of accountability, while anti-oppression requires ongoing attention to power, privilege, and harm reduction. Liberation emerges not as a distant goal, but as a process enacted through everyday choices. Tevin further explained abolitionist thinking beyond prisons to include schools and other institutions that enact harm,

> I think abolitionist values go straight into liberation anyway. It's like the liberation that we're talking about could quite literally also mean abolition, could mean the breaking down of the system that we are currently trying to construct and build up that is completely separate from the state systems that we see right now. Even as we talk about the school to prison pipeline, at FLM we call it a nexus rather, because it's not that students are going from schools to prison, but rather these schools are places of harm themselves, right. A level of imprisonment one might say.

This framing reflects FLM's critique of the school-prison nexus as overlapping systems of control rather than a linear pipeline. Disrupting these narratives, participants argued, constitutes anti-oppressive practice, particularly in a state where Black and Native communities experience disproportionate discipline, surveillance, and incarceration. For Tevin, abolition is not only a political stance but an educational imperative that demands reimagining how people learn to relate to one another and systems of harm.

Naming Anti-Oppression as Expansive Commitment. While all participants described anti-oppressive commitments, aurelius offered the most explicit articulation of how FLM understands anti-oppression as both expansive and intersectional:

> Because we were founded by four Black men, and at the time, you know, one of my minors in college was Women's and Gender Studies, so I was exploring Black and queer and Chicana feminist thought. I was really interested in this idea of like not just focusing on anti-racism, but broadening it to anti-oppression—that we are against all forms of oppression. And that came from a belief for me, right, that none of us are free until all of us are free. Absolutely, we must be anti-racist, but we also must be anti-sexist and anti-patriarchal. We must also be anti-homophobic and transphobic anti-classists. Anti-ableist. And so really wanting to show up as an individual, as my best self, and trying my best to be a sort of open, inclusive home for folks, a safety valve for folks of all walks of life and then also wanting to extend that into FLM and the work that we do and how we show up.

aurelius' framing positions anti-oppression as an ethical obligation rather than a single-issue stance. This understanding informed both FLM's programming and its organizational evolution. Tevin reflected on early moments of organizational self-examination, particularly around naming and mission alignment of the organization. He explained that,

> FLM wasn't necessarily our first name, to go from some less inclusive that we had at the beginning that we also thought were going towards liberation, I think also grounded us in what privileges we held, and what oppressive systems we can uphold as founders of this org, and I think in the molding of changing our mission statement, changing our name, and doing all these things really grounded us in these ideas that we still have a lot to unpack as well…

Tevin later clarified that resisting oppression requires continual recalibration rather than fixed certainty:

> …as long as we are upholding those oppressive frameworks, we are going to be doing the opposite of the work that we want to do. So having to continually come back in that grounding is important to us.

Together, these reflections demonstrate how shared values operate as organizing logics and tools for accountability rather than static principles.

Values in Opposition to Dominant Educational Structures. Participants explicitly situated FLM's values in opposition to Oklahoma's broader educational and political climate. Alham offered a sharp critique of the state's education policies:

> The education system right now isn't doing right by children. I think it teaches a very skewed way of navigating society. I think it socializes us into oppressive systems. I think it socializes, you know, especially white kids into, or maybe just children in general, you know, notions of domination and subordination. Oklahoma schools are failing children. Straight up. And like, we're now building an educational climate that's almost dangerous for kids. Like, we're completely avoiding history, like what's really happened. We're completely avoiding, you know, even just examples in class. Right? We're talking about Critical Race Theory. And everything is now labeled Critical Race Theory. Anything that has anything to do with any type of socio-emotional learning is considered Critical Race Theory. And like, that's just problematic because now we've got marginalized kids that can't even see themselves, not only in the curriculum, but the content. The pedagogy. I've never seen a time where like, and I would never imagine, even as a kid, you know, having been through the system, the educational system here in Oklahoma, that school is now a dangerous place to be. But not only physically, as we're talking about school shootings, right? And things like that, but like socially, emotionally. It's just a dangerous, dangerous place for kids. We're talking about Ryan Walters is almost on some metaphysical warfare with children at this point.

In this moment, Alham is referring to former State Superintendent Ryan Walters, who in 2023 worked with Governor Kevin Stitt to push school choice and private school programs. Walters was also advocating for the inclusion of Bibles and the Ten Commandments in classrooms in all public schools in 2024. In 2021, Oklahoma HB 1775 passed, banning public and charter K-12 schools from requiring courses or programs on sexual or race-based discrimination. Since September 2025, there have been several changes to the state Board of Education, including the resignation of Ryan Walters and the contestation of social studies standards promoting Christianity that Walters ordered before his resignation (Hayes, 2025). Alham's critique underscores how participants understand dominant schooling structures as sites of harm, particularly amid restrictions on curriculum, pedagogy, and historical truth. In contrast, FLM

defines education as a space that centers care, honesty, and accountability. Tevin further articulated this commitment through a refusal to disengage from place despite these conditions:

> Oklahoma's worth the work, really loving the state that you're from, even if it is horrible, knowing that there's reasoning there. Mine is really the people around me and my family, being able to see it all the time and knowing that something has to be done.

From Values to Orientation. Across interviews, participants described justice not as delivering solutions to communities, but as cultivating people power through sustained relationship-building and collective problem solving. These value commitments establish why FLM exists and how it understands education—they do not yet show how these commitments are enacted in everyday practice. The following theme examines praxis, how liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression are lived, embodied, and reimagined through pedagogical choices and programmatic work.

Theme 3—Enacting Praxis: Pedagogy, Programs, and Living Abolition

This theme examines praxis—how FLM values are enacted through pedagogical practices, organizational structures, and community-based programs. Participants consistently emphasized liberation, abolition, and anti-oppression must be practiced, not merely theorized. Across interviews, documents, and observations, FLM's educational work emerges as a process of lived engagement. This theme moves from the micro-level pedagogical practices of establishing group norms to organizational orientations towards care and power, and finally to programmatic examples where commitments are tested and enacted in community as FLM engages in a liberatory praxis.

Establishing Relational Pedagogy through Group Norms. FLM has a set of group norms that are provided and explored with every group in trainings and workshops, to ensure every participant—FLM facilitators included—are on the same page about what behaviors are

best suited for the group. Group norms are provided, but can be modified within each training and workshop depending on participant needs and collective agreements. The group norms were developed based on similar group norms provided in Interrupting Criminalization's workbook *In it Together* (2021), which FLM uses as part of the training for the SAFE Commune program and in addressing conflict between organization members when necessary. Participants described group norms as a foundational pedagogical praxis across all FLM programming efforts. Beginning every event with group norms is one way FLM establishes an equitable learning environment. Taken from one of the workshop slides and illustrated in the image below (Figure 2), group norms encourage event participants to think about where they are in relation to the issue being discussed, and to keep in mind that not everyone is in that same place.

Figure 2

Group norms



Alham describes group norms as,

> kind of a respect and civility thing, like you want to acknowledge everybody who's in the room. You know, we want to acknowledge that we all come from different spaces, different places. We've all had different things that affect the way we interact with each other. And so by having kind of group norms, I think everybody kind of comes in with kind of an equity mindset.

aurelius further emphasized that norms function as relational groundwork rather than behavioral control:

> …[they are] another sort of learning opportunity. Um, and it like, sets the foundation for what we're gonna be talking about and how we're gonna engage with one another. And I think more than just like rules that we're setting for the conversation, for the training or for the event, it really is about how we relate to each other.

Dana described norms as signaling FLM spaces as co-learning environments rather than policing. She shared,

> We're not trying to police what you say unless you say something very mean and hurtful. It's sort of like a buffer time to let people breathe coming into these trainings and workshops and let them know like we may be touching on heavy topics, we can talk about it maybe if you're ignorant, or especially if you're ignorant, like this is the space for you to come in and talk about these things because we are here to create a space for you to learn.

This tension, between refusing carcerality and still interrupting harm, surfaced repeatedly in my observations of FLM workshops. These practices reflect participants' belief that learning is iterative, relational, and grounded in mutual respect. While group norms structure how learning unfolds in individual spaces, participants also described praxis as an organizational orientation toward collective capacity-building, what Alham names "miracle work". The group norms function as a structured care practice. Describing training spaces as places where people have "permission to be messy" operationalizes care by removing the threat of shame and judgment—conditions that Tronto would identify as prerequisites for genuine receiving of care. Dana's framing that workshops are "a buffer time to let people breathe" reflects attentiveness to the

emotional labor participants bring into learning spaces. The norms don't just manage behavior; they create the conditions under which vulnerability and transformation become possible.

To get to this point in workshops, members of FLM had to sit together to discuss what outcomes they want to see in their workshops beyond engagement with core concepts. The establishment of group norms allows for learning of core concepts, but it also allows for respect and capacity-building to continue to develop beyond each individual workshop or event. Observations of FLM participants demonstrated a desire to not only instill core concepts, but to build a network of community members who are willing to provide care and share in interrupting harm in numerous ways as needed. The bigger the network, the more capacity people have, and the less instances there are for burn-out and fatigue in organizing spaces. Establishing group norms was a small step for FLM in establishing a space where people feel safe in learning and returning, in building relationships and in building capacity and developing a strong network of community organizers to continue the work beyond FLM's events. This also provides FLM members with capacity to do more behind the scenes work, such as grant writing and program development.

The communal care aspect of the group norms can be witnessed not in documents, but in observing the breakfast club Tevin started in the We the Eastside program. The breakfast club, modeled after the free meal program created by the Black Panther Party, meets once a month at a local youth center to feed students who participate in an after-school program. Here, youth who are in need of a hot meal come together to eat and connect with their friends at their after-school program. The meal is prepared by a community volunteer, and FLM provides the funds to purchase the necessary groceries. Tevin estimates that over 400 people were fed through this program in 2025. Tevin's breakfast club is the clearest example of how care cannot be separated

from political struggle—it's explicitly modeled after the Black Panther Party's free meal program, positioning feeding people not as charity but as a radical assertion that people deserve to be nourished. Care here is framed as a direct challenge to systems that produce scarcity.

In Figure 2, the community care section says to "do what you need for you and others" and this is exactly why Tevin worked to include the breakfast club as part of the We the Eastside Initiative. In his interview, Tevin explained that

> Prior to really understanding what it was I wanted to do with my life, I was exposed to different problems and ideas that we sort of try to combat now, but I was doing it without any sort of articulation of what it really meant. I think about that and what keeps me motivated, I think about my family and understanding the struggles that my family's had to go through, has played a role in my life and watching those things happen and getting to the narrative that I have now that people just need resources and people need to be loved and taken care of and that was very non-apparent in my family tree. And I think that's where I sort of navigated these problems and disparities in my own family, because we were a family that had at least a little of these resources in comparison to my cousins and my uncles. So being able to go bring food to them when I got a car and things of that nature, I was doing stuff like that without knowing what it was.

Creating the breakfast club was something Tevin wanted to do for the community, because he saw a need that needed to be filled, but he also did it for himself, for young Tevin, because he had already witnessed what it was like for others to go without food, and the joy and community that he was able to build by bringing his cousins food. Knowing what it meant for his own family, and how important that care was for the people he loved, Tevin also recognized how significant a breakfast club would be for the broader community, where he also knew there was a need.

Praxis as "Miracle Work". Instead of choosing to join an existing grassroots organization, Alham, aurelius, and Tevin came together to create FLM. Alham's explanation of why he helped create FLM offers insight into how praxis is understood at an organizational level:

> I really wanted to create a place, a workspace, where world changers could really, not only develop their passions, but bring their dreams to fruition. And so that's kind of where the dream comes from. And so FLM, I think, is…it's just kind of a workspace, and like in my mind, I wanted to make this organization a place…there's a specific term I'm looking for–miracle workers. So when I was a kid people used to say, like, I'm not a miracle worker. I can't do that. So I figured, if I can get all these amazing people into one space, I really do feel like we can change the world. And so that's really why FLM exists is like, I wanna make it this miracle organization.

He later clarified that "miracle work" is not extraordinary heroism, but attentive, relational support. He explained that,

> At the end of the day, the people know what they need. And so, making sure I can amplify their voices and really listen, and then help them using everything that I've learned, everything that's been provided to me, you know. Using my access, my privilege, and my experience to really help folks in a way that benefits them. In the way that they envision, not necessarily what I envision.

Too often, when people hear about miracle workers, or working miracles, they think of overcoming great feats and obstacles. For Alham, his framing situates praxis as meeting people where they are, amplifying community voices, and redistributing power.

One way in which FLM meets people where they are, quite literally, is in the We the Eastside program, which includes community walks. Each community walk centers a different topic. For example, if there is an upcoming election, the conversation will focus on ensuring community members are registered to vote and have a way to get to their polling location. FLM members and community volunteers meet at a central location to receive a packet, which includes a script, talking points, and relevant handouts, and to go over the rules and guidelines of knocking doors. After a half-hour instructional presentation, participants go in groups to knock on doors in the community—literally meeting people where they are—to provide information. At every community walk, participants ask the people they encounter if they have any pressing issues or if they have any concerns that warrant more immediate attention. This way, FLM can offer resources to those people, so they do not continue to struggle. While FLM does not have all

the resources necessary to meet every need of every community member, FLM is able to make connections to organizations who can offer the necessary resources, which is why capacity-building and building relationships is crucial to the relationships FLM builds with other organizations. Without those relationships and broader capacity, more people would continue to struggle and not have their needs met. In this way, praxis functions as accompaniment rather than intervention.

Organizational Praxis and Care. Praxis extended beyond programming into organizational structure. FLM operates without hierarchy; all members share materials, decision-making power, and leadership opportunities. Alham, aurelius, and Tevin are the co-founders, but they are not administrators or bosses. aurelius explained,

> The most important work that we do to me is that we show up. That we show up across issue areas. That we are no sort of rabbit holed into one thing, but that we really view and value all of these issues and how we live out the reality that like, all of our issues and all of our struggles, are interconnected. And so our freedom is also interconnected, and I think we model that work. One way in Oklahoma, you know, I think the reality that you know, we're a Black-led organization who is LGBTQ+ affirming and accepting and encouraging and celebratory, is really radical in this sort of Black-led organizational space. And I think we're unapologetic in that work, right? Because we know that this is a major fight in Oklahoma. This is a major fight and sort of the culture wars across the country and so we have to show up, right?

FLM leaders emphasized showing up across issue areas and identities, modeling interconnected struggle. Care practices, such as check-ins, emotional support, and resource sharing were described as enactments of anti-oppressive and liberatory acts. At the end of Ariana's interview, she reflected on the affective dimensions of this care:

> I literally love [FLM] and love all the people that's about it. I know I've said it before, but I'll say…they rejuvenate me? They encourage me. They made me feel good on my bad days. I feel like they're, they don't know this, but I feel like they're my free therapists, cause if I need to vent, they're gonna let me vent…It's such a breath of fresh air working with these people. They're some of the most loving, accepting, and wonderful and smartest–I'm standing on it; they're some of the smartest people I've ever met in my life.

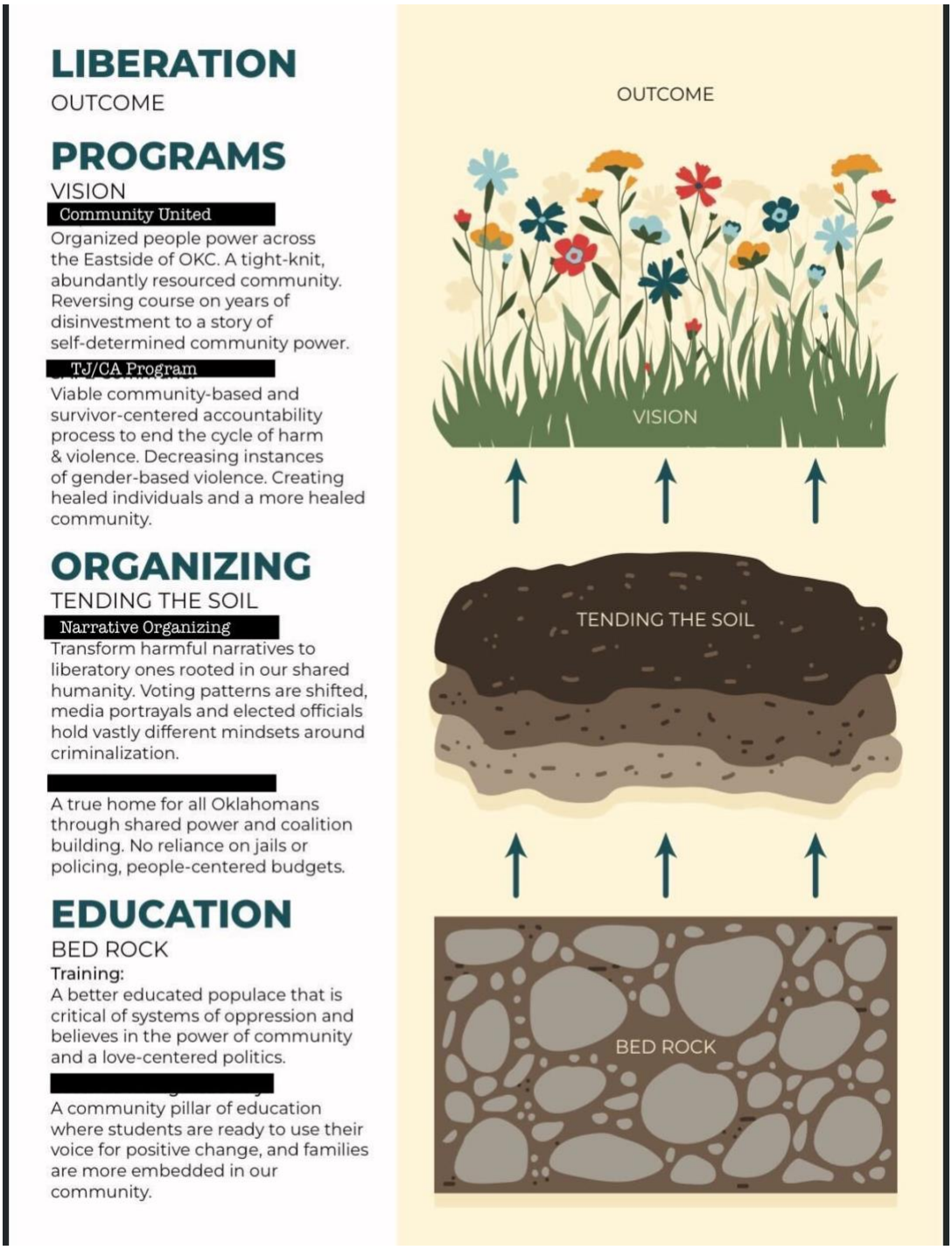
These practices embody abolition as the cultivation of care and the dismantling of harm. This internal work, this emotional labor and care, is significant to sustaining FLM members, but abolition and care work extend beyond internal praxis. Ariana's reflection that FLM members "rejuvenate" her and function like "free therapists" is interesting because it reveals that care flows in multiple directions within the organization. This is not a model where leaders care for communities in a one-directional way— members care for each other, and that internal care sustains the capacity to do external work. The flat organizational structure reinforces this, as co-founders explicitly refuse the role of administrators or bosses. Furthermore, relational and organizational commitments are most visible when FLM's values are enacted through sustained community-based initiatives, where this praxis of care extends to the broader community.

The foundation of all the work FLM does is rooted in education, which informs the way in which FLM engages in organizing and thus the programs that FLM implements, as explored below in Figure 3. This figure was created after data collection was complete, but was shared with me by aurelius, who had worked with another member of FLM (who did not participate in this study) to create a visual that better represented the work FLM does and how it transpires. This figure was included because it was important enough for aurelius to share with me, but also because it helps clearly explain the way the programs fit together, providing descriptions as well as a visual of how the programs work together to achieve the desired outcome of the organization. The outcome is liberation, but to reach this outcome a bedrock of education must be provided. This consists of trainings and the development of a school (the name of which was redacted for anonymity). Upon the bedrock of education lies the organizing components, or the soil that needs tending, which includes the I in II Campaign. The flowers that bloom from the soil are the programs, which include the We the Eastside initiative and the SAFE COMMUNE

program. The outcome of these layers is liberation—which cannot happen if one of these components is missing from FLM's work.

Figure 3

Visualization of FLM's structure



Tensions in Trainings & Workshops: Laying the Bedrock of Education. The conversations that take place in the trainings and workshops are one way that FLM seeks to reach the overall goal of liberation. This notion of building community through storytelling, as well as creating community through the establishment of group norms, not only indicates how FLM's values shape the organization's educational programming, but also demonstrates how FLM defines and enacts its mission and values across different areas of praxis. To FLM, liberation is more than just the dismantling of the prison industrial complex, of abolishing the carceral system in its entirety. Liberation is also dismantling the internal voice of policing that individuals sometimes have when they are in spaces with new and different people or when they are engaging in new or different ideas. The inner voice may tell someone they aren't smart enough to engage, or they are saying something wrong, or lead them to shut down and be less receptive to information and engagement. Achieving liberation is not linear, nor is it a simple task, which is why trainings and workshops are the foundation of FLM's work. The trainings that FLM offers vary by topic and concept, and to date FLM has provided approximately twenty trainings on various topics since 2017.

One such training, led by Alham and Tevin, covered the concept of cultural competence. Alham described moments of tension when jargon created defensiveness in the training, illustrating praxis as imperfect and contested. Rather than framing discomfort as failure, participants understood it as data requiring recalibration. Alham stated that,

> I would say it didn't necessarily go well. Not necessarily because of the information, but just because of how like ambiguous it was. They were a lot older folks. They were aligned, but I think the jargon, and like the anti-oppressive frameworks, and you know, when you talk about racism, and you talk like that, folks kind of start to itch and scratch about that kind of stuff like 'oh, well, you know, like I'm not racist,' but you know, for folks that are, and just like anytime you have that type of response, you know, kind of that defensive approach. I think those workshops don't necessarily…they're not the best. I don't think you get the outcome that you want.

Tevin reflected on pushback during Cultural Competence workshops, emphasizing norms that allow disagreement without harm. aurelius stated in his interview that

> I think sometimes pushback and critical questions are seen as negative, but to me they're really like, ok, you're really engaging with these ideas. You're really engaging with what we are talking about and not just looking at the PowerPoint and shaking your head.

Engagement and pushback demonstrate learning is taking place—evidence of engagement. Rather than viewing these as failures, participants framed discomfort as data, evidence of where learning and translation were needed.

I in II Campaign: Abolitionist Education in Action. Another area in FLM's work where discomfort and critical engagement with ideas takes place is the I in II Campaign. While the I in II Campaign is technically situated within the organizing aspect in Figure 3, it requires education on the history of the carceral system and carceral narratives, so it is also rooted in the education bedrock, demonstrating that the campaign encompasses more than just one aspect FLM's work. The I in II Campaign has multiple components, consisting of trainings and interviews. The first component is the trainings, which are completed with local organizations to learn how to disrupt carceral narratives in various ways, which are tailored to the specific work and goals of the organizations that request the training. The second component is the interviews, which consists of interviews, online videos, and a public screening that presented views and experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals to further help disrupt carceral narratives and shape the conversation on abolition. In these ways, the I in II Campaign serves as a central case illustrating how FLM operationalizes its commitment to liberation.

Rather than positioning education as the transmission of one correct knowledge, the campaign centers lived experience as a primary site of learning. A core component of the I in II Campaign includes video interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals, whose stories are

shared publicly with consent through the organization's YouTube channel. While the stories are made public, pseudonyms are used in this study to maintain organizational anonymity. In one video, a participant named "Mike" described his parents' experiences as veterans. As he speaks, the video shifts from a view of Mike's face to a text screen stating, "One in ten veterans have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder." This editing choice illustrates how praxis operates at the level of pedagogy. First, the interviewer in the video, aurelius, is neither seen nor heard, allowing Mike to narrate his experience without interruption or redirection. This affirms participant authority over their own story. Second, the insertion of contextual information invites viewers to reflect rather than judge, creating space for empathy and meaning-making. Finally, the deliberate use of the phrase "substance use disorder", rather than "substance abuse", reframes substance use as a mental health issue rather than criminal behavior, guiding viewers toward empathy and *re*humanization. Alham emphasizes that values must be lived, stating that,

> You can't only just talk about anti-oppressive frameworks. You gotta live them. I think at the base element of all of them is really empathy.

As Alham explained, highlighting narratives and guiding folks to empathize with others is a *re*humanizing campaign. Here, abolition is enacted not only through critique of carceral systems, but through pedagogical choices that teach people how to see differently. aurelius described "permission to be messy" as essential, allowing participants to engage without fear of judgement. He shared,

> Some of our trainings is like permission to be messy to make mistakes. Not have the perfectly worded vocabulary to describe this thing that you're trying to describe, but going ahead and saying it anyway, right? And I think that encourages everybody to speak, even if they don't feel super confident or knowledgeable in that area. Uh, and I think that aspect of people being able to share without fear of being judged, or feeling, or being shamed allows them to share, and that sharing, and that sort of storytelling, and that sort of vulnerability really, builds connections, and those connections and those relationships is what builds community.

And yet, this work does not come easy and carries tension and difficulty. aurelius described one particular Narrative Organizing training, and the tension that arose.

> this tour was all about building narrative liberators, really encouraging participants to you know, understand the carceral state, and understand carceral narratives and then also to learn how to disrupt and intervene on those cultural narratives by lifting up helpful narratives and liberatory narratives… And so there was pushback. There were questions about, well, you're saying this about the role of policing? How could that be true if this right? And I think those conversations allow me to go a little further into some of these topics, and to, you know, really push people to think critically about how they think about and how they have come to understand what policing is, and what the role of policing does and criminalization and incarceration.

The tension that arises when individuals question what they know and how they understand the world around them is not always easy to navigate, but it is necessary if liberation is to be achieved. That uncomfortable tension, as aurelius explained, is part of critically thinking about what we as individuals want our respective communities to look like. For FLM, thinking critically about carcerality, about how policing takes place and how it is viewed and supported by individuals and communities, is crucial to the practice of empathy, or rehumanization, and to the overall goal of achieving liberation.

SAFE Commune Program: Creating Safety Networks Rooted in Abolition. Building on the ways in which the I in II Campaign supports thinking critically about carcerality and the narratives surrounding crime and safety, FLM created the SAFE Commune program to take their goal of liberation and their value of abolition one step further. In the visualization of FLM's structure (Figure 3), the SAFE Commune program is described as a "survivor-centered accountability process" that seeks to decrease "instances of gender-based violence" as a means of creating "a more healed community". The goals of the program, as described in the SAFE Commune Curriculum Outline document, indicate that to create a network for safe community interventions, the network "will be full of supportive relationships of experienced and novice

practitioners facilitating processes". To accomplish this, knowledge and awareness of community-based interventions are crucial. This program, much like the I in II Campaign, is not without tension. Based on observations of the SAFE Commune program, many conversations come back to one crucial question often posed by those who are learning about the program—what about the rapists. As the program is rooted in abolition, the SAFE Commune program does not intervene through police contact, and those who are working to understand abolition struggle to imagine how to intervene and disrupt the harm caused by sexual violence without involving the police. This tension is one the members of the group face head-on, as they believe in the power of transformative justice. Members of the SAFE Commune program embrace the tension, working together to develop creative and innovative ways to practice accountability that does not perpetuate the harms of the carceral system.

aurelius explained his approach to this tension:

> Knowing how different things could be done, knowing how we could be living in different relations with one another, how we could be dealing with problems in our society without incarceration and criminalization, that's what really drives me. They seem to me very common-sense sort of solutions to issues and problems and move into a place where we're not just always talking about problems, but talking about just really cool, creative, innovative, ways to live, you know, and to promote life, and flourishing, and abundance, and joy and creativity, and happiness for everybody.

Such a creative, yet critical, approach to abolition practices and engaging tensions in multiple ways is yet another demonstration of how FLM works to practice empathy and rehumanization in their overall quest for liberation. The question of "what about the rapists"—asked repeatedly by people learning about transformative justice programs—is actually a question about the limits of care. The abolitionist answer the organization offers is that transformative justice extends care even to those who cause harm, rather than excluding them through punishment.

We the Eastside Initiative: Practicing Collective Justice. As part of the vision depicted in Figure 3, one of the programs that exemplifies how FLM enacts its values is the We the Eastside initiative. The We the Eastside initiative is a program that also has several components. It consists of monthly meetings that are either community conversations or community walks, depending on weather and community needs for the month; a free breakfast program that provides local youth with one free meal a month, either breakfast or dinner, which is served at the local Boys & Girls Club; and various collaborative efforts with local organizations and businesses that help support, uplift, and connect with the community. Tevin, who leads the We the Eastside initiative, emphasized partnership over service delivery:

> FLM wants to be direct partners with the community. We want them to be able to come to us for any of the problems that we could potentially help or support. It is very much like, 'not only are we here for you, but we finna be with you. We wanna walk with you, we wanna do all these things together', and it's not like a, 'I'm going to build you up for me to not have a relationship with you.' These are longstanding…those are how the communities can grow, is when those relationships are long-lasting and like there's a meaning behind those relationships, there's life behind those relationships, there's a reason in which I can call so-and-so if I need this, and also I know because of so-and-so that my neighbor also may be able to help me with this, through the relationships that we have. So it's like we want a direct relationship, we don't wanna use these people, we don't wanna make it seem like we're using them, we don't even wanna be like close to all that. We really want to be open, we want to be y'all's partners every step of the way, we want to be in relationship with the community. And that comes with the work we've been doing. We've given out food to thousands of families since this wellness center's been open, we host our meetings here so that folks can come in and learn, that is the sort of goal, like a long-lasting relationship between the community and FLM.

The We the Eastside initiative is to help everyone in the community feel like they have a voice, feel heard, and get to know their neighbors in ways they may not have been able to otherwise. Providing resources and offering a space to voice thoughts and concerns are just some of the ways the organization helps empower the community. The reason the initiative began, and the reason it continues, is because the community in which it takes place, the community in which

FLM works, is large and is predominantly Black. aurelius framed the initiative as a response to structural neglect:

> The work of [We the Eastside] is that we have really big problems, longstanding problems, generational problems [in the community] that aren't a fault of [community members], that aren't a fault of Black people, but are a fault of systems and structures and city government that has intentionally created these problems, these environments, the lack of infrastructure and investment in our community. That has created really big problems and issues that we need to address, and big problems need big people power. They need big solutions and strategies to address it. And so the work really is about bringing as many [community members] together, as many stakeholders together, to have conversations, to build relationships, to create a strategy, to address all of these problems one by one. I think that work of building a community in a very grassroots, very sort of small scale, one on one—you know some of the sessions, we have a dozen people there which doesn't feel like a big group. But even in those smaller sessions we're having really strong conversations, right? And we really are thinking creatively and collaboratively about how we can address these problems across our organization to have people who maybe aren't involved in one of our partner organizations or in [FLM], how they can get involved and really feel like their voice and their perspective matters a great deal in the work, you know, and in building a better [community]. And then also just the tangible skills of community organizing, community building, as like this is how we're gonna do it. This is how we're gonna build people power. This is how we're going to push our city government to invest in our community in these specific ways.

aurelius expresses that the point of We the Eastside is not for the organization to develop solutions and present them to the community, but instead to help bring the community together to come up with solutions together as a community, by the community, and for the community. Justice is pushing back against the systems the government has set in place that are meant to perpetuate poverty and oppression in Black and Brown communities and create systems that work for those communities. Dana highlighted the initiative's role in fostering belonging and agency,

> One of the main points of this initiative is to help direct the people of that community to the resources that are already given to them but are hidden in plain sight on purpose. It's for one, that the area itself is big so maybe bringing people together and letting them know like, 'hey your neighbors are here and they feel sort of the same struggles that you feel because this area in particular has been depleted of resources, purposefully overlooked.' And it's just letting people know that like there's community here; 'it's not just you, folks around you do feel similarly to you', but also for everyone who is feeling

> like this there are things that we can do, like we are stepping in to show you that you are fully capable of like bringing in what you need to let your community thrive.

Justice, in this context, is collective, rooted deeply in place and connection.

Praxis as Engaging Tension. Participants described abolition as dismantling not only carceral systems but internalized logics of punishment and self-policing. “Dreaming radically” was used and framed as imagining beyond constraint for FLM. aurelius explained,

> We're focused on transformation. And what that means to me is that each of our trainings and workshops we're really working to transcend people's mindsets around what they think is possible, or what they think is needed to make a difference or make a change in that specific area. And so I think that focus on transformation really encourages people and invites people to think differently into, you know, accept models that maybe are completely new to them.

Taken together, these examples illustrate praxis as intentional engagement with tension. Across programs, workshops, and organizational life, FLM’s values function not merely as stated commitments, but as pedagogical practices enacted through relationships, language, and community life.

Chapter 5

This chapter is the culmination of this study, providing a discussion of the findings and the significance of the overall study to the field. I offer an overview of the research design as reference before reiterating the key findings so that. The discussion section of this chapter extends understandings of popular education in grassroots organizing spaces, illustrating the impacts and importance of the work FLM. Implications for future research are also explored in the hopes that future scholars and activists find ways to take up the research and engage in praxis.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative case study centered Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM), a small grassroots organization in Oklahoma that focuses on liberation through education. Individual interviews were conducted, and data were gathered through collected organization documents and observations of programmed events. The research questions that guided this study were:

1) What values and practices shape the organization's educational programming?

2) How does the organization define and enact its mission and values across different areas of praxis?

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which FLM develops popular education spaces and their reasons for doing so. Popular education is "rooted in a reflexive relational practice, which includes expansive notions of what it political" (Beckett, 2020, p. 123) and "has the potential to engage people in processes of critical dialogue, exploring alternative understandings of the causes of their problems, building solidarity for more progressive futures" (Mayo & Ranford, 2023, p. 98). FLM demonstrates this, as it develops campaigns to provide services like free breakfast and community outreach through the We the Eastside Initiative,

which is indicative of the relationality Beckett mentions. FLM also engages community members and partner organizations in critical dialogue and provides alternative understandings and solutions through the We the Eastside Initiative, as well as the I in II Campaign and the transformative justice pods.[3]

Three themes emerged in the findings: Educational Experiences as Foundational to Organizing Work; Naming the Work: Shared Values, Language, and Commitments; and Enacting Praxis: Pedagogy, Programs, and Living Abolition. While interconnected, these three themes also lay the foundation through which to explore various aspects of grassroots organizations, not just FLM. In exploring the educational experiences as foundational to the work that grassroots organizers do, it is important to note what experiences and events shape their desires to engage in organizing work, as it often signifies their motivations as well as individual values. The second theme, naming the work, is important in understanding how concepts shift from values to orientation, indicating how the work takes shape and is modified over time. It also provides insight into the shared values of members of the organization, moving beyond the individual into the collective. Finally, the third theme, enacting praxis, illustrates how organizational practice and care converge—where programs, values, and intended outcomes create a body of praxis.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer significant insight into the ways in which experiences and shared values impact how grassroots organizations create and implement community programming that centers education. Schooling functioned as both a site of harm and a site of political awakening, shaping participants' motivations to create community-based educational

[3] See appendices for informative flyers on these programs.

programming. In response to these experiences, members of FLM identified narrative disruption and speaking truth to power as key strategies for resisting dominant educational structures and pursuing liberation. This awakening, in turn, motivated these participants to continue this work beyond their formal education and into their communities, where they witnessed other forms of oppression and harm. The result was the creation of FLM, a grassroots organization that utilized education as the foundation of community organizing with the guiding value of liberation, centering the concepts of abolition and anti-oppression. The following analyses connect the findings to the theoretical contributions, then shift into interrogating the applied implications of the findings in relation to the literature.

Learning to Care: Applying Ethics of Care as a Lens for Engagement and Education

In this study, care is a lens used to examine relationships, motivations, and the work of grassroots organizations. In the exploration of the first theme in the findings chapter, aurelius shares about the first time he felt motivated to speak out—when his history teacher was denigrating Trayvon Martin, a young man close in age to aurelius who was murdered. The teacher, as well as Martin's murderer, both upheld notions of white supremacy. The attacks on Martin—physical and verbal—reflected white supremacist ideals. In her article on the refusals of white supremacy, Gibbons states that, "under a white supremacist system, the violence that operates on bodies is sanctioned at the level of system and structure" (2018, p. 735). The dehumanization that aurelius witnessed influenced his examination of relationships, ultimately leading him to join his friend Alham in creating FLM in the first place. Their work together in FLM with other participants actively seeks to rehumanize people white supremacy continues to dehumanize. FLM as an organization illustrates how care becomes a tool for disrupting systemic racism.

Care-based methodologies intentionally challenge dominant narratives, center human relationships, and support transformative practices, which builds on FLM's narrative building work. The I in II Campaign requires participants to challenge dominant narratives, building on the concept of abolitionist care, which involves imagining and building alternative systems of collective care beyond carceral logics (Woodly et al, 2021). This program requires participants to learn more about those who have been incarcerated while also questioning their understanding of safety and community. It requires participants to care about others, to consider how power dynamics and white supremacy factor into the development and implementation of safety programs. This shifts participants toward connection and accountability, while also requiring dedication to learning and unlearning. Participants must sit with their own knowledge and understanding of safety, which often requires an uncomfortable moment of self-reflection where difficult issues, complex ideologies, and challenging conversations must be confronted. Furthermore, participants must grapple with uncomfortable questions, including but not limited to, what abolitionist care means in relation to those who commit violent acts of harm (i.e. sexual assault or murder). These questions can often challenge one's worldview and sitting in discomfort tends to dissuade people from engaging in this work. However, the work is important, which is why the I in II Campaign is pivotal to FLM's programming.

The discomfort that comes with confronting dominant narratives of harm and oppression is what makes FLM successful. The organization works with participants and partner organizations to lean into the discomfort and learn from it, making apparent the necessity of discomfort in learning and growth. The I in II Campaign is a great example of this, as there are many people who are uncomfortable sharing a space with someone who has been in prison—no matter what harm they may or may not have caused—let alone sitting in a space with the voices

and experiences of the formerly incarcerated are privileged. Decades of police propaganda in film and television have caused those who avidly watch such media to favor the voices and perspectives of the police and discredit and suppress the voices of the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. The I in II Campaign asks participants to suspend their previous discomfort with incarceration and those who have been in the system, which is often a major shift in experience and thinking. This is the start of the process in which folks disrupt carceral narratives, and continued participation in the I in II Campaign allows participants to further embrace their discomfort to sit with the ways in which oppression impacts everyone, not just those impacted by the carceral state. This discomfort, and the harm that continues to be perpetuated by the carceral system, is what sustains this program for FLM. This work will only end once the carceral system is abolished and everyone recognizes the harm and oppression it perpetuates. This program also represents the ways in which FLM provides care—abolitionist care and educational care—in that it works to abolish white centered systems of oppression through critical thought and dialogue.

FLM operationalizes care not only as a value but as a set of structured interactional practices. They do not just establish a safe space for conversation; they establish a way to embody care during difficult conversations and learning experiences. The group norms ask participants to assume the good intent of others, which is another way of humanizing those around us. Going into conversations and spaces with the idea that those we are entering into these spaces with have good intentions, and are engaging in good-faith arguments, makes the process easier to engage with, and allows all participants to practice empathy. Furthermore, recognizing that engaging tension will happen allows participants to anticipate a level of discomfort. They know going into a space that there will be disagreements, but the group norms ask participants to blame systems of oppression (Vasudevan et al, 2023), not one another. This

fosters a sense of care for one another where all involved reimagine power dynamics, seek to sustain individual and collective well-being of all in attendance, and consider how to continue these aspects of care once participants leave the space. The group norms, along with the entire premise of the I in II Campaign, offer an approach that puts pressure on the carceral system as a means of disrupting carceral logics and harm and disrupting inequities (Vasudevan et al, 2023, p. 10).

We the Eastside operationalizes care as redistribution by redirecting material resources, information, and access toward residents who are systematically excluded from state support systems. Rather than framing resource provision as temporary aid, FLM treats redistribution as a political response to disinvestment, positioning care as a mechanism for mitigating harm produced by racialized and spatial inequities. We the Eastside frames care as political inclusion by creating structured opportunities for residents to articulate concerns and influence decision-making processes that have historically excluded them. In this sense, care is enacted not through protection or mediation, but through the redistribution of political voice and the legitimization of community knowledge as a basis for policy engagement. We the Eastside enacts care as a spatial practice through sustained physical presence—community walks, local meetings, and neighborhood-based engagement—which resists extractive models of outreach. This spatialized care disrupts dominant organizing practices that position marginalized communities as sites of intervention rather than sites of knowledge and relationship. We the Eastside demonstrates how care operates simultaneously as redistribution, political inclusion, and spatial practice. Through the movement of resources, the amplification of community voice, and the embodied presence of organizers within the neighborhood, FLM constructs care as a sustained, political practice rather than an affective orientation. This multidimensional approach helps explain how discomfort—

naming harm, confronting inequality, navigating disagreement—becomes sustainable, because participants experience care not as sentiment, but as collective responsibility and shared presence.

Effective care requires acknowledging how people's lives are shaped by social identities and systems of oppression (Vasudevan et al, 2023). FLM's programming demonstrates what effective care looks like in practice for grassroots organizations—identifying the ways in which communities and people are oppressed by systems of power and working to provide resources and support to combat that oppression. Naming the oppression, working to understand what caused it and how it impacts communities, joining forces with community members and other community organizations to interrupt the harms that exist as a result of oppression, and providing a space where people can come together to learn and support one another is the foundation of FLM's work, demonstrating what culturally responsive community care looks like in praxis. Contemporary care politics aim to undo racial capitalism, cisheteropatriarchy, the carceral state, and colonialism (Woodly et al, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Davis, 2016; Abraham, 2023). These care politics, which for FLM are rooted in abolition with the goal of community liberation, recognizes who is abandoned by the state (Abraham, 2023; Lira, 2021; Piepzna- Samarasinha, 2018; Thompson, 1998; Woodly et al, 2021; Lomawaima, 1995) and emphasizes freedom as a place created through relationships, shared struggle, and community bonds (Abraham, 2023). This study extends existing literature by demonstrating that grassroots organizations construct integrated care frameworks that operate simultaneously across educational, political, and relational domains. Ethics of care is not a soft counterpoint to political organizing but is its very foundation—care is what makes liberation a feasible goal worth pursuing and a practice worth sustaining.

Ethics of care, as a theoretical lens through which to analyze and explore grassroots organizing, is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Care takes many shapes and forms, and is and should be enacted based on the needs of individuals and communities. Because of the differences between communities—geographic, cultural, racial, political, and social—care as a theoretical lens would be a means of exploring the variations in programs, outcomes, and approaches that grassroots organizations take in addressing issues of social justice. Existing studies on ethics of care, especially in relation to grassroots organizing, serve as templates and references for future studies and praxis, but cannot be broadly applied to all grassroots organizing. What is crucial in studies utilizing an ethics of care theoretical framework is that care is clearly defined in relation to the specific contextual conditions explored. Otherwise, the result could be an incorrect analysis of how other organizations implement an ethics of care, especially when there is a difference in core values, overall mission and goals, and the intended outcomes of the organization(s) examined. What ethics of care provides as a theoretical framework, however, is a stronger understanding of how and why grassroots organizations engage the work and communities they do in the specific ways that they do—all of which are unique. This provides insight into how different grassroots organizations enact and embody care, which further builds on ethics of care as a framework, as well as a methodology.

Ethics of care as a methodology is a means of ensuring the researcher engages their study with attention and care, asking the researcher to not only build stronger rapport with their participants but build a reciprocal relationship with the participants in which they learn with and from one another not just during the duration of the study, but beyond. This can take the shape of the researcher actively engaging in the work the grassroots organization does post-study or supporting the organization through donations or online support. Additionally, ethics of care as a

methodology provides the researcher with a foundation through which to evaluate and observe grassroots organizations included in their studies. These relationships and assessments should not merely be for the betterment of the researcher, but also for the betterment of the organizations. This requires careful approaches to data collection, keeping in mind contextual conditions, the need for anonymity, and the unique structure and staffing of the organizations.

Contributions to the Field

This study makes several meaningful contributions to educational leadership and transformative education discourse. The study fundamentally challenges where educational leadership is located. By centering FLM as an organization where none of the participants (except Alham) have formal training in education, the work argues that experiential knowledge and community rootedness constitute legitimate pedagogical expertise. This disrupts assumptions that tend to dominate educational leadership literature, where authority flows from institutional credentials and formal roles. The chapter also reframes the educator/leader relationship by extending Freire's mutual teacher-student dynamic beyond the classroom. FLM's facilitators are simultaneously designers, learners, and community members, which suggests that transformative educational leadership is less about positional authority and more about relational accountability and shared vulnerability in the learning process. Another contribution is the argument that transformative education requires care as infrastructure, not just sentiment. The distinction between care as an affective orientation versus care as redistribution, political inclusion, and spatial practice is genuinely useful for the field. It moves transformative education away from the language of “safe spaces” and toward something more structurally demanding. By positioning community itself as the site of knowledge production across generations, the study implicitly critiques how educational leadership programs define their constituencies.

The study gestures toward but doesn't fully theorize what it might mean for formal educational institutions to learn *from* grassroots organizations rather than merely being compared unfavorably to them. That bridge—between what FLM does and what school or district leaders could actually adopt—is an area where future studies may pick up the conversation. When FLM resumes work on planning, structuring, and collaborating with others to build their school, this gap could be taken up in further study of FLM specifically, though the ways in which other grassroots organizations across the nation are already doing this work could also be a starting point for this conversation and research. This study is not a practical model for revolutionizing education, because the educational needs of communities, states, and regions vary due to geographic, cultural, social, and political differences. However, it facilitates a conversation between grassroots organizations, community members, educators, and researchers on what popular education spaces contribute to communities, how those contributions are made, and the impacts of collaboration on past, present, and future educational spaces and endeavors.

Implications for Praxis

Popular education spaces functions as sites of critical dialogue, collective problem-solving, and political learning that extends beyond the constrains of formal schooling. The findings of this study suggest that grassroots organization like FLM play a critical role in sustaining these spaces, particularly in contexts where public education is increasingly restricted. Three key implications emerged: grassroots organizations as educational designers, abolitionist pedagogy in practice, meeting the needs of the community.

Grassroots organizations as educational designers. Oakes, Rogers, Blasi, and Lipton (2006) highlight that grassroots groups have historically influenced educational reform by building power among marginalized communities, creating spaces for public dialogue, and

challenging social inequities. While FLM works to build power among marginalized communities, create spaces for public dialogue, and challenge social inequities, education reform is not their goal. In fact, their abolitionist approach – focused on building alternative systems -- requires the opposite. Hancock et al (2021, p. 3), citing Freire, note that "dynamic critical learning environments are places and spaces where both teachers and students are empowered to not only reflect on, analyze, and discern the sociopolitical, historical, economic, and racial forces that undergird racism, discrimination, and inequity, but also ultimately act on them." However, given the current political climate in which several states, including Oklahoma, Texas, and Florida, have banned discussions and lessons centering diversity, equity, and inclusion (Schwartz, 2021), such critical learning environments are increasingly constrained. Attempts to influence public policy shifts could take place to combat such legislation, but that takes time. In the meantime, students and teachers are left without a critical space of learning where they are able to seek to understand and disrupt systems of oppression. Education reform takes time and the results may not reflect the wishes of the communities or individuals seeking reform. Furthermore, the United States education system—from curriculum to the perception of educators themselves—is currently under attack from politicians and community stakeholders, indicating that education reform is precarious at best and subject to complete dismantling at worst. An abolitionist view of education, which is what motivates FLM's programming, is crucial to actual shifts in education that support development of critical consciousness and student and teacher empowerment. FLM's abolitionist approach to creating popular education spaces extends Freire's notion of problem-posing education by incorporating the current social and political climate in the development of educational programming while centering liberation and remaining true to their abolitionist value. Because FLM is a grassroots organization and not

a public education space, they further demonstrate the ways Freire's problem-posing education does not solely apply to public education spaces, but to grassroots educational spaces.

Anyon (2009) claims most social movements do not provide their own educational programs any longer and instead focus on public education reform, however FLM complicates this. FLM demonstrates what it looks like when grassroots organizations do create their own educational programs, and the impacts those educational programs have on their communities. From the creation of workshops to the creation of entire programs like the I in II Campaign, FLM puts in effort to ensure their educational programming matches the goals of the program and/or workshop and the organization's values of abolition and liberation. As educators, members of FLM demonstrate their knowledge not only in the content—in which they include statistics, data, and quotes from scholars and other activists—but in the delivery of the information. Aside from Alham, none of the participants in this study have formal training in education. They utilized their own experiences and experiential knowledge as pedagogical expertise. FLM knows that to do is to learn, so all workshops and programs have some aspect of action tied to the delivery of information. Coupled with deep conversations where participants and FLM facilitators alike challenge their own understanding, this creates an overall space of critical engagement where FLM facilitators are both teachers and students, and event participants are also both teachers and students. This supports Freire's insistence "that educators have authority of knowledge, and that they must be aware of and indicate the values they bring to the teacher-learner relationship" (Kilgore, 1999, p. 193). FLM is open about the process they take to develop their materials with participants, so it is clear from the outset the goals, intended outcomes, and reasoning behind what they do and how they do it.

In Kilgore's (1999) article, how grassroots organizations not only create learning environments to engage with people who are not members of the group, but how grassroots organizations are also learning spaces in and of themselves is explored. Kilgore claims that "an understanding of the centrality of the group's vision of social justice that drives it to act—mostly in conflict with other groups—in the larger social, economic, and political field of meaning making" (1999, p. 191) is required to understand how and why learning occurs in groups. FLM's work requires collaboration to be successful. The organization collaborates with other local organizations to provide meals to local youth and their families, and that collaboration comes in the form of monetary donations, donations of time to help prepare meals, or donations of space, such as the Boys and Girls Club donating their space as a meeting point. Furthermore, the I in II Campaign's workshops were implemented in collaboration with other local organizations. aurelius, Alham, and Tevin all helped facilitate workshops for local organizations so that, in each facilitated workshop, stronger connections between organizations, a deeper understanding of the work FLM does with those organizations, and a deeper connection to ways to connect with and build community were fostered. The learning that took place centered shared notions of social justice—the underpinnings of which included concepts of safety, support, accountability, equity, and anti-oppression. While each local organization that collaborated with FLM for these workshops focused on different areas of social justice work, they all shared the desire to combat oppression, even if they were not all certain on exactly how to do so. FLM's work with others indicates that grassroots organizing is relational, not isolated. For the organization to be successful, for the *work* to be successful, learning must happen across organizations. Otherwise, the learning that takes place is solely for the betterment of the individual, not the community, resulting in limited impacts on social issues.

Abolitionist pedagogy in practice. Abolitionist approaches to education reject oppressive systems rather than education itself. FLM's educational goals are not to discredit the importance of public education, it is to fill the gaps where learning does not take place. In their interviews, Tevin and aurelius explained how their secondary educations were limited to dominant white narratives and they often felt out of place. These experiences are what led to the formation of FLM in the first place, so that students felt seen, heard, and valued within educational spaces. Because that does not always happen within formal schooling, FLM created popular education spaces where all participants—no matter their age or racial or ethnic background—felt valued and a sense of belonging. The I in II Campaign is an example of abolitionist pedagogy in practice in that it first centers the voices of the formerly incarcerated as a means of disrupting harmful carceral narratives and second demonstrates the ways in which dominant white narratives in learning spaces are subverted. By centering the voices of those impacted by the carceral system, the I in II Campaign reframes expertise—privileging the expertise of those impacted and with deep familiarity of the carceral system—further demonstrating the power of narrative organizing. Within FLM's programming, an abolitionist approach to education is evident. The I in II Campaign demonstrated how to critically engage carceral narratives and provided information and vocabulary to participants so that they could continue to engage in conversations on the issue outside the workshop. The program not only centered abolition, it demonstrated an abolitionist education approach by building a more just, loving, and kind approach to conversations about safety, crime, and accountability.

Empowerment, it appears, is pivotal to critical consciousness in popular education spaces. While the I in II Campaign is clearly rooted in abolitionist views, those views are not as transparent in the We the Eastside program. The I in II Campaign is obviously abolitionist and is

often viewed as a more radical approach to addressing systemic oppression. In contrast, the Community organizing campaign is not overtly abolitionist, especially to those who are unfamiliar with the concept. The purpose of the We the Eastside program is to seek to understand the issues the community faces and provide resources and assistance to address those needs. This takes place through community meetings and community walks, as well as a breakfast program to feed local youth and their families. What is empowering about this program is that community members feel they have a voice, because they can see that people care about what they have to say and are offering ways to help rather than let the issues remain and fester. It is rooted in abolition in that it seeks to disrupt the harms of oppression. FLM provides a space for community members to come together and share their experiences and concerns and offers support as needed. By centering the voices of the community, FLM is empowering Eastside community members to achieve the goals they set for themselves. The lack of infrastructure and investment has led to the creation of food deserts, poorly paved roads, lack of streetlights, lack of paved sidewalks, and an overabundance of policing ("We the Eastside"), demonstrating the level of oppression and harm produced by the state. Through the We the Eastside program, community members, volunteers, and members of FLM are able to come together to discuss the harms and ways to abolish those harms. Abolition, then, takes many forms. It can be overt in addressing the carceral system, and it can be covert, in learning about the needs of the community and working to establish a deeper, more meaningful relationship. The purpose of abolition is to disrupt systems of oppression and remove the reason for the existence of those systems. That can be through more radical means of centering the voices of the formerly incarcerated, or it can be through building community through conversation and providing meals to those facing food insecurity.

Meeting the needs of the community. Abolition is not solely concerned with dismantling systems of oppression. It also requires the active construction of alternative systems rooted in equity, care, and transformation. FLM does not seek to close schools or communities, they seek to end the harm that makes schools and communities unsafe for Black and Brown and queer kids and families, building on Love's (2021) claim that abolitionists aim to dismantle the systems that create bad schools and prisons.. They seek to eradicate the harm perpetuated by the state so that community members not only survive, but thrive. Such a social action project as the We the Eastside requires some education, which in the case of FLM means learning with the community, as FLM doesn't have all the answers or know all the issues. Social action projects, as representative of social action, benefit communities because they "engage students and teachers as active participants in learning and impacting change" (Hancock et al, 2021, p. 6). Grassroots organizations engage communities in conversations that uncover the roots of oppression, leading to shared understanding and collective action. We the Eastside does just that—meets the community where they are through community walks and conversations at locations within the community; offers resources during community walks; creates a website to provide links and a map to resources and a list of events within the community; and offers a youth meal program once a month to feed kids and their families at a local youth center in the heart of the community. This suggests that meeting community needs is not a peripheral function of grassroots organizations, but a primary pedagogical strategy through which education, political consciousness, and collective action are produced, which supports Kumashiro's claims that education should "address the needs of the Other" (2000, p. 28). Furthermore, meeting community needs is a means of challenging oppression and empowering the community (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28).

FLM's work demonstrates that popular education is not age-bound but intergenerational, positioning communities themselves as sites of ongoing learning and knowledge production. Examples of this take place in the I in II Campaign, the SAFE Commune program, and the We the Eastside program, where participants are invited to contribute to and learn from one another across lines of age and experience. The workshops FLM provides are not always centered on the needs of adults, but include the needs and desires of the youth. In fact, several workshops have been requested by youth to address and assist in the reflection on the circumstances significant to local youth and the issues they face. Jefferson and co-authors (2018) reiterate "if the democratic goal of public education is to be achieved, the scholarly roots of liberatory education offer a foundation for thinking about and integrating the emerging scholarship related to youth voice, critical pedagogy, schooling, and community liberation" (2018, p. 737). In centering the needs of the youth, FLM offers a liberatory education that integrates formal education, lived experiences, and critical dialogue. The critical pedagogy FLM creates and supports is a means of action and reflection—or cognitive liberation—which is a necessity when working to dismantle systems of oppression and uphold the values of abolition and liberation. The systems of oppression the community faces, which includes but is not limited to inequities in education, food deserts, and carceral logics, must be combatted through popular education spaces in order for the community to engage in critical dialogue and decenter the white supremacy that makes these systems of oppression so prominent.

This study expands the definition of "student" beyond formal schooling contexts., building on the notion of educator/expert as explored by Freire (2018) and Kumashiro (2000). Codrington (2014) asks how education can be fundamentally transformed to support Black students seeking liberation. Before exploring how FLM responds to this question, the question of

who is considered a student must be answered. Codrington is referring to primary and secondary school-age students, calling into question the status quo of a whitewashed science education that decenters Indigenous and non-Western approaches to science education. Her article offers ways to decenter whiteness and center Indigenous epistemologies and non-Western frameworks, which support educational justice (Codrington, 2014; Jefferson et al, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Gordon, 1993). What shifts here is the consideration of who exactly is a student: are students only primary and secondary ages? True educators know that learning never stops, so it is reasonable to apply the concept of student to all folks seeking to learn about an issue. If all involved in the learning process are considered students, then wherever learning takes place is a classroom. This reconceptualization destabilizes the boundaries of schooling and reframes education as community-embedded, lifelong, and collective process. This applies to popular education as well, as learning is taking place, all involved are simultaneously teachers and students, and the shared goal of liberation is closer to being achieved. FLM's response to the initial question—how can education be fundamentally transformed to support those seeking liberation—comes in the ways in which they create learning spaces. FLM's learning spaces center liberation by noting the work is difficult but necessary, recognizing that conversations and understanding are crucial to the learning process, decentering whiteness and humanizing the oppressed, and encouraging participants to sit in discomfort without judgement. FLM asks participants in their learning spaces to broaden their imaginations on what the community could look like, how it could function, and how community members can support one another in accountability and anti-oppressive measures. FLM provides transformative educational spaces that support critical dialogue, conscientization, empowerment, and community care.

These implications reposition grassroots organizations as not supplemental to formal educational systems, but are sites actively constructing alternative educational infrastructures. FLM's work shows that grassroots organizations themselves become sites of learning and collaboration, working together with community groups to share and distribute resources, build relationships, and strengthen collective efforts against oppression. Their approach reflects abolitionist pedagogy: dismantling harmful systems while simultaneously building community-based alternatives that promote care, accountability, and justice. Overall, this study argues that grassroots organizations like FLM create popular education spaces grounded in anti-oppression and community empowerment, offering transformative learning environments that challenge white supremacy, develop critical consciousness, and support collective action for liberation.

Future Directions and Deeper Analytical Considerations

Despite a growing body of scholarship on grassroots organizing, significant theoretical, methodological, and analytical gaps remain, particularly in relation to how organizations engage issues of race, education, and care. Five primary areas represent opportunities for future research to make meaningful contributions to the literature.

First, theoretical and methodological gaps persist in how scholars examine the work of grassroots organizations addressing social inequities. Lafore (2022) notes the absence of empirical studies in the past two decades examining popular education within unions or community-based organizations working specifically with mixed-race individuals. Although FLM operates within racially diverse communities and collaborates with organizations serving Latina/o/e, Native, and Middle Eastern populations, this study does not center the distinct experiences of bi- or multi-racial individuals. Future research that explicitly examines grassroots organizing with and for mixed-race individuals would address an important gap in the literature

and illuminate how organizing strategies, educational practices, and power dynamics operate across racialized contexts. Such work would benefit from research designs that foreground race and racism as central analytic concerns and attend carefully to researcher positionality and bias—dynamics that shape not only grassroots organizing but also the production of knowledge itself (Milner, 2007). Methodologically, future studies should prioritize approaches capable of capturing the complexities of identity, power, and systemic inequity, particularly as they manifest in the everyday educational and organizing practices of grassroots groups.

Relatedly, existing social movement literature continues to under-theorize the role of intentional learning spaces and the daily, often low-profile labor of grassroots organizations (Lafore, 2022). While this study briefly attends to activities such as trainings and workshops, further research is needed that centers the day-to-day educational work of grassroots organizations, including collaboration, relational labor, and informal learning practices. Deeper examination of these processes would strengthen understanding of how grassroots organizing shapes educational spaces, influences knowledge production, and contributes to long-term social transformation. This study's analysis of FLM as simultaneously a learning organization and a teaching organization extends Kilgore's (1999) framework, showing that anti-oppressive grassroots work requires organizations to be internally reflective, not just externally directed—a distinction future research would do well to build upon.

Second, context-specific research is needed to account for the shifting political, social, and policy environments at the state, federal, and local levels. Because these contexts are continually evolving, the educational and organizing work of grassroots organizations also changes, necessitating flexible and ongoing research approaches that are responsive to such conditions. Additional research is particularly needed on how care is conceptualized and enacted

within organizing and educational spaces, especially at the intersection of anti-oppressive and liberatory frameworks. While scholars have explored notions of care within queer, disabled, and communities of color, further inquiry should examine how care functions as a sustaining and strategic practice within grassroots education efforts amid shifting political and educational landscapes. A care-based analysis must distinguish between care as sentiment and care as structured political practice—a distinction that becomes increasingly important as governance and policy environments continue to shift. Until the educational system incorporates care into its processes and development, the educational spaces rooted in care that grassroots organizations continue to create will remain necessary. The government could stand to learn from grassroots organizations; until that change happens, it is up to grassroots organizers to help ensure their communities are educated in ways that reflect the lived experiences, needs, and demands of those communities.

Third, expanding sites of organizing—particularly student-led organizations within higher education—represent an important yet underexplored area of inquiry. As student organizations increasingly mobilize in response to political and social issues, understanding how student organizing shapes academic communities, as well as broader social contexts, is essential for capturing the full scope of grassroots organizing and its impacts. A deeper analytical framework would also benefit from comparative and coalition-level analysis, given that FLM does not operate in isolation but collaborates with organizations serving 2SLGBTQ+, immigrant, Latina/o/e, Native, and Middle Eastern communities. Extending the unit of analysis beyond a single organization to the coalition or network level would allow researchers to explore how anti-oppressive and care-based values travel, get translated, get contested, or get diluted across organizational partnerships.

Fourth, exploring how grassroots organizers engage in care work while managing and preventing burnout would provide a valuable pathway for both organizers and researchers. This study does not deeply examine who bears disproportionate care burdens within FLM itself. Ariana's comment about FLM being her "free therapists" is presented warmly, but it quietly signals how much emotional labor the members carry—labor that can produce exactly the burnout the organization says it wants to prevent. The breakfast club, the community walks, the workshops—these are all care-intensive practices, and while capacity-building is mentioned as a strategy against burnout, a more thorough analysis of who absorbs disproportionate care burdens within the organization remains necessary. A better understanding of how to navigate burnout in organizing spaces that enact an ethics of care would benefit organizers and scholars alike, with implications well beyond the context of grassroots organizations.

A deeper study of FLM's internal organizational dynamics would also benefit the field. Such research would examine how power moves within the organization itself—how decisions get made, whose perspectives shape programming, and whether the horizontal, care-centered values FLM espouses are adequately reflected in its internal culture. Research drawing on organizational ethnography over an extended period, rather than interviews and observations of programmed events alone, would be better positioned to surface these dynamics. Longitudinal research is similarly needed: this study captures FLM's work at a particular moment but cannot assess whether participants' critical consciousness, political engagement, or community relationships actually shift over time as a result of participation. A deeper examination would follow participants across multiple years, using mixed methods to assess whether popular education in this context produces durable transformation or remains more episodic.

Finally, assessments of FLM's work within the community are necessary to better understand how the work impacts community members, how community members envision community care and safety, and what liberation and freedom dreaming look like for the communities in which FLM operates. These assessments would not only strengthen FLM's practice but would also directly benefit the organization by supporting grant acquisition, demonstrate where FLM needs to make changes to better meet community needs, and provide space for community members to voice their thoughts, ideas, and concerns. A deeper examination would also create more analytical distance to ask harder questions about the limits of FLM's abolitionist framework: Where does the abolitionist framing foreclose certain kinds of coalition-building or community engagement? How do community members who do not share abolitionist values experience FLM's programming? What happens when care-based and abolitionist logics come into tension with one another within the organization? These are not critiques of abolition as a political project, but rather questions that would strengthen the theoretical contribution and make the study more useful to organizers working across a range of ideological contexts. Together, these future directions would move the analysis from richly descriptive toward more structurally and longitudinally explanatory—which is ultimately what the field needs if grassroots organizations are to be taken seriously as sites of educational leadership and transformation.

Contextual Conditions Facing the Urgency of Research

When this study began in late 2023 and early 2024, Oklahoma's public education system was marked by heightened political intervention, ideological polarization, and growing restrictions on equity-centered educational practices. At the state level, Superintendent Ryan Walters advanced policies aligned with Christian nationalism and aggressively opposed teachers'

unions, DEI initiatives, and critical approaches to education. These actions reflect broader efforts to regulate what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose identities are affirmed, and which forms of critical engagement are permitted within public schooling. Such conditions are not merely political background; they actively shape the educational terrain in which grassroots organizations like Foundation for Liberating Minds (FLM) operate, rendering community-based popular education spaces increasingly vital for sustaining critical dialogue, collective care, and liberatory learning. Taken together, these state and national conditions underscore the urgency of examining grassroots educational spaces—not as supplemental to public education, but as critical sites where care, political education, and collective liberation are actively maintained under conditions of increasing repression. This political and policy context matters because it reveals the increasingly constrained conditions under which critical, anti-oppressive, and liberatory educational work occurs. As public education spaces become sites of ideological regulation, curriculum restriction, and political surveillance, opportunities for critical dialogue, collective learning, and care-centered pedagogy are narrowed or eliminated altogether. These conditions heighten the significance of grassroots organizations like FLM, which operate outside formal schooling structures and thus become some of the few remaining spaces where critical consciousness, abolitionist pedagogy, and community-based care can be practiced. Examining FLM within this context underscores not only *what* the organization does, but *why* such educational spaces are urgent, necessary, and politically consequential in the current moment.

Across the country, public education is at the center of intense political battles over curriculum, funding, and the boundaries of free expression. In Texas, the State Board of Education gave preliminary approval to a mandatory K-12 reading list set to take effect in 2030, a list that critics argue lacks diversity and incorporates Biblical material while having removed

writings by figures like Frederick Douglass (Edison, 2026). At the university level, Texas Tech's administration announced plans to prohibit students from producing degree-culminating research on gender and sexuality topics, a move that PEN America called the most extreme case of student censorship it had tracked in five years, and that faculty described as incompatible with the standards expected of a major public research university (Whitford, 2026). Meanwhile, Republican governors in at least eight states have endorsed Turning Point USA's effort to establish conservative student clubs in every public high school, a push supporters frame as protecting free speech, but critics argue amounts to state-sponsored favoritism toward one political viewpoint (Beck & Akbarzai, 2026). The funding side of public education is equally contested. In Arizona, a critical school funding mechanism—Proposition 123, which had delivered $300 million annually to K-12 schools for a decade—expired last year, and Republican lawmakers have so far been unable to agree on a replacement despite three separate proposals being introduced. The leading plan would tie renewed funding specifically to teacher raises with performance requirements attached, drawing opposition from teachers' unions, school support staff, and Democratic Governor Katie Hobbs, who argue the restrictions are too narrow and inequitable (Gomez, 2026). Taken together, these stories reflect a national landscape in which decisions about what students can learn, who gets to teach it, and how schools are funded are increasingly shaped by partisan priorities rather than broad educational consensus.

As public education becomes an increasingly regulated and politically contested space, grassroots organizations that center care, critical dialogue, and community-based learning have become not just supplemental resources but essential alternatives. When state-level policies restrict what can be taught, which identities are affirmed, and whose histories are included in the curriculum, formal schooling loses its capacity to serve all students equitably. Grassroots popular

education spaces fill that void by offering room for critical consciousness, abolitionist pedagogy, and collective care that has been deliberately narrowed or eliminated from public institutions. Organizations like Foundation for Liberating Minds operate outside the reach of ideological regulation and political surveillance that increasingly defines public schooling, making them some of the few remaining places where liberatory learning can be practiced openly. In this sense, their significance is not incidental to the current political moment—it is produced by it. The more public education is shaped by partisan priorities and restrictive policy, the more urgent these community-rooted spaces become as sites where people, particularly those whose identities and experiences are marginalized in formal settings, can engage in honest, affirming, and politically consequential education.

Closing Reflections

This study suggests there is a need for a new system of education to be created, one that centers Freire's notion of problem-posing learning where teachers and students learn alongside one another, where students' funds of knowledge (Moll, 2019) are considered throughout the process, and where collective ideas about care—where relationships between educators, students, parents, administrators, and the community—are prioritized. Because care work is political, and a form of resistance (Owis, 2024, p. 26), centering care in education—or better yet, making education a practice of care—is both a form of resisting fascism and white supremacy and a form of building relationships and strengthening empowering communities. Owis (2024, p. 21) poses a question in their book, stating, “we should ask ourselves: what would happen if care was the organizing principle for our world? For our educational system?” Indeed. What would—what *could*—our educational system look like if care was the organizing principle? Anti-oppression, liberation, and abolition are values and concepts that are rooted in care. Those who embody these

values aim to ensure that everyone is cared for, cared about, and has the agency to speak and act for themselves. These values and concepts guide those who hold them to strive for the best possible outcome for all involved. This study suggests the need for a new system, and I do believe that. However, I also believe that grassroots organizations are already creating those educational spaces within the communities in which they work. This study demonstrates that such a system is not purely aspirational but is already enacted. Grassroots organizations such as FLM embody values of anti-oppression, liberation, and abolition and center notions of care—even offering care for those who do not hold the same ideals, values, and political ideologies as they do—in the relationships they build and maintain. They offer resources, knowledge, and community aid in a reciprocal manner; that is, the care, knowledge, resources, and friendship they offer are not transactional or only offered when needed. These relationships are ongoing, are ever-evolving, and are meant to last. In this way, education is free, accessible, and meaningful. The information provided is information that is needed—whether it is about systemic oppression, food deserts, transformative justice practices, or advocacy—and freely shared. Everyone who participates is involved in the process of learning and relationship-building; they are involved in the process of community care.

The combination of grassroots organizing, popular education, and an ethics of care that is rooted in anti-oppressive and liberatory practices will aid grassroots and other community organizations with similar approaches to local issues to understand the need for the work they do in their own communities and better develop strategies for programming and organizing. Grassroots organizers, scholars, and those invested in care work should consider the ways in which they can continually work to disrupt white, cisheteronormative and patriarchal understandings of care in their own work and in the work of others. Providing care, engaging in

care work, participating in grassroots organizing, and working in popular education spaces is not easy work, especially in the current political climate. As Ariana stated in her interview, “it can be very daunting work, and can be very difficult work, because it's not sunshine and butterflies” all the time. However difficult and overwhelming the work may be at times, it is worth it, because in the end, communities are built and strengthened with care and imbibed with hope and the knowledge of how to create a better, more just society.

As a member of FLM, I would be remiss if I did not end this study in the way that we end our meetings and our podcast–in calling for the audience to consider their radical dream, whatever that may be and in whatever way the audience may define the concept. Dana said in our conversation that “there's so much power in learning about people's stories” and I want to conclude by building on this and offering my radical dream. My radical dream is that, as a society, we challenge ourselves to learn about other people's stories–about their past, present, and their hopes for the future. My hope is that, in learning about, and then subsequently alongside, one another, society can begin to unlearn and dismantle the harms of white supremacy, and begin providing educational spaces where education is valued, where educators are valued, and where communities are cared about, cared for, and care with one another. My radical dream is that grassroots organizations continue to build and collaborate with one another, forming coalitions when necessary, to build out systems that support racialized and marginalized communities that have been historically and systematically oppressed, not just by the educational system, but by all systems rooted in and maintained by white supremacy. In order to do this, there needs to be more case studies on grassroots organizations to explore *how* they are enacting care. Saying they care and embodying that care are two different scenarios, and further studies will help demonstrate how care takes shape in other contextual moments as well as in differing

communities, as care is not a blanket concept or action. My radical dream is that FLM and organizations like them are no longer viewed as radical, as unrealistic, and that they have the funding they need to accomplish their dreams, because their dreams provide care, education, and support for the communities they love.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interest/Reasons/Background Prior to FLM

1. Prior to joining Foundation for Liberating Minds, tell me about any of our previous experiences working with marginalized communities or education?
2. Why did you join Foundation for Liberating Minds?
3. Tell me what keeps you focused on continuing the work that Foundation for Liberating Minds does.

Experiences and Motivations in Engaging Anti-Oppression and Social Justice Activism and Education

4. Tell me about what motivates you to engage in anti-oppressive work.
5. Tell me about other community-engaged programs or organizations you have worked with prior to Foundation for Liberating Minds.
6. Tell me about your experiences engaging in anti-oppressive work in other programs or organizations.
7. Explain why you think informal education is necessary in this particular metro area.
8. Describe why you think it is important to collaborate with other organizations and community members.

FLM Focused Trainings and Workshops

9. How would you describe Foundation for Liberating Minds's curriculum and approaches to learning?
10. Thinking about FLM's particular training and workshops, can you provide an example of one in particular that you think went particularly well? Or didn't?

11. Walk me through a typical day working for FLM – that can include planning of a particular program or even leading up to facilitating a particular workshop.

    a. What is the purpose of establishing group norms in the trainings and workshops?

    b. Why do you think this matters?

Community Building

12. Describe the work that defines the We the Eastside initiative.

13. Describe the relationship between FLM and the community in which the We the Eastside initiative takes place.

Abolition Narratives

14. Explain how abolitionist ideologies shape the work FLM does.

15. How do abolition narratives factor into FLM's anti-oppressive and liberatory values?

Looking Ahead

16. Tell me what you believe is the most important work Foundation for Liberating Minds does and why.

17. Imagining what FLM could do better – or if you had a magic wand and could change something about education/FLM even what would that be?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

The chart below provides information about participant interview length, where the interview was conducted, and where their interview data was stored. Digital copies of the transcripts were stored on my personal computer and hard copies of the transcripts were stored in a folder in a secure area of my desk, in my locked office. Hard copies were destroyed upon completion of this study, and digital copies were permanently deleted from my files.

Participant	**Interview Length**	**Interview Location**	**Interview Storage Location**
Dana	40 min.	In person, recorded on Zoom	Secure file under participant's initials, in my locked office
aurelius	55 min.	Zoom	Secure file under participant's initials, in my locked office
Tevin	56 min.	In person, recorded on Zoom	Secure file under participant's initials, in my locked office
Alham	1 hr. 2 min.	Zoom	Secure file under participant's initials, in my locked office
Ariana	53 min.	Zoom	Secure file under participant's initials, in my locked office

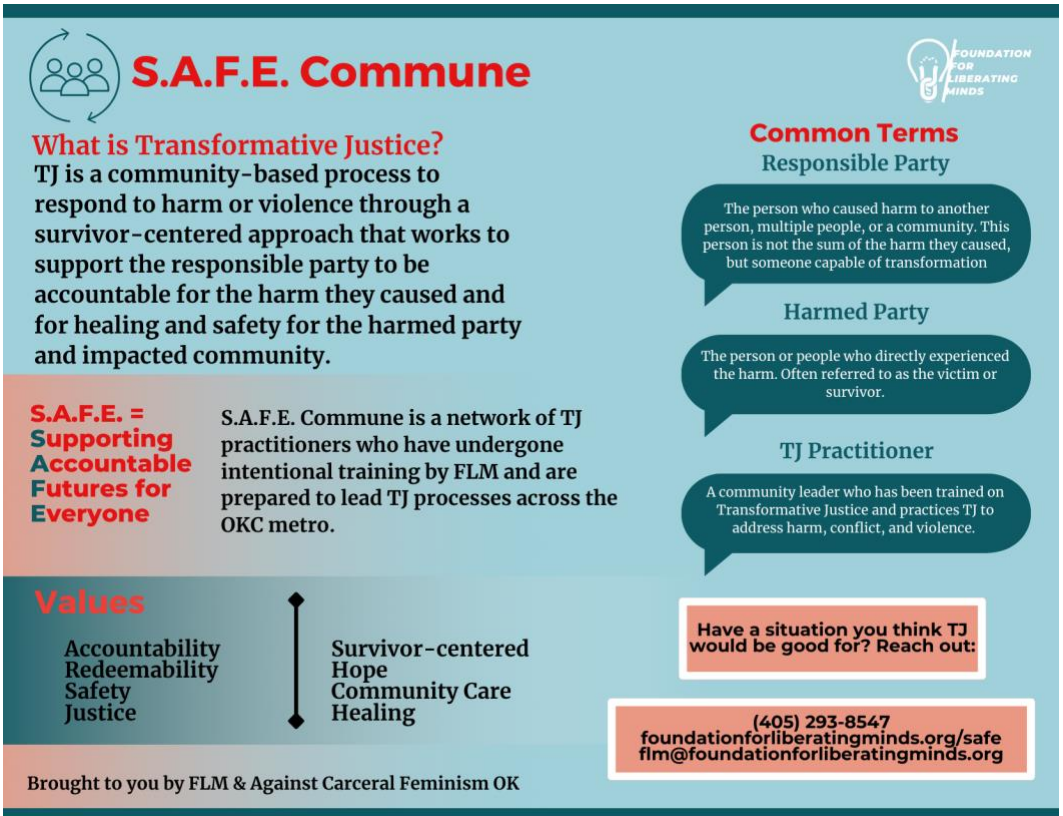
Appendix C: Tables of Documents Chosen for Data Analysis

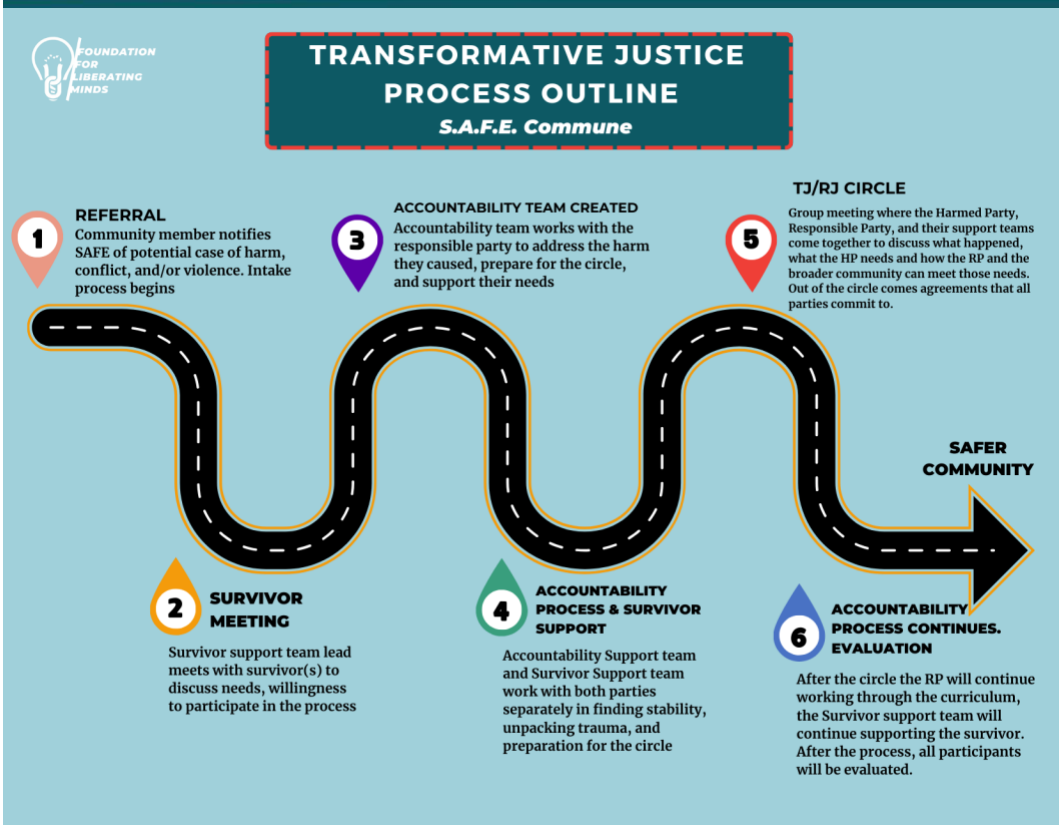
Free Our People Initiative	
Document	*Description of document*
I in II Campaign Overarching Document	Provides overview of the campaign, list of sources consulted, inspirations, definitions, campaign goals, roles, next steps, flyer information, and meeting notes
I in II Campaign Flyer	Appendix H; provides statistics on incarceration and explains why the program was created; intended for large audiences
Study and Struggle Slides	Over 70 slides from multiple meetings, discussions on abolition, harm reduction, (trans)gendering abolition, transformative justice, revolutionary dreams with video by Nikki Giovanni, future of abolition, vision for Justice and liberation, care webs, and world making
TJ Pods Flyer	Appendix G; series of flyers that describe the process, overview of the program, definitions; intended for large audiences
SAFE COMMUNE Curriculum Outline	Goals, definitions, FAQs, and curriculum outline
Transformative Justice Handout	Appendix D; defines transformative justice, provides common terms and values, and describes TJ process
Accountability Chart	Explains the difference between accountability and punishment
Vision Statement	Vision statement defining abolition
Deconstructing Masculinity	Provides learning goals and outcomes, mission, vision, theoretical frameworks, sources, participants, and meeting notes

We the Eastside Initiative	
Document	*Description of document*
We the Eastside Initiative	Provides purpose, overview, step-by-step actions, timeline, list of businesses in community, weekly action items, list of contacts, organizer notes, and reflection questions
We the Eastside Flyer	Appendix E; explains what program does and available resources
Community Walks Flyer	Appendix F: describes purpose of community walks, lists partners, and explains the We the Eastside program
Website	The We the Eastside website, including the homepage, events, and about pages

Other documents not part of a specific program	
Document	*Description of document*
Group Norms	Figure 2; slide from a training that lists the group norms
About Us	From the FLM website, provides vision, principles, and values
Liberation School	Provides the mission and vision of the proposed charter/private school, instructional design, purpose, student outcomes, and location
Cultural Competence Workshop	Slides from workshop that provide guidelines, FLM's vision, definitions, guiding questions, classroom approaches, and resources
Visualization of FLM's Structure	Figure 3; provides a visual of how the programs work together to produce the desired outcome of the organization
2024 Impact Report	Referenced in the discussion and not part of document analysis; provides and overview of the work FLM did in 2024 and the goals for 2025

Appendix D: SAFE Commune Overview Handout





Appendix E: We the Eastside Flyer

A community for us, by us

What is We, the Eastside

At the heart of the We, the Eastside Initiative (WEI) lies a deeply ingrained dedication to nurturing connections within the community, empowering individuals with access to vital resources, and promoting educational opportunities. We actively listen and respond to community needs, recognizing historical neglect and systemic barriers. Through WEI, we amplify underrepresented voices and work to dismantle barriers, striving for inclusivity and empowerment. We want change. We demand change. We are the EASTSIDE.

We, the Eastside



Monthly Meetings

At our monthly meetings, Eastside residents lead community change through brainstorming and dialogue with stakeholders, creating a community by us, for us.



Community Walks

Community Walks are instrumental in community building. By going door-to-door, we engage with residents to understand their needs and empower them to enhance their own lives, homes, and neighborhoods.

Appendix F: Community Walks Flyer



Appendix G: SAFE Commune Recruitment Flyer

PAID training equips community members with the skills to respond to harm and violence through community interventions. Transformative justice does not rely on policing and prisons to address community issues because WE KEEP US SAFE! Limited spots are available.



This training is for people who want to see an end to gender-based violence and other forms of harm in our community. Whether you've heard of restorative justice, or community accountability or not, we want you!

Skills you'll learn include:

- Deescalation
- Community Circle Facilitation
- Intervening on the Cycle of Violence
- Creating Community Safety

Sign Up Now!

Appendix H: I in II Campaign Flyer

Foundation for Liberating Minds'

The 1 in 2 Campaign

1 in 2 adults in America has had a family member in jail or prison. This is an incarceration crisis. The 1 in 2 Campaign is a narrative organizing project coordinated by Foundation for Liberating Minds' Free Our People Initiative. This campaign focuses on amplifying the stories of the many Oklahomans impacted by the carceral state to garner an inside look at the violence and injustice of this system and to also exemplify what else is possible to achieve true justice, true safety, true accountability, true redemption, and true community.



1 in 2 adults in America has had a family member in jail or prison



45 percent of people had an immediate family member jailed or imprisoned for one night or more.

The Free Our People Initiative

The Free Our People Initiative is an abolitionist education pillar of FLM that raises awareness around the harms of the prison industrial complex (PIC), advocates for communities and people impacted by the criminal punishment system, builds alternatives to this system, and works through narrative change, political education and the project of dreaming radically to create a just world of safety and accountability for all people.