# An Urban-defined School Implements a Grassroots Oral History Course and Study Abroad Program for Social Justice Equity, Social Consciousness, and Student Advocacy

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## Abstract

This paper conceptualizes the practices of one urban-defined school's development of two uniquely designed student-led advocacy and research initiatives to promote social consciousness and student advocacy among the school's faculty, staff and community. This paper considers urban-defined to be any school, system, or teaching force that operates in a suburban populated city or area that carries the socially constructed and political descriptor of "urban" because the school demographics are characterized as including a majority of children of color (Black and Brown) and/or children with low socioeconomic/high poverty status. Two tenets of Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework are identified: (1) racism as an invisible norm and (2) the use of counter narratives to provide voice to historically marginalized groups. In addition, the grassroots frameworks for African American educational lobbyists to enact African American legislative voice (Griffen, 2015, 2017, 2018) were used to as a way to mobilize community interests through youth advocacy and voice, which resulted in a collaboration of this urban-defined school's leaders and teachers to empower students to (1) conduct grassroots oral history research and (2) propose an accepted study abroad program. Recommendations for replication include frameworks for developing a grassroots Oral History and Study Abroad course in order to promote social justice equity, social consciousness, and student advocacy

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## Introduction

Urban-defined schools are at a distinct disadvantage in the United States of America. First and foremost, the description "urban" is typified as a moniker for schools and communities that serve majority populations of color. Therefore, this paper considers urban-defined to be any school, system, or teaching force that operates in a suburban populated city or area that carries the socially constructed and political descriptor of "urban" for having a school demographic characterized as including a majority of children of color (Black and Brown) and/or children with low socioeconomic/high poverty status.

The "inner city," a term also used to describe urban centers, has been described by scholars as places where marginalized groups are left to sink or swim, have low educational resources, and have minimal access to healthcare (Anyon, 2005; Bierlien, 1993; Kincheloe, 2010; Kozol, 2005). Furthermore, urban is used as a descriptor for areas high in poverty, unemployment, and crime; and in low academic achievement due to a lack of care about education. It is within this context that this paper conceptualizes the practices of one urban-defined school's development of two uniquely-designed, student-led advocacy and research initiatives for promoting social consciousness and student advocacy among its faculty, staff and community. The urban-defined school under consideration will be Southeast Springs—a high school located in the Southwest Springs School District.

## Background

In this section, Southeast Springs's socially conscious learning environment is conceptualized to show how this dedicated community of lifelong learners developed cultural responsiveness as a core value and practice along with two uniquely-designed, student-led advocacy and research initiatives. The grassroots frameworks for African American educational lobbyists to enact African American legislative voice (Griffen, 2015, 2017, 2018) were used to as a way to mobilize community interests through youth advocacy and voice, which resulted in a collaboration of this urban-defined school's leaders and teachers to empower students to (1) conduct grassroots oral history research and (2) propose an accepted study abroad program.

Southeast Springs School is located in a Mountain State. The racial diversity in this Mountain State stands at 84.3% Caucasian, 4.2% that identify under other race, 4.1% African American, those that identify as two or more races at 3.4%, Asian at 2.9%, and .9% Native American. The racial diversity of the city where Southeast Springs is located is 78.8% Caucasian, 16.1% Hispanic or Latino of any race (Mexican American: 14.6%), 6.3% Black or African American, 3.0% Asian, 1.0% Native American, 0.3% Native American, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, 5.5% Other race, and 5.1%, Two or more races (Infoplease, 2018). Interesting and of note is that the Mountain State does not differentiate White from Hispanic in its demographic data; yet, the city of Southeast Springs does share the population percentage of Hispanics as a group separate from Whites.

In contrast to Mountain State and the city, Southeast Springs School has a population that is over 81% children of color and over 60% Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL): 41% Hispanic, 30% African American, 19% White, 3% Asian, 4% Multiracial, 1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Native American. Therefore, the Southeast Springs

School meets the definition discussed earlier of an urban-defined school. As is the case for urban schools in the United States, Southeast Springs School had been marred by low staff retention coupled and high administrator turnover prior to the 2014-15 school year.

Southeast Springs School's new principal is the school's seventh principal in nine years. The importance of mobilizing the community, parents and students to support school change became a top priority for the principal to ensure that students would begin to gain access to the same or similar opportunities as their affluent peers. Southeast Springs School utilized grassroots methods to include key decision makers and gatekeepers in the decision making—students, parents, the community, the teachers, the principal, the central Office, and the board of education (Griffen, 2015, 2017, 2018). By facilitating the development of social consciousness on campus, and nurturing student advocacy and empowering social justice equity, Southeast Springs School began to see a positive shift in learning outcomes and overall expectations for student success.

## Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is significant for this paper because of the views of parents, students and the community on race in Southeast Springs School. Race had long been a determiner of access and denial in the school for programming options and in disciplinary practices. CRT also underpins the execution of the grassroots oral history and study abroad program design.

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework used by scholars to critique political, social, legal, and educational practices in existence in the United States. Ladson-Billings (1996) asserted it originally emerged as a "counter-legal scholarship to the positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights" and examines the theory that education in the United States purports to prepare citizens without considering intersections of citizenship and race (p. 7). According to Khalifa, Dunbar, and Douglas (2013) five tenets have emerged from CRT scholars:

1. Acknowledging that racism is an invisible norm and White culture and (privilege) is the standard by which other races are measured.
2. Committing to understanding that racism is socially constructed and expanded and an inclusive worldview is required for true social justice.
3. Acknowledging the unique perspective and voice of people of color as victim's oppression in racial matters and valuing their storytelling as a legitimate way to convey knowledge.
4. Engaging interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse to analyze race relationships.
5. Understanding that racism is systemic and that many current policies and laws are neither ahistorical nor apolitical. (p. 491)

In essence, CRT recognizes the "lived experiences of people of color in a white-dominated society as well as how various contexts," such as in urban schooling environments, may be sites of oppression for students of color (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Hall (2017) further defines CRT as a means to "analyze laws, policies, and systems that appear impartial but result in continued racial inequity" (p. 53).

Two tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) are identified in this paper: (1) racism as an invisible norm and (2) the use of counter narratives. Von Robertson, Bravo, and Chaney

(2016) noted the tenets of CRT are, "the primacy of race and racism and their interconnectedness with other forms of subordination; a questioning of the dominant belief system/status quo; a commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and a multidisciplinary perspective" (p. 717). The "primacy of race and racism" and the "questions of the dominant belief system/status quo" is what drove the planning and execution of the two grassroots program at Southeast Springs School.

**The primacy of race and racism.** Southeast Springs Schools serves a population of students impacted by discriminatory practices, low expectations from the surrounding communities, systemic racism, race based immigration reform via the overturning of DACA, historic redlining practices that ensure that businesses do not invest in "that part of town", and past zero-tolerance policies that resulted in African American children being disproportionately suspended and expelled from school. The foundation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) is in acknowledging the presence and normality of racism in the educational system (Barker, 2016; Reddick, 2006; Sinanan, 2016). Therefore, there was the necessity for the school community to promote social consciousness among students and staff, student advocacy to promote systemic change, and social justice equity to ensure that specific populations of learners are receiving their equitable share of the excellent educational reform outcomes.

As a school comprised predominantly of students of color with intersections of class, culture, gender, gender identity, race identity, and heritage; race and racism's primacy compels race as the essential framework for recognizing the motivation behind Southeast Springs School's program designs and the intentional strategies being employed to support access for all students. By providing such a platform, the students and the community are able to engage in dialogue about their lived experience including through opportunities to express their unique perspectives regarding political decisions and national and state educational policy agendas.

**Questions regarding the dominant belief system/status quo.** Khalifa, Dunbar, and Douglas (2013) posited that the counter-narrative tenet of CRT is characterized as "counter" because it is diametrically opposite to the traditional collection, interpretation, presentation, and acceptance of research—particularly in relation to people of color. Quintessential scholar Derrick Bell laid the foundation for CRT in two law review articles: *Serving Two Masters: Integration İdeals and Client İnterests in School Desegregation Litigation* (1976) and *Brown V. Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma* (1980). Bell (1993) also introduced the counter narrative style of writing in another significant work: *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. Bell's research was met with distrust and his scholarship was viewed as non-academic because it disregarded the narrative of neutrality and objectivity. Neutrality and objectively are arguments for the dominant belief system/status quo maintenance that ensures the powerful remain in power without the responsibility to reverse practices that ensure the marginalization of *othered* groups. Counter-narratives of the lived experiences of historically marginalized youth and communities disrupt those maintenance systems.

Barker (2016) maintained CRT is a necessary vehicle in "challenging traditional, hierarchical systems of power and providing counter-narratives…to those for which systems oppress or silence" (p. 130). In a similar vein, segregated schools for youth of color in the Jim Crow-era South fostered students' sociopolitical consciousness by introducing counter-narratives that challenged oppressive social injustices as well as innovative strategies for resisting these social inequities (Seider, Graves, El-Amin, Soutter, Termerat, Jennett, & Johannsen, 2017). Counter-stories are implemented in CRT to challenge the historical narratives of the majority steeped in the

misrepresentation of racially minoritized communities (Lopez, Erwin, Binder, & Chavez, 2017). Through one of the program designs discussed in this paper—grassroots Oral Histories—the counter-narratives from the Voices of the Dreamers, for example, provided challenges to traditional, hierarchical systems of power. This occurred because students themselves developed the research questions they asked, conducted the interviews independent of school personnel, and conducted their purposeful sampling of participants. Students essentially guided their own research design ensuring a safe space for both students and participants—a clear moment and example of social justice equity.

## Developing Social Consciousness at Southeast Springs School

The principal and staff at Southeast Springs School declared that teachers and administrators should share a pedagogical emphasis on dismantling social injustice. This meant that every practice and conversation would include social consciousness, social justice, and equity as expected outcomes. Hiring practices were modified and new program initiatives were considered as ways to grow student interest in improving the school's climate and community. The school team found that including meaningful and authentic opportunities for students to design and implement their learning experiences facilitated a learning environment where students felt heard and included in campus decisions.

### Prepping for Social Consciousness through Social Justice Equity

Teachers who help youth form their own opinions regarding socio-political issues and encourage democratic dialogue may facilitate marginalized youth's socio-political awareness and agency (Kirshner, 2009; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Promoting an open classroom climate where minoritized youth consider socio-political issues from various intersections may also inspire student activism to produce social change (Youniss & Yates, 1997). In discussing social justice equity in schools, Bemak and Chung (2005) argued that school counselors are additional educational gatekeepers responsible and available to act as advocates for students of color in urban schooling environments. The school counselor played a vital role in scheduling and program offerings at the school studied. This was a school where race, socio-economic status, and ability had been determining factors in student access to Honors, Advanced Placement and Concurrent Enrollment—the gateway courses to college.

### Social Consciousness is Core

At the end of the 2014-15 Southeast Spring School's academic year, a new vision developed that would be grounded specifically in a pursuit of excellence through socially-conscious lifelong learning. During the 15-16 school year, Southeast Springs teachers were becoming adept at various aspects of creating a culturally responsive school where students feel safe, empowered, and had access to high quality and rigorous instruction. As a result of faculty and staff efforts, student ownership of our Southeast Springs school community increased and along with parent support and community partnerships. For example, students sat on hiring committees for new counselors, new teachers, and for the new athletic director.

Southeast Springs School soon developed a new mission that showcased its focus on the community, students, and programs offered through access to tuition-free on-site college credits; its all-inclusive advanced placement courses; its appreciation and acknowledgment of individual successes, gifts, and talents; its fostering of culturally responsive access to opportunities; and its development of meaningful relationships with the community (beyond simple recorded messages and newsletters). The literature supports the mission of Southeast Springs School by identifying the following six

common guiding principles formed by a Pathways2Teaching curriculum (Goings, Brandenhoff, & Bianco, 2018): (1) focusing on educational justice, (2) promoting and elevating the profession, (3) providing college access and readiness, (4) a focus on inclusion, (5) access to role models and mentors, and (6) encouraging family and community engagement.

**Cultural Competency Series.** A trauma culture was deeply rooted in the Southeast Springs school and community, which resulted in student "fight or flight" responses to stressful situations. The school's administration and counselors developed a plan of action to include a Cultural Competency Series and a new level of accountability towards the community, among one another, and among the students. The plan included a series of professional development sessions developed collaboratively by the school principal and school personnel that focused specifically on relationships, recognizing biases, allowing for student voice and advocacy, and developing and honoring a shared view on constructing knowledge. The five-part series occurred over five months in place of faculty and staff meetings.

After each session, faculty and staff would commit to one takeaway to implement immediately and one takeaway to implement over time. These takeaways ranged from building curriculum to be more inclusive of all racial, gender, cultural, identity and/or social class archetypes; to building instruction around student discussion. Evaluations and measures were put in place including observations by culturally competent staff members and students. The interview protocol for new staff now included a specific question to gauge the cultural competence of applicants, regardless of position, and an effort was made to recruit faculty and staff of color and Southeast Springs School alumni.

### Developing Student Advocacy at Southeast Springs

As noted earlier, the stories and lived experiences of students can be a mechanism to advance student empowerment and engage youth toward advocacy and social justice. Student voices are real and powerful. Their experiences provide a counter-narrative that exposes and challenges the status quo of their daily lives within their communities and education. However, students are rarely permitted to tell their stories. For a grassroots effort to impact change, who better to advocate for the needs of the community and for education that is responsive than students themselves. Rather than being informed about the needs of the community, the students accepted an opportunity to engage in a qualitative research course designed specifically to learn about historically marginalized groups in their communities.

### Southeast Oral History Society
Through a grassroots Oral History course, Southeast Springs students learned how to gather information and formalize approaches to bring voice to the marginalized and "unheard" groups in their community. From their training, they began to formulate research designs and identified potential participants for their research. The result was that their stories became a mechanism through which educators could alter the discourse regarding the education of marginalized students. Through this process, they also developed and documented their intellectual property in such a way that what they designed can be replicated by other schools and communities.

The design of the program stemmed from a partnership with a local broadcasting station where students from the Southeast Springs journalism class were taught how to conduct community interviews. The principal of the school recognized the interviewing strategies to be similar to that of Oral Histories. According to Shopes (2012):

> Oral History is a maddeningly imprecise term: it is used to refer to the formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition bearers; to informal conversations about 'the old days' among family members, neighbors, or coworkers; to printed compilations of stories told about past and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell. (p. 1)

Within the definition provided by Shopes, one finds the term *culturally sanctioned tradition*. Before there was the printed Word, there was the spoken word as one generation of storytellers told another generation of listeners about family, community traditions,and life experiences. In her study on culturally responsive teaching and the brain, Hammonds (2018) refers to *collectivist cultures* that engage in oral storytelling and call and response as ways of transferring generational knowledge and mastery of learning:

> By telling stories and coding knowledge into songs, chants, proverbs, and poetry, groups with a strong oral tradition record and sustain their cultures and cultural identities by word of mouth…An oral tradition makes the most of the brain's memory systems by using alliteration, movement, and emotion as strong cognitive anchors. (p. 28)

The "oral tradition" was a means of passing down family history, providing stories to make sense of things not understood, and to provide hope in difficult times. It is through folklore and myth that these oral histories were provided. Myth is, by definition, a process that subsumes individual insights and explanations of experience (Grele, 2007). Folklore has heroes and heroines, providing a model of a good citizen or by whom others should strive.

Due to the historical marginalization of Southeast Springs' community by what many in the community deemed outsiders, the principal felt that this was one way to allow the community to reconnect with the school (the principal himself was an outsider). To promote that the grassroots efforts were truly student-led, students developed their own unique questions, selected their participants, and engaged in the interviews independent of school personnel. The research topics students chose the first year of the elective course included an Oral History study of the local Military Academy, the state Skating Derby, and a city Historical Legacy Group. The following year, the research extended further to include an Oral History of the Southeast Springs Board of Education, a continuation of the state Skating Derby and local Military Academy, and those impacted by the DACA decision.

The course evolved from a scheduled elective section to a full-fledged research society that was then sought to provide program design training for neighboring schools. Furthermore, the students were onsite at Southeast Springs School for the DACA protests that occurred around the nation in 2017. They led the interviews of protesting students and utilized their partnership with their peers to extend their Oral Histories into the school community for the first time. The *Voices of the Dreamers* as the project became named included school personnel and students, parents of school personnel and students, and the students and parents of the Dreamers Club from Southeast's sister high school, Southwest Springs School.

A key result of the research conducted over the first two years of the elective course, now the Southeast Springs Oral History Society, was two invitations to present their study at a Tier I research institution in Texas. This means that their grassroots effort to

share *Voices of Dreamers* allowed them to develop intellectual property. Their research has also been spotlighted by the State Association for School Executives and at the local Children of Color conferences.

**Southeast Springs' Study Abroad Program**
At Southeast Springs School, the value and importance of student intellectual property extended beyond the community Oral Histories. The intellectual property at Southeast Springs School extended to South America and to the state Science Summit. Through the efforts of one of the teachers, a zoologist by trade, a student trip to South America was proposed at the end of the 2014-15 school year. Similar to the Oral History program, the Principal of Southeast Springs School recognized that in order for the program to be approved there had to be a student research and intellectual property component. The sister school has a student program which allowed them to go to Europe each year as a part of a *21st Century Program*. In order for Southeast Springs School to be successful in their proposal, students had to lead the design of the program in collaboration with the teacher and there had to be a curricular target and focus.

The Southeast Springs Study Abroad Program came into being because students proposed that they would undertake qualitative and quantitative research during their 10-day stay in a South American rainforest. They did not stay at a hotel or resort. They lived in the rainforest along with the indigenous groups. They did not have technology, hot water, or direct communication with their families while they studied biodiversity and kept daily video logs of their experiences. The result was a uniquely designed program that allowed these students to participate in rebuilding and painting a school, trade artifacts in the local markets, and develop an elective course the following year for the next cohort. Because of curricular alignment, the students earned a Spanish credit and a Science credit. These were earned because students were immersed in Spanish language and culture when communicating with the locals in the rainforest and conducted rigorous research and study that included assisting in the research about the rainforest canopy with a California forest ecologist.

Like their Oral History peers, the Southeast Springs Study Abroad students were requested to present their experiences and research to the Southwest Springs Board of Education, at the local Children of Color conferences, and were featured in the local newspaper. The experiences helped the counselors and the teacher design a new elective course in the school that would be replicated by the district in other schools. The Study Abroad elective course was designed to replicate a college research course that would train the next cohort of student researchers in the methodologies they would use. The difference for the second cohort is that they designed their own research questions and hypotheses prior to the trip.

Unlike other student trips to other countries, this program allowed for real research and study, allowed for the development of intellectual property, and allowed for all types of learners to attend. This is not a program for students in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or other college gateway programs. The Southeast Springs Study Abroad Program has an intersectional vision that allows students in all programming and levels of learning to participate. This means that there is an intentional and purposeful inclusion of males, females, and LGBTQ students as well. This program is designed for meeting the socially conscious vision of Southeast Springs School while ensuring opportunities for historically marginalized students.

**Outcomes and Implications**

The Southeast Springs School community soon realized that, when students are in school and authentically engaged in practices that promote social justice and student advocacy, they are less likely to engage in activities that lead to suspension or expulsion. Engaging students in social consciousness and grassroots student advocacy connects students to their school and community. Although these programs were not designed specifically to address student behaviors, the faculty and staff found that such programs mitigated academic, social, and behavioral factors that lead to negative student outcomes.

During the development of social consciousness on the campus, Southeast Springs enjoyed significant improvement in climate, safety, instruction, programs and overall academic outcomes. For example, classroom behavior referrals declined by over 65%. This decline in class referrals further impacted the number of students receiving in-school and out-of-school suspensions with declines of over 60% and 50%. The decrease in out-of-school suspensions also meant fewer students were expelled—a decline of over 50%.

Furthermore, by students remaining in class and not being suspended from school, more students were able to enroll in, and find success in Advanced Placement Courses, with a 41% increase in exams passed over three years. Lastly, the number of scholarships earned by graduating seniors more than quadrupled from just under $500,000 scholarships earned in 2013-2014 to well over $7 million from 2014-15 to 2017-2018. This much scholarship money means that more students are being accepted to college.

**How to Develop a Grassroots Oral History and Study Abroad Program**

Oral History and Study Abroad Programs can either be curricular additions or embedded activities that support learning authentic history and research. At Southeast Springs, this ideal was taken further by making Oral History and the Study Abroad Program stand-alone electives. Several steps were taken that ensured the success of both programs. Initially, Oral History at Southeast Springs was a journalism course where students were trained to conduct journalism interviews. The course took a turn toward Oral History once students began interviewing community members and discovered a rich "oral" history of the Southeast Springs area. The Study Abroad Program was initially an idea by the Science department chair to take students on a trip to the South American Amazon. After careful consideration for ensuring approval, the teacher and colleagues involved discovered that making the trip a Study Abroad trip would facilitate authentic research and experiential learning opportunities.

**Step 1: Build Interest**
In both programs, the teachers began to solicit interest for a spring semester course to be added as an after school elective. Acknowledging the fact that the courses, if accepted, would be an additional elective, it was imperative to seek out students who could add this elective with it not becoming an obstacle to meeting graduation standards. For Oral History, it was essential to target juniors and seniors who were ahead on electives, meaning they would need to have a minimum of 20 earned credits to participate (graduation requirement is 23). For the Study Abroad Program, it was determined that juniors and seniors should be the first cohort because they had already met prerequisites for the course: a passing grade in Biology and either enrolled in, or having passed, Earth Science. There was no prerequisite for Spanish, since they would be immersed within the culture where they would be required to learn and be able to communicate in Spanish. This met the Spanish I requirement.

The teachers reached out to individual students to solicit interest by sharing how the programs would benefit students individually as researchers and allow them to provide a voice both for the community and for indigenous groups from abroad. The students who agreed to take the courses accepted that the course would be afterschool and be an added credit. The initial Oral History course drew the interest of over 10 students. The Study Abroad Program drew the interest of over 50 students, resulting in an interview process. Only 14 students could go on the initial trip per the guidelines of the partnership organization.

**Step 2: Align to State and District Standards**
To gain traction for the programs and to ensure approval, the teachers reached out to other departments in order to align the programs to state and district standards. First, the Oral History course was aligned to State and District English and Language Arts and Journalism Standards. Next, the aligned standards were shared with the Social Studies department chair, who was able to recommend social studies standards that could allow students taking the course to receive either a social studies or language arts credit.

The Study Abroad program initially was aligned to the Science standards for Biology, Environmental Science, and Earth Science. As interest grew, the Science teacher determined that since the program would be in South America and students would be immersed entirely in a Spanish speaking culture for the duration of their trip, they possibly could align the program to Spanish standards. By aligning the courses to specific standards, there was the potential for credits being earned in both programs. However, both would need central office approval.

**Step 3: Identify and Engage Gatekeepers**
In his study on African American educational lobbyists and their ability to enact African American legislative voice, Griffen (2018) wrote about the significance of linking the ability to mobilize community interests through youth advocacy and voice. To do so meant that the students' families, communities, and school faculty and staff would have to be engaged. Specifically, it would be critical for the community and faculty and staff to provide support for students who would be involved in both programs and to ensure there was enough interest and "buy in" to influence the key decision makers and gatekeepers - the Principal, the Central Office, and the Board of Education.

**The principal.** Teachers met with the Principal, the main gatekeeper, to determine if the course first would be approved by the Counseling Department at Southeast Springs and then to put together a plan for District approval. The significance of including the Principal in the process is because the Principal acts as a gatekeeper for resource allocation to the district, to other personnel on campus, and to the daily curriculum and instructional program. Without the Principal's support, partnership, and approval; both of the programs would not be considered by the District. Therefore, the group involved was the Principal together with the Counseling Department, the Assistant Principal who was the master scheduler, and the Department Chairs of Social Studies, World Languages, and Electives. Both teams developed a scope and sequence showing how the Oral History elective and the Study Abroad Program would be an after school elective for the upcoming spring semester, but would become a course added during the day the following school year.

Furthermore, they were able to show how the students would utilize their training and projects in both courses to support other programs in the school. This is an important element for developing an Oral History course as a student advocacy elective. Students and the decision makers must see a direct connection with bringing voice to the school

environment and to the community. For the Study Abroad Program, the idea of students conducting action research in another country with national researchers provides an element of cross-curricular, interdisciplinary practice typically be reserved for higher education students. This allowed the development of college level rigorous practices.

**The teachers.** In order to bring authentic research practices and voice to the school environment and to the community, the students and teachers in both programs began reaching out to other teachers in the building for pilot interviews on topics such as the presidential election, events in the community for Oral History, and a study of insects and plant life at the local zoo and national reserve forest. Oral History began with interviewing teachers who were military veterans. In short order, other teachers were asking to be interviewed to share their experiences.

This is a critical step in developing a student advocacy course such as Oral History. What makes this critical is that teachers, like the Principal, will often serve as gatekeepers to members of the community or to other potential participants. Furthermore, teachers had projects where they wanted to partner with the students to produce a deep dive into counter-narratives. For example, several students supported the Historiography class as they conducted research and wrote reports on World War II and on the History of Immigration Policy in the United States. The counter-narratives produced a deeper and more authentic connection to the concepts and themes being taught. Essentially, students were able to connect the past to the present through an analysis of contemporary issues, such as DACA and Human Trafficking, which is modern day slavery.

With the Study Abroad Program, this occurred as well. The Study Abroad Participants partnered with Oral History to capture their experiences once they returned from the rainforest. In addition, Oral History was the primary method for interviewers during the DACA student protests in 2017. The Study Abroad Program participants presented their research from the rainforest to the Southwest Springs Board of Education, at the State Science Conference, and at local Student of Color education and leadership conferences.

**The parents and the community.** Critical to any grassroots program that aims to uncover the voices of marginalized groups and perpetuate a counter-narrative that argues for equitable access and opportunities for historically underserved students are the parents and the community. As gatekeepers, parents allow access to their child's agency and identity that informs the work. *Identity* is who we are and *Agency* is what we do to inform others who we are. Furthermore, parents can curtail the entire program by mobilizing other parents and the community to stand united against a program that seeks to bring what some may consider "unnecessary attention" to their students, the school or community.

Parents at Southeast Springs School united with students and teachers to advocate for these two programs. Through a series of presentations where the parents and community were invited, the Science chair for the Southeast Springs Study Abroad Program was able to not only gain parent support for driving student and community interests, but for help with fundraising. At these presentations, parents and community members were informed about the costs of the trip, the timeline, supplies needed, alignment to curriculum and standards, the criteria for going, and the expected outcomes. Fundraising included students hosting car washes, students selling coffee and tea, students requesting donations from places of business around the community, and the Principal working with the School Board and Superintendent to fund the remaining balance. Community partnerships with the local YMCA, community centers, and

churches yielded more donations as well as support for supplies needed and for passport and insurance costs.

The community support spilled over to the Sierra Oral History Society as community members began to spread the word about the projects. In qualitative research this is called the "snowball" effect, where participants act as gatekeepers and connectors to other potential participants. Therefore, the student researchers were able to find interview participants through word of mouth across the community. Lastly, both programs advertised via social media (Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat), which mobilized greater community interest in the school as a whole. This resulted in donations for new artwork in the hallways, new furniture in the front office and staff lounge from a major furniture retailer, mulch from a local retailer for the school's front and back flower beds, and donations from local universities for equipment and for spreading the college and career theme across the campus.

**The Central Office.** The key to gaining central office approval was through clearly aligning state and local standards and providing specific timelines and tasks for evaluating student mastery throughout the training and during the research components of each program. The Study Abroad Program was approved for one high school credit the initial year (.5 in Science and .5 in Spanish). The following year, 2018, it was approved for 1.5 high school credits (.5 Science, .5 Spanish, and .5 Social Studies). The addition of Social Studies was due to the Social Studies chair finding an alignment to the study of migrant patterns for indigenous groups in South America. Therefore, the students would be researching bio-diversity, immersed in Spanish, and studying migrant patterns while living in the rainforest for a 10 day period.

Oral History was approved for 1.0 credits. Because Oral History is a qualitative research method, the Principal, the Oral History teacher, and the lead counselor partnered with the District College and Career Coordinator to potentially *articulate* the course as a college credit. Articulation occurs when a course is offered at the high school level, but follows the recommended and approved syllabus and scope and sequence of a partnering university or college. Unfortunately, no college in the state offers an Oral History course; therefore, the course could not be articulated as a college credit. A recommendation is to see if the course can be articulated by partnering with universities in other states such as Baylor University Oral History, the organizers of the conference where the Oral History students presented their Oral History research.

**The Board of Education.** A final and key strategy is to engage the Board of Education in the process after the initial stakeholders, decision makers, and gatekeepers are on board. A great approach is to have students present the proposal to the Board of Education, sharing their voices in the development of the programming. This is key because Boards of Education hear the value of the programs from the perspective of the students while they express their commitment to making sure they are successful in the program.

College matriculation to graduation is becoming a key issue, nationally. Therefore, it is also critical that students are able to forecast how the programs will support and benefit their long term goals in college, the military, and/or in their careers. By aligning each program to college curriculum, Southeast Springs enabled students to clearly articulate the benefits of both the Oral History and Study Abroad Programs to the Board so that they are now in their fourth year of implementation. The Board of Education worked with the Superintendent to fund the remaining balance of Study Abroad Program and agreed to continue to support, and even be interviewed for, future Oral History projects.

## Recommendations for Further Study

The grassroots practices that are a part of advocacy activities can engender connections within and among school stakeholders that may yield the engagement of teachers and school leaders as active social justice agents in schools. Therefore, the following are recommended areas of future study and/or action:

1) Find and/or develop Oral History courses that support second language learning for all learners;
2) Find and/or develop Study Abroad Programs that take students to the African continent and Asian rainforests that would allow for students to stretch their programing through the study of early civilizations prior to European influence;
3) Partner with local and national colleges and universities to articulate these courses as early college research credits;
4) Studying the impact of teachers as Oral Historians of the school community they serve.

Promoting teacher-led and teacher-driven social consciousness, teacher advocacy, and social justice advocacy are also areas of recommendation. Teachers who support students in these areas will undoubtedly remain immersed in advocacy and social consciousness. In order to ensure that socially conscious programming becomes embedded in school culture and enjoys long term sustainability, recommendations for teacher-led and teacher-driven socially justice equity initiatives and teacher advocacy are warranted.

## Conclusion

Southeast Spring's leaders and teachers collaborated to empower students to (1) conduct grassroots community oral histories and (2) propose an accepted study abroad program. Through the grassroots Oral History course and the Study Abroad program, Southeast Springs was able to see improvements academically, socially, and behaviorally, an unanticipated outcome mitigated by youth empowerment and community engagement. Students and the community began to see the opportunities present at the school that would allow for college credits, authentic research and learning experiences, and for the development and facilitation of student voice.

By engaging students in grassroots oral history research, student advocacy grew to the point where DACA became a rallying cry for the campus commitment to social consciousness and social justice. The Study Abroad Program allowed Southeast Springs to close the opportunity gap as more students later became interested in research-driven courses such as Historiography and showed greater interest in Advanced Placement (AP) Courses. Southeast Springs's socially conscious learning environment is conceptualized in this paper, showing how this dedicated community of lifelong learners developed Cultural Responsiveness as core and two uniquely designed student led advocacy and research initiatives. Recommendations for replication include frameworks for developing grassroots oral history and study abroad courses in order to promote student social consciousness and student advocacy.

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